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“No country for old men?” Analyzing older people’s attitudes toward mobile communication

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Overview

- Background
- Method
- Results and discussion
- Conclusion

- Our presentation is a part of a broader research project that involves researchers from Sapienza University of Rome, Lumsa (Rome), Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. F. Comunello, M. Fernández-Ardèvol and S. Mulargia are linked to the Mobile Technology and (G)lobal Challenges research group, IN3 – UOC

Background

- Mobile technology plays an increasing role in interpersonal communication, representing a useful resource for different age cohorts. While the usage of mobile communication by younger people has received a wide attention from communication scholars, its usage by older people is less explored (for previous literature, see Conci et al, 2009 and Fernández-Ardèvol & Arroyo 2012).
- As society shifts towards *networked individualism* (Wellman, 2004) and *networked sociability* (Castells et al., 2007), older people also experience new patterns of sociability built on *me-centred networks* (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), that are growingly enabled by mobile technologies.
- In European societies, older population is steadily growing: this justifies a special focus on their relational and communication practices, that show a relevant role both for personal safety and for social inclusion.

Background (2)

- *Media ideologies*: people's beliefs about how a medium communicates and structures communication [...]. "Media ideologies are not true or false [...] but some people *believe* that e-mail is more formal, more dishonest, and more calculated, and this affects the ways they send and interpret e-mail messages" (Gershon 2010, pag. 21).
- Idioms of practice: "people figure out together how to use different media and often agree on the appropriate social uses of technology by asking advice and sharing stories with each other" (Gershon 2010, p. 6).
- Social representations (Moscovici, Farr, 1984) of mobile technology (Contarello, Fortunati, Sarrica, 2007)
- Gender and digital technology: Mobiles are an active agent in evolving gendered relationship (Tacchi, Kitner & Crawford , 2012); technology is, at the same time, cause and consequence of gender relations (Wajcman, 2004; Ganito, 2010).

Our research project

- The goal of our research project is to analyse the usage of mobile phones by the elderly in Italy.
- We conducted 51 semi-structured interviews in Rome and in a mid-range town located in Umbria (Central Italy), between October 2013 and February 2014.
- Our interviewees are both men and women, coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds, and their age varies between 60 and 95. All interviews have been recorded, transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis.
- Results are compared to empirical evidence gathered with the same methodology in other countries –in Europe and in North and South America.

Mobile communication and over 60: an overview

Our study explores older users' motivations and usage practices, their perceptions of mobile phones, their adoption and domestication of mobile phones, their usage skills. More specifically, our analysis focuses on:

- personal characteristics
- personal networks (personal network composition, self-perceived social life, communication channels)
- adoption of mobile telephone
- consumption patterns of mobile devices
- used mobile services
- location and mobility of mobile telephone
- current mobile characteristics
- attitude and opinions towards mobile technology

Mobile communication and over 60: a multifaceted picture

Despite what common beliefs suggest, older people can not be considered an homogeneous age cohort. Differences in users' behaviours and perceptions can be related to: age cohorts (younger olds vs older olds); socio-cultural levels; vital trajectories (in terms of professional and familiar status); gender.

In this presentation we will focus on:

1. Mobile phones in everyday life
2. Autonomy vs mediation in mobile phone acquisition and usage
3. "Smartphone= touch screen": the role of interfaces in mobile services usage
4. Media ideologies and social representations of mobile phones
5. Gender stereotypes

1. Mobile phones in everyday life

The mobile phone is mostly embedded in everyday life, with a majority of respondents showing a *non-problematic* attitude: mobile phones are very often seen as a common, everyday tools for communication.

Our respondents' usage practices can be put on a continuum (with regard to embeddedness in everyday life) from an *extraordinary use* to a *common use* of mobile phones

Common use largely prevails and can be related both to personal (family and friends) and to professional communication.

I use it almost every night 'cause I call my sister [...]. I use it a lot, yes. Every day, even because I often call my grandchild_(Co, Woman, 83)

Well, I consume all my 900 monthly minutes [literally: "I eat them"]. But for work purposes. (Cla, man, 67)

A minority of our respondents show an *extraordinary* use of mobile phones; a couple of them even use the mobile phone as a "temporary" substitute for the landline phone.

