

Filipino Children's Uses of the Internet and Mobile Phone and their Relationships in the New Media Environment

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ABSTRACT

Using depth interviews with a purposive sample of Filipino children, this preliminary study describes and compares how the Internet and mobile phone are utilized by participants, and explains the meanings and contexts of such uses. The focus is on understanding how new media are integrated into Filipino children's everyday routines and practices. The study also probed into the participants' peer and family relationships in the new media environment. Data suggested that the contexts of family, school, and leisure defined the uses of the new media. The Internet was used mainly for information seeking related to school and personal interests, relational maintenance (friends and relatives) and leisure activities. On the other hand, the mobile phone was used for coordinating day-to-day practicalities and relational maintenance among family members and peers. Findings also indicated that parents monitor their children through the mobile phone. Participants tended to maintain existing social networks rather than create new ones in the new media environment. The point of this exercise is to develop a conceptual model for future research on the integration of new media into the everyday lives of Filipino children. Results are therefore tentative and provisional.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND ITS BACKGROUND

How do Filipino children integrate the Internet and mobile phone into their everyday life and peer and family relationships?

This study is a response to a suggestion by Sonia Livingstone (2003) to investigate further children's relationships in the new media environment. It also seeks to address the lack of empirical studies on Filipino children's engagements with and in the new media, specifically the Internet and mobile phone. Why children? As children become more exposed to new media through school and home, it is important to investigate how they use and appropriate these technologies in their everyday life. Do these technologies allow for continuity or change in children's experience of leisure, school, peer and family relationships?

As most studies (Leung and Wei, 2000; Livingstone, 2002; McMillan & Morrison, 2006; Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004; Pertierra et al, 2002; Valdez, 2003) focus only on one new medium, it would be interesting to compare, in one study, how children use both the Internet and mobile phone. Are there similarities and differences between their uses? The premise is that each medium has its

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own set of attributes and functions. Although the Internet and mobile share the same capabilities as an information and communication medium, each of them assumes a specific function among users. It is significant to find out these functions in children's everyday life.

Uses of the mobile phone

The common approach to the study of new media technologies is the uses and gratifications theory, which posits that people use media to gratify certain social and psychological needs. In their study of a diverse sample in Hong Kong, Leung and Wei (2000) identified seven gratifications or motivations for using the mobile phone. These are:

1. Affection and sociability-using cellular phones as a means to show affection.
2. Immediate access-allowing immediate access regardless of time and location.
3. Instrumentality-using the cellular phone as an instrument for business transactions or facilitator of business talks.
4. Reassurance- reflecting a sense of security and safety in having a cellular phone in case of emergency.
5. Fashion/status-the mobile phone used as a status symbol, and to look stylish.
6. Relaxation-the pleasure of using the phone to pass time and relieve boredom.
7. Mobility-elimination of the need to change coins or cue up when using a public phone. (Leung and Wei, 2000, p 313)

Among these motivations, mobility, immediacy and instrumentality strongly predicted the use of mobile phones. Adapting the framework of Leung and Wei to Filipino children, teenagers, and young adults, Valdez (2003) reported that for younger children, reassurance followed by immediate access and mobility were the top three motivations. For elder children, interpersonal relationships and sociability, immediate access and reassurance were ranked accordingly as their motivations. Using depth interviews to find out how Finnish teenagers integrated the mobile phone into their lives, Oksman and Turtiainen (2004) reported that the medium served to articulate the respondents' personal space and enabled presentations of self. For Finnish teenagers, this new medium also enabled them to form their own social networks and define boundaries in their relationships with parents.

Gathering data through survey and depth interviews, Pertierra et al (2002) revealed that aside from instrumental purposes, Filipinos mainly used the mobile phone to communicate with family and friends. Distance was bridged by the technology for users whose family members were

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geographically dispersed. The study suggested that the medium had “increased the capacity for surveillance for people locally and internationally” (Pertierra et al, 2002, p. 140).

