

**Intimate Connections:
Contextualizing Japanese Youth and Mobile Messaging**

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Abstract

This paper describes social, cultural, and historical contexts that structure current mobile text messaging practices of Japanese youth. First are ways in which mobile messaging has been structured by the power geometries of existing places of home, school, and public places. Second, the paper presents the central social context in which youth peer messaging practice is situated, that of the intimate peer group. Finally, the paper describes how these practices are situated in a postwar history of intergenerational struggle and cultural politics over youth street and communication cultures. Our central argument is that youth technology use is driven not only by certain psychological and developmental imperatives, but also by youths' position in historically specific social structures. Mobile messaging provides a mechanism through which youth can overcome some of the adult-controlled power structures that govern their everyday lives.

Keywords

Mobile phones, youth, text messages, Japan

Ever since NTT Docomo launched its i-mode mobile Internet service in 1999, international attention has been trained on Japan as a hothouse for incubating the future of the wireless revolution. In particular, international technology communities have noted and often celebrated handset design by Japanese electronic manufacturers, third generation infrastructures, video and camera phones, and mobile entertainment. A focus on ever-new advanced technical functionality, however, can often lose sight of the social, historical, and cultural context through which contemporary Japanese mobile media is structured and has evolved. As Richard Harper (Forthcoming, 187) has argued, “mobile society is not rendering our society into some new form, it is rather, enabling the same social patterns that have been in existence for some time to evolve in small but socially significant ways.” In this paper, we analyze messaging practices of Japanese youth as an outcome of existing historical, social, and cultural factors rather than as something driven forward by the inherent logic of new technology.

Based on the distinctiveness of young people’s mobile media usage, we argue for the context specificity of meanings and usage of new technologies. Even as mobile phones have become common in all age groups,¹ young people use their phones more, spend more on them (IPSe, 2003), and have unique patterns of usage. Particularly distinctive is usage of mobile email.² 95.4% of students describe themselves as mobile email users, in contrast to 75.2% of the general population (VR, 2002) and they send a higher volume of messages.³ They also tend to be more responsive to the email that they receive. Almost all students (92.3%) report that they view a message as soon as they receive it, whereas a slimmer majority of the general population (68.1%) is as responsive. May older users say that they view a message when convenient to them, or at the end of the day (VR, 2002). What is behind these distinctive patterns of usage by young people?

This paper seeks to answer this question by analyzing ethnographic material on mobile phone usage in relation to three different contextual frames. One is ways in which mobile messaging has been structured by the power geometries of existing places of home, school, and public places. Next, the paper presents the central social context in which youth

¹ Since the late nineties, youth have had higher rates of mobile phone ownership than the general population, but the gap is closing. In contrast to a 2001 survey that documented how young people had higher adoption rates (Yoshii et al., 2002), a 2002 national survey of mobile phone communications conducted by Video Research (2002) found that the overall penetration of mobile phones in Japan was 73.7% with ownership by students age 12 and up at 75.7%.

² We use the term “mobile email” to describe messages (mostly text, but sometimes images) sent via short message services analogous to SMS, as well as mobile Internet services. Short messages can generally only be sent between subscribers to the same provider, and cannot be as lengthy as those sent over the Internet. While users make case-by-case decisions about whether to send a message via short messaging or Internet, both types of messages are generally called *meiru* (mail).

³ Teens send twice as many emails than twenty-somethings, sending approximately 70 a month in contrast to 30 for the slightly older set (Yoshii et al., 2002). In contrast to the general population (68.1%), almost all students (91.7%) report that they send over 5 messages a day.

peer messaging practice is situated, that of the intimate peer group. Finally, we analyze how this ethnographic material articulates with longstanding intergenerational dynamics in postwar Japan. Our focus is not on the uptake of a particular technology (ie. short text message services on the mobile phone), but on a historically continuous set of practices that have mobilized different technologies at different times. Because of the structural location they occupy in contemporary Japanese society, youth, particularly teenage girls, have spearheaded the development of what we call “personal, portable, and pedestrian” communication media practices (Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005).

Method and Conceptual Framework

Our Research

This paper draws from ongoing ethnographic research on mobile phone use centered at Keio Shonan Fujisawa Campus near Tokyo. We draw primarily from three different sets of data. One is a set of ethnographic interviews conducted by Ito in the winter of 2000 with twenty-four high school and college students about their use of media, including mobile phones. We have also conducted a series of observations on trains in the Kanto and Kansai regions of Japan, documenting instances of mobile phone use (Okabe & Ito, 2005). The central body of data behind this paper is a set of “communication diaries” and interviews we collected between July-December 2002 where we collect detailed information on where and when particular forms of mobile communication were used by a diverse set of people. We seek direct observational records in addition to interview data, as it is notoriously difficult to capture the fleeting particularities of mobile communication after the fact. Our diary was adapted from data collection methods piloted by Rebecca Grinter and Margery Eldridge (2001) where they asked ten teenagers to record the time, content, length, location, and recipient (or sender) of all text messages for seven days. As with interviews, this data collection method still relies on second-hand accounting, but has the advantage of providing much more detail on usage than can be recalled in a stand-alone interview.