Few respondents refer to a sense of *embodiment* in everyday life

"[it] is life!", (N_IVA, Woman, 84)

Overall, a strong sense of a *social indispensability* of the mobile phone emerges

1.2 Mobile phones in everyday life - Mobile phone versus landline phone: an utilitarian approach

In our respondents' experience, the frequency of mobile phone usage is not directly related to individual preferences.

I prefer the landline phone; I hate the mobile but I can't do without. [I use the mobile] more often, [because] it has the phonebook, so it's easier. (GiòA, Man, 65)

Some users are still adopting the strategy of using the mobile phone to call mobile phones and the landline phone to call landline phones.

When asked to make a choice between the mobile and the landline phone, the majority of our respondents answer they would keep the mobile phone. The reasons for such a choice appear to be related to an *utilitarian approach*: some respondents mention emergency needs or relevant communications, while others explicitate that, on a practical level, the mobile phone can substitute the landline phone and not viceversa.

Well, I'd choose the mobile because... I mean... you can use it at home, outside, everywhere you go; for every need, with the mobile you are safer. (TE1, Man, 69)

1.3 Mobile phones in everyday life - Reachability: pleasure and pain

Almost all respondents show an ambivalent attitude towards *reachability*. On the one hand, they consider it as a positive element that makes the mobile phone irreplaceable, on the other hand, they also evaluate the mobile phone as an “invader” of their own privacy, or as an “intruder” in conversations or activities already underway. Communicating any time and any place is a *mixed blessing*.

The advantage is that you can communicate any time and any place, at any distance, even if you are abroad. The disadvantage is that you can be called at any time in the day” (GiòP, man, 67)

Well, the pros are those we have already discussed: you can call and be called almost anywhere. And then, well, sometimes there’s the nuisance that someone calls you because he wants something. You can’t avoid it, and so, what can you do? You can build up an excuse, but then you **have to** answer” (CMAS, man, 66)

Being always reachable is a mixed blessing. If you don’t have the phone it’s different: but if you have it, everybody wants to know why you don’t answer. That’s both a pro and a con (MirkVT, man, 61)

2. Authonomy vs mediation: acquisition of the first mobile phone

Autonomous or “mediated” mobile phone usage can be observed considering three main dimensions:

1. **Acquisition of the first mobile phone.** While the majority of our respondents report to have autonomously chosen to buy their first mobile device, others recall that it was given to them at work or by their relatives. In both cases, motivations are mainly related to a utilitarian dimension and/or to *social indispensability*

My first, belated, mobile was a present as well. They have almost forced me to have it. It was a Philips (Ene, Man, 60)

You enter the mechanism of the “continuous life”, of the “constant life”, of the professional relations where everybody is “equipped” with mobile phones: “can you give me your number?”, “can you give me your number?”, “how can I reach you?”... and therefore you automatically enter a “vortex”. [...] I don’t remember the exact year when they were launched, maybe it was ‘91, ‘92, ‘93... To be up to date in my working environment and therefore, automatically, also in my private life (AnMAZ, man, 63) [the original Italian quotation, as well, expresses a sense of confusion]

2. Authonomy vs mediation: phone fare and device model choices

2. **Phone fare and device model choices:** a majority of our respondents did not play a completely active role in choosing their mobile phone model. Some of them received it as a present (or received it when a relative dismissed an old device); others relied on the advice of family members or shopping assistants

Well you have to ask my children, they did it for me [Q: did you ask for their advice?] No, no, they bought it! I would never had bought it [...] they do everything! (NoS, Woman, 87)

[...] I told the shopping assistant: “give me the cheapest one” and I took it. (I, woman, 84)

On the other hand, some users show a fully autonomous approach

I choose the iPhone because Apple is a cult! [...] I choose my phone autonomously because “1” Apple is a cult, “2” this is the best existing phone, at least I think so... I’ve always bought a “top” (sic) phone. (MirkVT, Man, 61)

When it comes to **phone fares**, however, there is a prevalence of autonomous and in some cases well informed choice.

2. Authonomy vs mediation: handling the device

Users' inclusion in relational networks plays a central role in shaping their usage patterns. A majority of our respondents relies on so-called "warm expert" (Bakardjieva, 2005) in order to solve everyday problems related to mobile phone usage.