Among the mobile phone's functions, short message service (SMS) or *texting*, a term Filipinos have coined, was the most popular. Pertierra et al attributed this to the similarity between the experience of talk and the immediate exchange of text messages. They argued that “this preference is due to the continuing relevance of a traditional orality, within which most Filipinos still operate” (Pertierra et al, 2002, p. 151). Their work shows how cultural practices are actually continued in new media forms, particularly the mobile phone.

However, children are barely represented in this study; only 3% of the 700 survey respondents are between 12-16 years. This confirms Livingstone's (2003) observation that studies of new media are less likely to focus on children, who in reality are one of the early users of the medium. It would be significant to probe further, using a qualitative approach, into Filipino children's engagements in and through the mobile phone and the Internet.

Uses of the Internet

Livingstone's (2002) review of existing studies on the Internet revealed that children used the Internet for “diverse purposes—to support schoolwork, to search for information, to play games and their most preferred activity, for communication (chat, email, instant message).” She also noted a finding in a survey (BMRB Youth TGI) that children also used the medium for their hobbies and interests (p. 12).

Using autobiographical narratives to analyze how the Internet has become integrated into the lives of young people, McMillan and Morrison (2006) found that their respondents (undergraduate and graduate students) were becoming dependent on the Internet for activities ranging from managing their daily lives (seeking information, shopping) to maintaining social interactions and building real and virtual communities.

Relationships online

Studies show that people initiate and maintain relationships on the Internet (Lorenzana, 2002; McMillan & Morrison, 2006; Parks and Floyd, 1996) and mobile phone (Pertierra, 2002; Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004). Livingstone (2002) noted that children also used the Internet to meet

people online. Valdez (2003) reported that among high school students, interpersonal relationships and sociability were the highest gratification of mobile phone use.

Pertierra et al's study revealed that Filipinos tended to explore new relationships and identities using the mobile phone. Respondents of the depth interviews revealed that they were more expressive of their feelings and sexuality through the mobile. They also reported having contacts with strangers and incorporating them into their lives. When survey respondents were asked if the cell phone improved relations with 1) friends and 2) family, 89.6% and 83.4% of them said yes, respectively. This finding further confirms the role of the mobile phone in the social relations of Filipinos.

It would be interesting to find out whether Filipino children initiate and maintain relationships through both media, and whether the use of the mobile phones also improve relations in the family. Moreover, as concerns on risky behaviour are raised against new media use, it would be significant to find evidence among a sample of Filipino children.

These studies imply that people's use of the new media is rather complex. Certain motivations do not only shape new media use but also the users' particular circumstances or situations.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Uses and Context

This study furthers our understanding of new media use by taking into account the complex ways children shape and are shaped by these technologies.

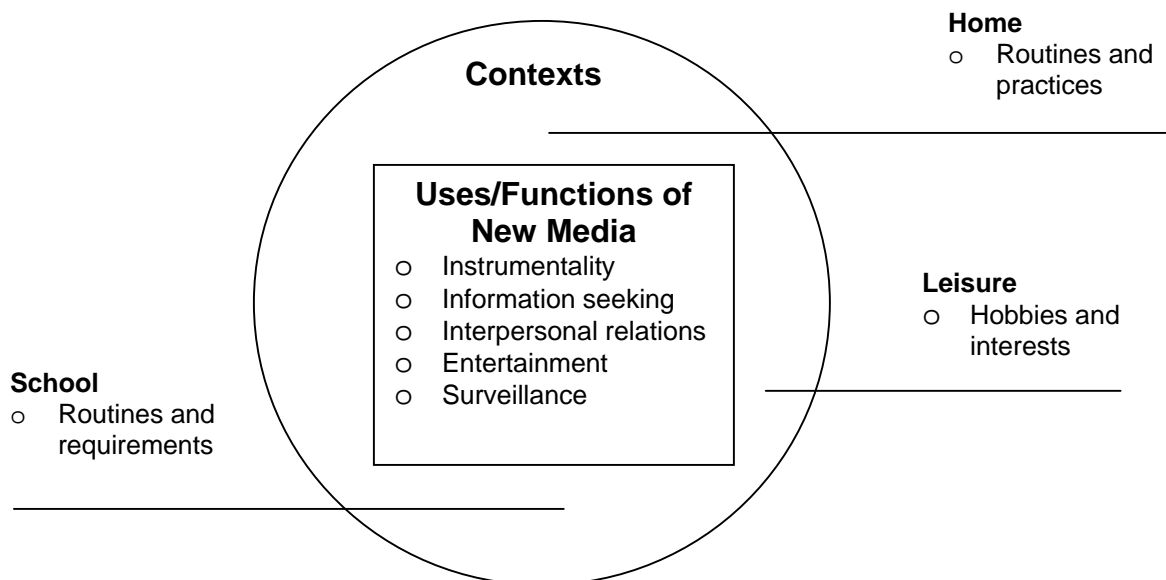
Uses and gratifications theory is successful in maintaining the agency of users and pointing out the motivations for using media. However, this perspective misses out the context of new media use. Context, according to Livingstone and Bovill (1999), provides meaning to uses of new media. Livingstone (2003) further argues that focus should be given to "social conditions, cultural practices and personal meanings" that constitute the nature of Internet use. The same applies to the case of the mobile phone.