We expanded the communication log to include voice calls and mobile Internet, and more details about the location and context of use. Participants were asked to keep records of every instance of mobile phone use, including voice, short text messages, email, and web use, for a period of two days. They noted the time of the usage, who they were in contact with, whether they received or initiated the contact, where they were, what kind of communication type was used, why they chose that form of communication, who was in the vicinity at the time, if there were any problems associated with the usage, and the content of the communication. After completion of the diaries, we conducted in-depth interviews that covered general attitudes and background information relevant to mobile phone use, and detailed explication of key instances of usage recorded in the diaries. Our study involved seven high school students (aged 16-18), six college students (aged 18-21), two housewives with teenage children (in their forties), and nine professionals (aged 21-51). The gender split was roughly equal, with 11 males and 13 females. 594 instances of communication were collected for the high school and college students and 229 for the adults. The majority of users were in the Tokyo Kanto region. Seven were recruited in the Osaka area in southern Japan to provide some geographic variation.

In addition to our own ethnographic work, we base our analysis on Japanese popular discourse and research literature on mobile phone adoption. In particular, we draw from research compiled by Tomoyuki Okada and Misa Matsuda (2002), collected more recently in English (Ito et al., 2005), which represents over a decade of work on youth mobile media. The final section of our paper brings this material to bear on our ethnographic material, analyzing current mobile messaging practices as an instantiation of longstanding intergenerational dynamics and a history of mobile media adoption. We turn now to the theoretical and conceptual framework for our analysis.

Conceptual Framework

Countries with widespread adoption exhibit cross-cultural similarities in the intersection of youth and mobile phones. Richard Ling and Birgitte Yttri (2002) have coined the term “hyper-coordination” to describe the expressive and socially active uses of mobile phones by Norwegian teens. In contrast to the more instrumental uses that older subjects described, youths describe using phones for emotional and social communications, particularly for cementing peer relations. Ling and Yttri describe adolescence as a unique time in the lifecycle, how peers play a central role during this period, and how the mobile phone becomes a tool to “define a sense of group membership, particular vis-à-vis the older generation (2002: 162). A growing body of work with teens in locations such as the UK (Green, 2003; Grinter & Eldridge, 2001; Taylor & Harper, Forthcoming), Finland (Eia-Liisa Kasesniemi, 2003; Eija-Liisa Kasesniemi & Rautianinen, 2002), Norway (Skog, 2002), and Sweden (Weilenmann & Larsson, 2002), finds similar patterns in other countries. As documented by the papers in this volume, text messaging, in particular, appears to be a uniquely teen-inflected form of mobile communication, and young people have driven adoption of SMS across the globe (Agar, 2003; Grinter & Eldridge, 2001; Eia-Liisa Kasesniemi, 2003; Eija-Liisa Kasesniemi & Rautianinen, 2002; Ling & Yttri, 2002; Rheingold, 2002). In the US, IM appears to occupy a similar structural role (Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Shklovski, Forthcoming).

Rather than locating the affinity between messaging and youth in the developmental imperatives of teens, we take a context-driven approach. In another essay, Ito (2003) has argued that the practices and cultures of youth are not solely outcomes of a certain level of developmental maturity, or even of social relations, but are also conditioned by the regulative and normative force of places. In other words, rather than originating solely with the psychological, social and developmental needs of youth, text messaging practices are structured by institutional and cross-generational surrounds. We also argue that the historical development of certain mediated communication practices also construct a key structuring context that has made mobile messaging particularly amenable to young Japanese.

Behind our approach is the “new paradigm” in childhood studies that has argued that “youth” and “childhood” are categories constructed and consumed by people of all ages, and produced in particular power-geometries (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; James & Prout, 1997).⁴ In other words, an understanding of youth practices needs to be located within an

⁴ In her study of Japanese youth, Merry White (1994: 11) describes the differences between US and Japanese labels for young people. The category of “teenager” or “cheenayja” has

adult social structure that limits and regulates youth activity as well as cultural discourses that often construct youth as frivolous and socially immature. Most simply put, modern teens, despite their physical and psychological maturity, do not yet have access to a full repertoire of adult rights, responsibilities, and resources, such as their own homes where they can meet friends and lovers, or a workplace where they are considered productive members of society (as opposed to “consumers” and “learners”). Teens are also considered legitimate objects of external regulation, control, and redirection in a way that even young adults are not. Just as social theory has interrogated race, class, and gender, generational dynamics need to be analyzed with a similar social structural lens (Alanen, 2001). We cut our data along these lines as well. We apply the category of youth to those institutionalized as such—high school and college students who are financially dependent on adults.