My grandchildren. There's the one there that "has really the hands" for computers. He changes the ringtone, deletes sms... He says "grandma, you have a lot of sms". (TE3, Woman, 73)

I've asked my son-in-law and a young neighbor. Then, looking at others, you learn. (MV, Man, 66)

On the other hand, some respondents show an independent attitude toward mobile phone usage, sometimes showing to be proud of it. In some cases, respondents do not want other people to handle their mobile phone for privacy reasons

We are two experts at home, so I don't check my wife's phone and she doesn't check mine. If it rings I might answer, and so does she. But I don't go poking around [...] Let's say that when I had some problems, I solved them myself somehow. It took me a little longer, but I solved them. Considering that my son is an electronic engineer and that he could help me... but I prefer not to bother him [...] Lately I wasn't able to copy some photos on my PC, but sooner or later I got it. It was hard, but I succeeded. (TE1, Man, 69)

3. Smartphone = touch screen. The role of the interfaces in using mobile services

Operational skills constitute an issue for some of our respondents, at different levels. Such issues are often related to *physical limitations* (sight, hearing, touch).

The limit of the mobile is that its display is not large enough. **It's our physical limit.** (PS, man, 67)

When it comes to more advanced features (and devices), respondents spontaneously recall the “touch screen” (almost always employing the english word), wich is often used as a synonym for “smartphone”.

This shows the relevance of interfaces (and, secondly, of interface design) not only in *user experience*, but also in user representation of technology.

3. Smartphone = touch screen. The role of the interface in adopting mobile services - 2

When considering a new device, users appear to be strongly focused on interfaces.

Moreover, while touch screens have been designed as tools for “calm technology” (Weiser and Seely Brown, 1995), even “younger olds” and well educated users appear to perceive them as a (initial?) barrier for accessing more advanced services.

Well, my friends! When I see a friend who has a **touch screen** (sic)... how is it called? [...] well I admire them because, even if some of them are older than me, I see that they handle this **screen**, like that, with their fingers [...] I think it's not for me! (DG, woman, 69)

[RV_F_62_75]. Yes, I prefer this kind of mobile [a basic model] to those with a **touch screen** (sic). I used to have it, but I didn't feel comfortable, and I went back. From a technological point of view, we are at zero! ☺ (RV, woman, 62)

AnMAZ_U_63.80. The new touch screen (sic) will take over this [device]]. [...] I only took a 20-euro sim card, **to become familiar with the touch screen**. (AM, man, 63)

Nowadays it starts becoming complicated: there's no more the keyboard, there is “**the digital, the touchscreen**” (sic) (ASR, man, 60)

4. Media ideologies and social representations of mobile technology

In general terms, our respondents seem to share a set of beliefs on communication channels – and specifically on mobile phones and on their “correct” use (*media ideologies*, Gershon 2010).

Not only do they perceive specific channels as more *intimate* than others, but they also show to have a precise picture of a set of social norms to be followed when using the mobile phone (*m-etiquette*). This emerges, for instance, when they mention “places or situations where the mobile should not be used” (church, theatre, cinema, hospital; while at a meeting or on public transportation; while eating/at a restaurant is a more controversial situation), or more general “unpleasant situations” related to mobile phone usage.

While such norms appear (and are perceived as) widely shared by our respondents, some of them (polemically) underline that younger people do not follow them.

4. “Turn it off! God wants to talk to you, but not on your mobile phone”

Once I read in a church in Visso [a village in central Italy]: “God wants to talk to you, but not on your mobile phone”. It’s great! :-D In churches, in court, at the restaurant, if it’s possible to turn it off... nowadays, everybody uses it on the bus... (MW, man, 66)

For example in hospitals [...] in such places where I often need to meet the doctor... well, then for sure it’s annoying. And I believe those who behave in a certain way are impolite: it’s a matter of politeness. (Te4, man, 70)

[...] you cannot switch it on during the mass! Even in a place... let’s say a bar... if every mobile starts ringing, what do you do? In church, please no! (NoS, woman, 87)

When I turn it off I turn it off. I don’t keep it on silent mode. It annoys me in church, on the train, on the bus, wherever people like to be quiet. I could not say my Rosary on the bus in Rome because there where people talking about personal matters... It was awful! Moreover, just to tell rubbish! I believe it’s a waste of time, of intelligence, of money. (SF, woman, 74)