For this study, context is also referred to as 'everyday life', or the typical activities and routines of people. Based on this concept, new media use is seen in the context of children's everyday life, their activities and routines at home and school, and during their leisure time. Activities and routines are influenced by values, beliefs, and practices in a given society. Such factors greatly influence how new media are to be utilised and consequently integrated into people's social practices.

This approach does not only provide an enumeration of children's use of new media but also affords us to know what these technologies mean for children. It acknowledges the greater influence of "family and childhood, leisure and lifestyles, work and education and social values" (Livingstone and Lievrouw, 2002) in shaping new media technologies.

We now come up with a tentative conceptual model that integrates concepts from studies that deploy the uses and gratification theory (Leung and Wei, 2000) and uses and context approach (Livingstone and Bovill, 1999). This model was used to guide data gathering.

Figure 1. Uses and Context of New Media



Contexts refer to routines, cultural practices and/or requirements of school and home. Leisure is defined as activities relating to one's hobbies and interests that may be shared with peers or others.

Uses of new media include but may not be limited to:

1. Instrumentality – new media are used to accomplish tasks;
2. Information seeking – users look for information in and through new media;
3. Interpersonal relations – new media as a means to initiate or maintain relations;
4. Entertainment – new media are used to pass time and relieve boredom;
5. Surveillance – new media are used to monitor one's location or condition.

After defining the concepts uses and context, we now pose the following questions:

Research Question 1: **How does a sample of Filipino children use the mobile phone and in what context?**

Research Question 2: **How does a sample of Filipino children use the Internet and in what context?**

New Media as Environment to Create and Sustain Relations

Livingstone and Bovill (1999) also suggest that we look at media not only as a technology but also an environment or “social space” (Jones, 1995) where, according to Thompson (1995), new forms of interactions and relationships occur. Is the new media environment different from the offline world? Livingstone (2002) points out in her review of literature that

the early, popular opposition between online and offline, or virtual or real communication or relationships is inappropriate. Rather, young people use both on and offline communication to sustain their social networks, moving freely between different communication forms, using the online to forge offline relationships and vice-versa. (Livingstone, 2002, p. 13)

This finding is supported by earlier studies (Lorenzana, 2002; Parks and Floyd, 1995), where interactions online migrate to other settings (landline, mobile, and real). Evidence from Pertierra et al's study also suggests that the mobile phone helps improve relations in the family. But how? It would be interesting to gather evidence to support and to explain these observations. The third and fourth research questions are thus posed:

Research Question 3: **Does a sample of children create and sustain relationships in the new media environment? How and why?**

Research Question 4: **Do the new media help improve relations in the families of a sample group of Filipino children?**

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Since the objective is to identify, describe and explain children's activities in the new media environment and how they use these technologies, a qualitative design was employed for the study. This approach allows us to probe further into the contextual realm of children's engagements with and in the new media.

Instrument

Data were gathered through a depth interview guide, which allowed respondents to narrate and explain their uses of the Internet and mobile phone as well as their relationships online. The following are the concepts investigated and the corresponding questions:

- a. Access and Usage of the Mobile Phone/Internet
 1. How did you come to own one? Why?
 2. How long have you been using a mobile phone?
 3. How often do you use the phone?
 4. Where do you have Internet access? Why?
 5. How often do you use the Internet? Why?