In the section to follow, we posit that the institutionalized power-geometries of place (Massey 1991) are important factors structuring youth mobile phone usage. Youth communications are regulated by peers or adults depending on place and time of day, and access to mobile media takes a central role in managing and inflecting that control. Conceptually, our approach shares much in common with Nicola Green’s in her analysis of the role of mobile phones in surveillance and monitoring between adults and teens and among teens (Green, 2002). Ling and Yttri (this volume) make similar observations of youth mobile phone usage and power relations in Norway. Cross-cultural similarities in mobile phone usage can be understood in relation to shared and different structural conditions in the lives of young people. While this paper does not present a comparative analysis, it does lay out conditions that contextualize Japanese youth’s mobile phone use, and suggests that the cross-cultural similarities in mobile phone usage are partially an outcome of the similarities in the institutionalized status of youth. Specifically, mobile messaging helps compensate for the lack of social settings and places where youth can communicate privately among close friends and lovers.

Following our description of how mobile communications are keyed to existing power-geometries, we argue that youth mobile messaging has worked to construct alternative kinds of intimate “places” or settings where youth can be in touch with their close peer group or “full-time intimate community” (Nakajima, Keiichi, & Yoshii, 1999). In a different paper (Ito & Okabe, 2005), we have proposed a concept of “technosocial situation” to describe such settings for activity that span a range of physical locations but still retain a coherent sense of location, social expectation, and role definition exhibited in Goffman’s (1963) analyses and other practice-based studies. Our general conclusion is that youth messaging can undermine certain adult-defined prior definitions of social situation and place, but also construct new technosocial situations and new boundaries of identity and place. To say that mobile phones univocally cross boundaries, heighten accessibility, and fragment social life is to see only one side of the dynamic social reconfigurations heralded by mobile communications. Mobile phones create new kinds of bounded places that merge the infrastructures of geography and technology, as well as technosocial practices that merge technical standards and social norms.

Our argument is that the social outcomes of technology use are a result of social struggle over appropriate usage rather than a “natural” outcome determined by a particular

been borrowed from English, but is not in widespread use. The native categories are *shonen* and *seinen* which are closer to the English term “youth” or “young person.”

technological form; mobile media usage is a site of intergenerational struggle over what should be the structuring social institutions and relations for young people. The final section of our paper analyzes our ethnographic findings in terms of longstanding intergenerational tensions and cultural politics. Since the period of Japan's economic prosperity in the eighties, the older generation has struggled to regulate an increasingly vibrant and self-directed set of youth cultures. Current mobile media usage is simply the latest example of young people mobilizing new technologies and consumer cultures in their struggle to claim a space of autonomy outside of the purview of adult control.

Japanese Youth and the Politics of Place

Doreen Massey has argued that “different social groups are placed in very distinct ways in relation to late modern flows of media, people, and capital” (1994, 61). While the mobile phone has often been touted as an “anyplace, anytime” medium, we have found that usage is keyed to the specific structuring dynamics of particular places, and an individual's relationship to the power geometries of the that place. As in most postindustrial contexts, teenagers in Japan generally find themselves in places controlled by adults with certain degrees of power over their lives, particularly their parents and teachers. Most college and high school students move back and forth from the space of the home—where they may have some privacy and discretion over their activities, but lack physical access to friends—and the space of school—where they are physically co-present with their friends, but have severe constraints on forms of social contact. The result, not surprisingly, is that young people have very few places in which they can have private conversations with peers and lovers. Urban spaces such as the street and cafes become key sites for gathering on their own terms. Now, the mobile phone has also become a device for young people to construct a “place” for private communication that is not monitored by adults. The low-profile, unobtrusive nature of email on a small handset is particularly amenable to youth communication because it does not disrupt the norms of existing place and can escape adult surveillance. A more extended version of this argument can be found in a prior paper (Ito, 2003). Here we summarize the use of mobile email in relation to places that young people inhabit.