4. Media ideologies are ever-changing (and perceived as age-specific)

[I use it] wherever I am... but, be careful, when I am with others I keep it in silent mode: I don't like those who talk on the phone while they are with others, I find it a really impolite practice! [...]. I believe this is – again – a common trait of our generation, because we are used to pay the respectful due attention when someone is talking to us. It can't be that when you are talking with that person... of course this is even more true when I am at work; but I don't start handling the phone while I am at lunch with someone [...] Younger people [behave like that]. There are common rules between people same age. (Bru, women, 67)

Such media ideologies are not stable, but change over time (and are subject to constant social negotiation)

In the past, during the first years of mobile phone diffusion, I was really annoyed when I heard it ringing at a restaurant, when you were out for dinner or, anyway, with others. Now I consider it perfectly normal that someone answers the phone while at dinner. (A, man, 64)

5. Women users and gender stereotypes

Respondents tend to almost take for granted that women are **less likely to use** digital technology and have a **lower level of skills**, although women are actually building up more intimate relationships with technology and are becoming power users (Ganito, 2010). Nevertheless, some of our men users refer to the partners as an example of lack of technological expertise; likewise, some women consider the male partner as a driver of innovation, even if this form of (self) representation does not always coincide with the real level of the woman user.

[Does someone help you...?] My husband, my husband [...] I can't do nothing with the mobile phone (I, woman, 84)

[Device model and phone fare choice] We've done a market research and we have evaluated, my husband and I, he is far more expert than I am (Dan, woman, 62)

[referring to application management] Mostly my son-in-law... my daughter, like every woman, is more complicated (sic). My son-in-law is a great expert in this domain (Te4, man, 70).

My wife doesn't really have a good relation with the mobile, she could surely do without it. For example, she doesn't use the [mobile] internet, she only seldom uses messages and Whatsapp (Gimas, man, 63)

All my (women) friends already had a mobile phone, they were more **emancipated** than me (Co, woman, 83)

5. Women users and gender stereotypes – women and caring activities

Rooted gender-based stereotypes still emerge. Women are usually described by our men respondents as a "chatterbox" or as the (grand)children' care appointee.

Maybe... my wife could as well [give up the mobile phone], she's not a mobile phone lover, even if a call with her friends does not exactly last 30 seconds (GiòP, man, 67)

My wife uses it more than me, because she keeps constantly in touch with our children: whenever they need something, they call her. (TE1, man, 69)

What my wife thinks... you women are always... my wife never leaves our apartment without the mobile phone, because life it's like it is, the daughters may need something (GiòA, man, 65)

The discourse on **women and caring**, sustained and maintained within our culture (Ungerson, 1983; Wood, 1994; Armstrong & Armstrong, 2004; Lewis, 2006), shifted within mobile media environments. The "grooming calls" which have primarily a socio-emotional function (Palen, Salzman & Youngs 2001) are referred to women: they use the phone sets for keeping in touch with (grand)kids, friends and family members (Kopomaa. 2000), and for purposes of security and care (Puro 2002).

Conclusion 1: Specificities of this case study

All the participants were mobile phone users, a unique feature of this case study. This might be due to the high diffusion of mobile telephony in Italy – above the EU average.

Mobile phones constitute an extra layer of communication, as they are usually combined with the landline. This is a common result in other developed countries, particularly in Europe.

Voice and data flat rates shape the way Italian participants use the mobile phone.

The price structure in each country and the way it evolves shapes specific communication practices.

Italian participants mostly report a “common use” of mobile phones. In contrast, in North America proportionally more seniors described an “extraordinary” use of mobile phones.

While other gender aspects are not, the sexist discourse regarding ICTs seems to be specific of the Italian case study. Further analysis will be conducted on this issue.

Conclusion 2:

Italian respondents use mobile phones in order to activate and maintain their relational network(s), that can be considered as a powerful driver for mobile phone adoption and usage (both because they provide *motivation* for mobile phone usage, and because they can provide “technical” support, when needed).

“Idioms of practices” (Gershon, 2010) appear to emerge at the intersection of several negotiation processes: among media ideologies, market conditions, personal networks, and individual motivations and usage skills.

The discursivization of mobile phone usage practices constitutes a privileged perspective for analyzing social relations (inter-generational relations, gender relations, etc.) and, in broader terms, people’s understanding of “the times [they are] living in” [Cld_Plr, man, 79].

Grazie!

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