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Abstract

The design of participatory systems mandates empowerment. Understanding necessary conditions for empowerment in socio-technical systems, in particular empowerment of young women in New Delhi, is the focus of a research endeavour within the TUDelft. This paper focuses on exploratory research on how young women in relative poor areas in New Delhi, India currently use mobile phones. Personal stories of young women in Delhi settlements describe how many young women own a mobile phone for work purposes, for security reasons and to stay in touch with their relations and relatives. These stories also describe how young women invent creative methods to participate in their own socio-technical systems, in challenging repressive and male dominated environments. The Tell-a-Story presents a collection of these personal stories.

1 Introduction

Mobile phones have become a consumer item embraced by a broad segment of the Indian population (Schwittay, 2011). By 2011, one in five of the world's mobile-phone-owning youth is likely to be living in India. Youth is often portrayed as a global consumer culture. One aspect of this culture is how they create and display social identities through the consumption of mobile phones. What symbolism and significance do these adolescent girls give to mobile phones? Their consumption and use of this relatively new technology should be understood within its social and cultural context, and varies across communities. Consumption patterns need to be considered within a social context, paying attention to values, beliefs, practices and rules, experiences, desires, relationships, class, gender, or age, creating a variety of perceptions. Nilan and Freixa (2006, p. 8) observe that the way youth participate in global consumption practices, whether it is music, fashion, media, or food, it is

influenced by their income, religion, gender, status or ethnicity. According to Plant, the way youth perceives and uses mobile phones are shaped by their values, practices and rules of their social, cultural context where they take place. Thus, the use of mobile phone cannot be separated from their social framework (Srivastava, 2005). Mobile users are not merely part of a technological network, but also of an important social one. Young people use the mobile primarily to sustain and enhance their social networks.

The Tell-a-Story presentation explores how young women from urban settlements of Delhi construct their social identity through the use of mobile phones, creating new socio-technical systems.

1.1 Relevance

The young women in this study, sharing bits of their adolescent world with us, are aware that the communication practices they describe in their stories give them a form of independence and freedom; something which is very hard for them to obtain. Their situation is similar to many other young women of their age. By sharing stories with each other, the young women have re-articulated their relation to mobile technologies and social interactions. This study shows the importance of situating research on communication practices in places where those practices arise: in the context and texture of women's lives.

2 Method

2.1 Collaborative Research Methodologies

The first phase of this exploratory project focuses on conversations on how people in their neighborhood (mohalla) perceive girls with mobile phones. It is a collaborative exploration on young women and their interaction, perspective on new technologies and their relation with the city, neighborhood, family. The information sources consist of informal conversations, group discussions, participant observations, photography, sketches, storytelling and writing, field-notes, in-depth interviews, self- documentation and exercises. Self-documentation is a creative use of media, like photography, a research process by allowing people to document themselves and their environment. The young women also draw maps depicting social infrastructure of their mobile phone usage. It shows the frequency of calls, the people they call, the time of the day

and where, the locations they use to make phone calls. It seems fruitful, to begin to look at how some young women, especially those who find the mobile phone enjoyable and useful for their purposes, understand and make sense of their own behaviors as denizens of electronic spaces.

2.2 Method - Author's Story

When first planning this research endeavour I was particularly interested in exploring how urban transformation in a city was impacting young women and how it was influencing their interaction. To this purpose it is essential to be able to see the city through the eyes of its inhabitants' everyday experiences. Together with young women from Ankur, Society for Alternatives in Education¹ we initiated a collaborative exploration on how young women relate to mobile technologies. Ankur has set up various centers in a few workers' settlements of Delhi. One of these centers focuses on teenage girls. It is a space, where young women come and meet each other daily for two hours. They learn stitching, some basic computer skills, but mostly they come together to have time for themselves, share stories and write short narratives. Through this exercise they become self aware and confident.

During the collaboration, girls are asked to keep a journal, write, stories, take photos, draw sketches about their relationship with mobile phones, as it is the first time that these young women have this kind of technology in their hands. Group discussions explored various aspects of mobile usage: How do young women feel, how do they use this relatively new tool, where do they make these phone calls, where do they keep their cell, what kind of comments do they get to hear, what functions do they use, with whom do they interact on the mobile phones, are whether they use it personally or professionally?

This population 'discovered' mobile technology in relation to usage within their families, their profession, security reasons, leisure time and personal usage. Their desires, rather than specific institutional pressures, have brought them into a networking culture. By examining the subjects' narratives about their activities, I have tried to construct a picture of the group's understanding of mobile technology

Following a group discussion, understanding when mobile phones come to use, whether they own mobile phones, finally we also discussed how a community feels when girls use mobile phones. The discussion resulted in a list of comments girls face when using mobile phones. What we realized is that using

1 www.ankureducation.net

or owning a mobile phone, as a girl, triggers many negative connotations in certain contexts. Some people in the community think that girls must be talking with their boyfriends (which is not allowed, as girls are to be married off), girls have become too advanced and (adolescent) men make obscene remarks.

While collaborating with the girls, I learned many new aspects of their lives. The first few days, we got acquainted with each other, getting to know one another, building trust within the group. After a few days, the ice was broken and the girls shared all their personal stories and secrets with me. In each of the following sessions we discussed a different topic. During these sessions various anecdotes were highlighted. Finally I asked them to elaborate that particular anecdote in a more in-depth story.

In the following phase I will be exploring the relation between young women and water. Water is of vital importance, without water one cannot survive. Since women are responsible for the house, it makes them also responsible for water. Collecting water takes up a lot of time in a day, causing a barrier for many women to join school or take up a job.

3 Mobile Stories

“When we walk around our neighborhood with our mobile phones, people give all kinds of comments, such as shiny box, you think you are really smart... We usually get the old, retired phones, whereas our brothers get the newest, latest models. We learn from our surroundings, through trial & error, from our brothers. If we have a mobile phone, we call in case of emergency, we listen to music and we dance to it, we record videos and take photos of ourselves and friends, we talk to our far away relatives, but most of all we stay in touch with our boyfriends. We find secret spaces in order to talk with our friends, we hide under our blankets, we call in the bathroom with the tap running, we keep our mobile phones in our secret pockets or wrap it in our dupatta (long scarf). We share our mobile phones with our friends, so that we can be in touch with our boyfriends in turn. A mobile phone is for safety, and useful for emergencies, but it can cause fights too. It brings bad news and it brings good news (quoted from various stories by adolescent girls (14 – 22 years old), New Delhi, February – March 2011).”

4 Installation

A mobile installation presents the stories written by the adolescent girls at IWIPS 2012. Approximately 16 stories have been recorded for mobile phones in various formats, ranging from messaging, radio plays, monologues, narratives and dialogues are to be presented. The exhibition provides context to each story through visualizations and short texts.

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