First, in the home context, youth report that they do not see it as a place where they can congregate with their peers and significant others. Through college, Japanese youths have less private space compared to their US and even European counterparts. The Japanese urban home is tiny by middle-class American standards, and teens and children generally share a room with a sibling or a parent. Most college students in Tokyo live with their parents, often even after they begin work, as the costs of renting an apartment in an urban area are prohibitively high.⁵ Because of these factors, urban Japanese youth generally take to

⁵ Our sample of college students for the communication diary part of our study is a bit skewed in this respect, as our student pool at the Keio campus was largely comprised of youth living on their own. As a suburban campus of an elite urban university, the situation at our campus is unique in attracting students from around the country in an area with a relatively low urban density. Overall, our interviewee pool represented a range from mainstream middle class to elite.

the street to socialize. For high school students, this usually means a stop at a local fast food restaurant on the way home from school. College kids have more time and mobility, gathering in cafes, stores, bars, and karaoke spots. Unlike the US, there is no practice for teens to get their own landline at a certain age, or to have a private phone in their room. The costs of running a landline to a Japanese home are very high, from \$600 USD and up, about twice what it costs to get a mobile phone. It is thus extremely rare for a home to have more than one landline.

Here is an excerpt from an interview with four high school girls who are close friends.

Interviewer: You all live close to each other. Do you visit each other's homes?

Student1: We don't. It's not that we are uncomfortable, or our parents get on our case, but it's like they are too sweet and caring, and you worry about saying something rude, or talking too loud. You can't be too rowdy. So we don't meet in our homes.

Student2: Occasionally. Maybe once a year. Actually, that's not even occasional.

Student1: And if it happens, it is at a friend's house where they have their own room.

This stance was consistent across the youths that we interviewed. Meetings among friends almost always occurred in a third-party space run by indifferent adults, such as a fast food restaurant, karaoke spot, or family restaurant. Even for college students living on their own, their space is generally so small and cramped that it is not appropriate for hanging out with groups of friends.

The phone has always provided a way of overcoming the spatial boundary of the home, for teens to talk with each other late at night, and shut out their parents and siblings. As noted in other studies (Green, 2002; Ling & Yttri, 2002, this volume; Skog, 2002), the mobile phone has further revolutionized the power-geometry of space-time compression for teens in the home, enabling teen to communicate without the surveillance of parents and siblings. This has freed youths to call each other without the embarrassment of revealing a possible romantic liaison, or at hours of the day when other family members are likely to be asleep. All that we interviewed were consistent in stating a preference for calling a friend on a mobile rather than home phone despite the higher cost. Youths now do not have the home phone numbers of any but their most intimate friends. Parents are generally tolerant of their children's mobile phone usage, and many mothers reported using text messages for family communication. At the same time, most homes had a rule against mobile communication during meals, and peer communication can be a site of parent-child conflict. All the parents we interviewed described a sense of unease and curiosity about their children's mobile communications. Conversely, all the children took measures to keep parents in the dark about the content of their email and calls. One parent voices what we take to be a typical parental stance.

Okabe: Do you have a problem with her using her mobile phone during meals, or after meals in the living room, when you are together?

Mother: I don't have a problem with it when we are just lounging around. But during meals or when she is studying, I try to tell her to tell the other person on the line.

Okabe: Are you curious or concerned about with who and what she is communicating?

Mother: I am concerned about all of it... though I can usually guess who it is.

Okabe: When you tell her to stop, does she stop?

Mother: She goes to her room... if I am strict about it.

The constraints on gathering with friends in homes has driven youth to the personal medium of the mobile phone to cement peer communications. The places of school and public transportation have, more specifically, encouraged use of mobile messaging. While the home context supports communication by both voice and email, in the classroom and on public transportation, mobile email, rather than voice, is by far the preferred modality.

Schools vary with respect to how teachers deal with mobile phones, but without exception, voice calls during class are considered inappropriate. Almost all schools officially ban phones from the classrooms, but most students do use email during class at least occasionally. It is not uncommon for students to leave their mobile phones out on their desks during class, claiming that they use the clock function. All students, both in high school and college voiced the rule that they would not use voice communication in class, but almost all said that they would read and sometimes send messages. The mobile phone gets used most frequently during the lunch time hour and immediately after school, as students scurry to hook up with their friends.

We saw email being sent during class in only two of our communication diary cases, but almost all students reported in their interviews that they would receive and send messages in class, hiding their phones under their desks. Four students we interview specifically described conversations with students in the same classroom, making comments like “this sucks,” “this is boring,” or “check it out, the teacher buttoned his shirt wrong.” More commonly, students reported that they conducted “necessary” communications during class, such as arranging a meeting or responding to an email from somebody with a specific query. The communications in class that we saw in the diaries involved coordinating meetings after school or receiving email from friends who were absent, asking for notes or other class information. In all these cases, mobile email is being used to circumvent the communicative limitations of the classroom situation, much as passing notes and glances across the classroom did in an earlier era. Perhaps more uniquely, the mobile phone in the classroom is a way to challenge the communication hierarchy of the traditional lecture format that insists that students passively listen to an active teacher. Mobile email enables students to resist their role in this one-way communication and to make more productive use of their attentional “dead time” between jotting notes and waiting for teachers to finish writing theirs.

In contrast to the home and school, which are under the surveillance of adults with a personal interest in individual youth, public spaces like the street and public transportation rely on a more distributed set of strategies for regulating communication. Most trains and buses display “no mobile phone signs,” and announcements are made every few minutes specifying limitations on phone use. A typical announcement is: “Please do not make voice calls while on the train. Please turn off your mobile phone in the area surrounding ‘preferred seating’ [for the elderly and disabled].” The street and train platforms are open to voice calls, but are generally extremely noisy, and it is difficult to have a sustained conversation in these locations. In one of our studies, we have focused on uses of mobile phones on trains and subways (Okabe & Ito, 2005). While we commonly observed email use, voice calls are rare.

For example, one 41-minute observation on a busy train line represented the highest volume of usage that we recorded. During the period of observation, there were 37 instances of observable mobile email usage (including both receiving and sending email), and 4 instances of voice calls. In a 30-minute observation with the lowest volume of usage, there was one voice call and 10 instances of email use. The overall average of voice calls in any given 30-minute span is 1-2 calls.

In our interviews, almost all responded that they would freely engage in email exchanges but were hesitant to make and receive voice calls. For example, interviewees described how they might decide not to answer a voice call if the train was crowded, or they might move to a less crowded location to take a call, or they might take the call but cut it right away. Most also responded that they were annoyed when somebody took a voice call on a train and talked in a loud voice. These responses were consistent across all age groups. Here is a typical response:

(High school student, male, 18 years, Kanagawa prefecture)

Interviewee: When I hear somebody's keitai go off on a train, it bothers me. I think, "I'll always keep mine in silent mode."

Interviewer: How about email in trains?

Interviewee: I do email a lot, to kill time. I think email is probably okay. If I get a call, I do usually answer it, but I keep my voice low. I do feel bad about it and don't talk loud.

Phone ringing is also considered a violation in public space. Interviewees who were heavy mobile users almost invariably reported that they put their phones in "manner mode" (silent mode) when they left the home. In the communication diaries, we saw only once instance of a voice call being initiated on public transportation, when the subject was the only passenger on a bus. The call lasted only a few minutes, and was cut as soon as another passenger entered the bus. Despite the virtual lack of voice mobile communication on trains in the Tokyo area, the announcements are relentless, attesting to a high level of social regulation work even in the absence of major transgressions.

In contrast to voice calls, mobile email is considered ideal for use in public spaces. Some trains announcements and signage specify no voice calls, thus implying that Internet and email use is permitted. While bus drivers will prohibit someone speaking on a mobile phone from entering a bus, we have not observed any instances of regulation of silent mobile phone uses. Just as the power-geometries of the home make email a privileged, private form of communication, regulatory efforts on public transportation have also contributed to the rise of email as a preferred form of mobile communication. Largely because of the risk that their interlocutor may be on public transit, a social norm has arisen among the younger generation that you should not initiate voice calls without first checking availability with a text message. Unless certain that their recipient is at home, most youths (there were two exceptions in our study) will send a message first asking if they can call.

Tele-Cocooning in the Full-Time Intimate Community

The location-based contexts described thus far provide a picture of some of the factors that have driven Japanese youth's adoption of mobile email. Now we turn to the question of the kinds of social settings, or technosocial situations (Ito & Okabe, 2005), that youth are building through their mobile email exchanges. While there are a variety of different types of situations being built through mobile email, we focus here on ongoing contact in an intimate peer group.

Unlike voice calls, which are generally point-to-point and engrossing, messaging can be a way of maintaining ongoing background awareness of others, and of keeping multiple channels of communication open. This is like people who keep IM channels open in the background while they go about their work, but the difference is that the mobile phone gets carried around just about everywhere for heavy users. The rhythms of mobile messaging fluctuate between focused chat-like exchanges and a more lightweight awareness of connection with others through the online space. In our interviews with heavy users of mobile phones, all users reported that they were only in regular contact with approximately 2-5, at most 10, close friends, despite having large numbers of entries in their mobile address books. This is what Matsuda (2005b) following Ichiro Nakajima, Himeno Keiichi, and Hiroaki Yoshino (1999), describes as a "full-time intimate community." In a related move, Ichiyo Habuchi (2005) describes these online spaces, occupied by most Japanese youth as "tele-cocoons." She contrasts these intimate spaces with the more extroverted spaces of online dating and encounter sites frequented by a small but significant minority of Japanese youth.

While the scale of social relationships and content of communication appears to be similar to what other studies have found in other forms of mediated communication (eg., for IM and telephone, see Boneva et al., Forthcoming), the portable format of the mobile phone affords certain distinctive usage patterns. Heavy mobile email users generally expect those in the intimate circle to be available for communication unless they are sleeping or working. Text messages can be returned discreetly during class, on public transportation, or in restaurants, all contexts where voice communication would be inappropriate. Many of the messages that we saw exchanged between this close peer group or between couples included messages that informants described as "insignificant" or "not urgent." Some examples of messages in this category are communications such as "I'm walking up the hill now," "I'm tired," "I guess I'll take a bath now," "just bought a pair of shoes!" "groan, I just woke up with a hangover," or "the episode today sucked today didn't it?"

These messages define a social setting that is substantially different from direct interpersonal interaction characteristic of a voice call, text chat, or face-to-face one-on-one interaction. These messages are predicated on the sense of ambient accessibility, a shared virtual space that is generally available between a few friends or with a loved one. They do not require a deliberate "opening" of a channel of communication, but are based on the expectation that someone is in "earshot." From a technology perspective, this differs from PC-based communication because the social expectation is to be almost always connected. This is also not a "persistent" space as with an online virtual world that exists independent of specific people logging in (Mynatt, Adler, Ito, & O'Day, 1997). As a technosocial system, however, people experience a sense of a persistent social space constituted through the periodic exchange of text messages. These messages define a space of peripheral

background awareness that is midway between direct interaction and non-interaction. The analog is sharing a physical space with others that one is not in direct communication with but is peripherally aware of. Many of the emails exchanged present information about one's general status that is similar to the kind of awareness of another that one would have when physically co-located, a sigh or smile or glance that calls attention to the communicator, a way of entering somebody's virtual peripheral vision. This kind of virtual tap on the shoulder may result in a change of setting into a more direct form of interaction such as a chat-like sequence via texting or a voice call, but it might also be ignored if the recipient is not available for focused interaction.

Of particular interest are the logs of one teenage couple in our study, which is a somewhat more intense version of couple communications that we saw in other instances. Their typical pattern is to begin sending a steady stream of email messages to each other after parting at school. These messages will continue through homework, dinner, television shows, and bath, and would culminate in voice contact in the late evening, lasting for an hour or more. A trail of messages might follow the voice call, ending in a good night exchange and revived again upon waking. On days that they were primarily at home in the evening, they sent 34 and 56 messages to each other. On days that they were out and about the numbers dwindled to 6 and 9. The content of the messages ranged from in-depth chat about relational issues, to coordination of when to make voice contact, to lightweight notification of their current activities and thoughts. In this case, and to a smaller degree for other couples living apart, messaging became a means for experiencing a sense of private contact and co-presence with a loved one even in the face of parental regulatory efforts and their inability to share any private physical space.

While mobile phones have become a vehicle for youths to challenge the power-geometries of places such as the home, the classroom, and the street, they have also created new disciplines and power-geometries, the need to be continuously available to friends and lovers, and the need to always carry a functioning mobile device. These disciplines are accompanied by new sets of social expectations and manners. When unable to return a message right away, young people feel that a social expectation has been violated. When one girl did not notice a message sent in the evening until the next morning, she says that she felt terrible. Three of the students in our diary study reported that they did not feel similar pressure to reply right away. Yet even in these cases, they acknowledged that there was a social expectation that a message should be responded to within about thirty minutes unless one had a legitimate reason, such as being asleep. One describes how he knows he should respond right away, but doesn't really care. Another, who had an atypical pattern of responding with longer, more deliberate messages hours later, said that her friends often chided her for being so slow. In another instance, a student did not receive a reply for a few hours, and his interlocutor excused himself by saying he didn't notice the message. The recipient perceived this as a permissible white lie that got around an onerous social expectation. All students who were asked about responses delayed an hour or more said that they would generally make a quick apology or excuse upon sending the tardy response. These exceptions to the norm of immediate response trace the contours of the technosocial situation as much as do conforming practices.

With couples living apart, there is an even greater sense of importance attached to the ongoing availability via messaging. The underside to the unobtrusive and ubiquitous nature of mobile email is that there are few legitimate excuses for not responding, particularly in the

evening hours when one is at home. Five of the ten student couples in our study were in ongoing contact during the times when they were not at school, and all these couples had established practices for indicating their absence from the shared online space. They invariably send a good night email to signal unavailability, and would often send status checks during the day such as “are you awake?” or “are you done with work?” We saw a few cases when they would announce their intention to take a bath, a kind of virtual locking of the door. Him: “Just got home. Think I’ll take a bath.” Her: “Ya. Me too.” Just as mobile workers struggle to maintain boundaries to between their work and personal lives, youths struggle to limit their availability to peers and intimates. The need to construct and mark these boundaries attests to the status of this ambient virtual peer space as an increasingly structuring and pervasive type of technosocial setting.

Cultural Politics of Youth Mobile Media

We have described how youth mobile email use has grown out of the imperatives of existing places of home, school, and public space, and in turn, constructs a new set of technosocial places dominated by the logic of peer relations. In line with our overall context-driven approach to understanding youth messaging practices, here we analyze how these ethnographic findings articulate with longstanding cultural politics and intergenerational struggles.

Postwar Japanese urban culture has featured a succession of highly visible but transient youth subcultures, often led by young women. In their essay on Japanese women and consumption, Lisa Skov and Brian Moeran (1995) describe how young Japanese women’s central positing in media imagery and cultures of consumption are an inversion of their weak position in the labor market. Consumption and style, particularly of youth street cultures, is one cultural arena where young Japanese women have taken the lead, in part because of this marginal social status. Feminine consumerism represents an escape from the dominant rhythms of salaried labor. The more recent history of mobile media adoption is in line with this characterization of postwar consumer culture as an arena where the disenfranchised have taken leadership and control. The micro-negotiations we have described through our ethnographic cases, where young people have appropriated existing places and new technologies to create spaces of self-determination, are tied to these broader historical and structural trends. Although corporate ventures are quick to capitalize on new consumer youth trends, these emergent cultures also invite a series of efforts to reinvigorate existing (and still hegemonic) social structures and norms. The case of youth mobile media, at both the micro and the macro level, is characterized by the struggle between youth at the social margins discovering new means of organizing and communicating (with the help of consumer capitalism), and adults in the social mainstream seeking to regulate and redirect these efforts.

Although we could trace the origins of current mobile media to diary exchanges and note-passing in class, most trace current mobile messaging back to the pager cultures of the early nineties, when teenage girls first hijacked the uses of mobile media for their social purposes (Matsuda, 2005b; Okada, 2005; Okada & Matsuda, 2002). Pagers were originally conceived of as business tools for companies to beep their workers in the field, but only became popular mobile media after teenage girls adopted them. Okada (2005) describes how 1992 was a pivotal year in the development of mobile messaging. Spurred by reductions in

subscriptions rates and new pagers that displayed a callback number on the terminal (as opposed to simply beeping), young users began adopting this new medium. In contrast to prior years, where business uses were central, 1993 saw individual users, mostly in their teens and twenties, beginning to dominate, comprising 70% of new subscriptions. Taking their cue from these trends, providers released new pager designs that could receive text as well as numbers. At the peak of their use in 1996, 48.8% of Tokyo middle and high school students had a pager.

Mobile phone providers took note and began piloting inexpensive text messaging services for mobile phone handsets in 1996 through 1997. Young people soon jumped onto the short message services purveyed by the Personal Handyphone System (PHS) and then moved on to cellular phone-based messaging. By 2002 pager subscriptions were on the decline and young users had largely switched to texting via mobile phones. When mobile Internet services were rolled out in Japan in the late nineties, they integrated the messaging functions that had previously been restricted mostly to short messages sent between subscribers of a particular provider. Japanese mobile Internet adoption was driven forward by mobile messaging as young people, for the first time, were able to send messages of varying length across different terminal devices and mobile service providers. Within a space of a few years between 1995-98, mobile phones shifted from association with business uses to an association with teen street culture. Many of the young women we interviewed who are heavy texters had started with pagers in their middle school years, moved on to PHS in high school, and are currently mobile Internet users. They see the different technologies as upgrades supporting the same underlying set of social practices.

Kenichi Fujimoto (2005) has tied this shift from business to play uses of mobile media to the growing hegemony of young girls in public space. He calls this transformation “The Girls’ Pager Revolution.” Unlike the male *otaku* (techno-geeks) associated with video games and computers, media savvy girls have been associated with communications technologies such as pagers and mobile phones. Through the nineties, young women and girls gained more strength in defining street cultures, and in the mid nineties, the media attached a new label to street-savvy high school girls: *kogyaru*. In the late nineties, certain *kogyaru* in urban centers sported bleached and frosted hair, extreme tropical fashions, tanned faces, heavy make-up, and customized mobile phones, becoming the object of widespread imitation by youth across the country and moral panic among adults (Cohen, 1972; Matsuda, 2005a). We started our ethnographic research in the waning years of extreme *kogyaru* street cultures. Though the high school girls we interviewed would not self-identify with these subcultures, most adopted related cultural forms, such as bleached hair, brightly colored fashions, and conspicuous mobile media use. Even with pundits declaring the death of the *kogyaru* at the turn of the millennium, this youth subculture has a lasting legacy in mobile texting cultures and related public perception of mobile media.

In line with the moral panics over *kogyaru* street cultures, public discourse has associated pagers and mobile phones with bad manners, declining morals, and a low-achievement, pleasure-seeking mentality. Mobile phones continue to be iconic of a fast and footloose street culture beyond the surveillance of the institutions of home and school. For example, there is widely reported practice called *enjo kousai* that started in the nineties, where high school girls, particularly *kogyaru*, meet older men on the street and date them for money. Although anonymous dating and prostitution was supported with voice mail services using payphones and landlines, public reports have associated mobile phones with growth of

these practices among minors (Tomita, 2005). In one example of public uptake, the popular weekly magazine, *Aera*, ran a series of articles about *kogyaru* and *enjo kousai*, depicting Lolita-complex middle aged men and “old man hunting” teenagers meeting on the street, keeping in touch with pagers and mobile phones (Hayami, 1996). Mobile phones have been linked as well to a more general decline in morals and manners. In the late nineties, a series of articles described the annoyance of having to listen to young people engaging in trivial chit chat via mobiles on trains and buses, and public transportation facilities started prohibiting voice calls (Okabe & Ito, 2005). A cover of a recent best seller, *Keitai wo Motta Saru: “Ningen Rashisa” no Houkai* (Monkeys with Mobile Phones: The Collapse of Humanity), features three *kogyaru* on a subway, clutching mobile phones, legs splayed, talking loudly (Masataka, 2002).

Social and cultural research paints a different picture of young people’s mobile media adoption. The young people in our studies were highly conscious of mobile phone manners and used their phones to keep in touch almost exclusively with family and close friends from school. Others have argued that mobile phones have made youths’ relationships selective rather than superficial (Matsuda, 2000), and only a small minority of youth engage in anonymous dating (Habuchi, 2005; Tomita, 2005). In an earlier study of American and Japanese youth, Merry White (1994) describes highly consumerist youth cultures that are likely familiar to North Americans, but she sees fewer conflicts between Japanese parents and youths. Dependency has less social stigma that it does among Euro-American youths, and this is institutionalized in the protective functions of family that extend through college and often beyond. White also describes how youth are defined by marital and employment status rather than by age, and “such institutional definitions have more weight than social and psychological identities” (1994: 11). Arguably, youth culture in Japan has been subject to more concern since the nineties, after White completed her work. Yet our ethnographic research supports her overall findings, in that the regulatory and protective functions of institutions such as family and school still dominate the lives of Japanese youth into their twenties.

Conclusions

The leaders of the girls’ pager revolution and the anti-authoritarian subcultures of *kogyaru* were the early adopters or a new set of technosocial practices that have infiltrated the everyday lives of mainstream Japanese youth on the backs of new mobile media. Our ethnographic findings attest to less confrontational but more pervasive practices of micro-negotiations with the hegemonic structures of home, school and urban space that carve out new spaces of action for young people. Although the low-profile exchange of messages among full-time intimate communities is a far cry from the more extroverted practices of *kogyaru* extreme fashion and *enjo kousai*, both ends of the spectrum are indicative of young people’s everyday struggles to push back at the adult-controlled structures that govern their everyday lives. Adults, too, push back through public demonization of deviant youth as well as more everyday efforts to regulate mobile phone usage in schools, homes, and public settings.

This paper has described some of the social conditions that have contextualized the unprecedented adoption of the mobile Internet by Japanese youth. Rather than focusing on factors “inherent” in the personality and cultures of Japanese young people, we have

suggested attention to a broad set of historical, social, and cultural factors. Among these are the unique history of mobile messaging in their intersection with youth street cultures, as well as the power geometries of place that regulate youths' everyday lives and social contact. We have described youth messaging as a unique response to these existing patterns of social life based on their sense of connection and accountability to their peer relations. The intersection between mobile email and the life situations of Japanese youth have created a new set of technosocial practices and situations in support of distributed intimacy and pervasive lightweight contact. These practices are both novel and situated within a broad set of historical, social, and cultural contexts.

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