- b. Uses and Contexts of the Mobile Phone
 1. What do you do with your cell phone? Why?
 2. What types of messages do you send? Why?

3. Who do you call? Why?
 4. What does the mobile phone mean to you? Why?
- c. Uses and Contexts of the Internet
1. What do you do on the Internet? / What activities do you engage in online? Why?
 2. What sites do you visit? Why?
 3. What does the Internet mean to you? Why?
- d. Peer and Family Relations
1. Do you make friends through the Internet? Mobile phone?
 2. How do you make friends?
 3. Do you reveal truthful information about yourself when online? Using your mobile phone? Why?
 4. Are these friends the same as your friends in school or in your neighborhood?
 5. Do your interactions move/progress to other media? Do you call them? Meet them in person? Why?
 6. How do you see these friends from the Internet/mobile phone? Are the same as your *barkada* (peer group)? Best friends? Why/not? Do you use a different term to refer to these friends?
 7. Does the mobile phone/Internet improve relations with your parents and siblings (if any)? How? Why?

The instrument was pre-tested to a sample of students, 9-12 year olds, from the University of the Philippines Integrated School. It was then revised to make it simpler for younger children to understand some questions.

Sample

Since data were gathered during the summer break in 2004, participants were selected based on convenience. The main criteria for choosing the respondents were ownership of a mobile phone and access to the Internet. Two groups comprised the sample of the study: younger children aged 9-

12; elder children aged 13-17². They came from different schools in Metro Manila and most of them came from an upper middle class background. The following is the breakdown of participants according to gender and age.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

	Female	Male	Total
Younger Children (9-12 years)	8	7	15
Elder Children (13-16) years	6	8	14
Total	14	15	29

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

1. Uses and Context of the Mobile Phone

Access and General Uses

All participants reported that they own a mobile phone. In the case of elder children, parents bought them a phone because, as most of them said, “they thought I needed one.” Cristina, 17, explained: “My parents gave me one so they could track me down.” Younger children usually own used mobiles from their parents or elder siblings. Others received them as gifts from their parents for performing well in school. Participants used the phone to: send text messages (SMS), make calls, play games, and download ring tones.

Analysis of data suggested that the mobile phone was used for surveillance and security, coordination, relational maintenance, and amusement in the context of home, school, and leisure practices.

² According to Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ‘children’ is defined as persons up to the age of 18.

Surveillance and Security

As the purpose for owning a phone revealed, the use of the phone was mainly for surveillance and security. Regardless of gender, the mobile phone served as a device for parents to monitor their children's whereabouts and activities. Aily and Isabela's responses supported such observation:

It's for security purposes. They wanna be updated. They expect to call me all the time...Because I have the cell phone, somehow I am still under their guidance and I am not distant from them...And I am not tempted to do something that they do not want. I always feel that they have their eyes on me. (Aily)

It means security because they can find me wherever I am. They can just call me and there they can be connected to me. (Isabel)

Noel, 17, whenever he was out on a gimmick, explained:

...with the cell phone, they have a little more assurance than before *kasi naririnig naman nila yung background ko kung totoo talaga* [because they can the background (noise) and verify where I am].

For younger children, the phone provided access especially during emergency situations: when classes were suspended (Jonathan, 11) or when one of the younger children missed her service (Isabel, 11).

As a two-way medium that provides accessibility, the mobile phone becomes an instrument through which protective parents can extend their control over their children even when they are distant from them. Dav, 16, shared that he would ask permission from his parents through the phone. Data implied that children hardly resisted this form of control; instead they saw the medium as a sign of security. Equipping children with mobile phones provided both parents and children a sense of assurance, especially in the context of a city environment in the Philippines, where situations can be very unpredictable.

Coordination

Data suggested that most messages sent and calls made through the mobile were instrumental in nature. The medium facilitated everyday activities of children and their families. Both elder and younger participants used the phone to coordinate transportation arrangements from school to home. Isabel, for example, would inform her mother when to pick her up from school.

When children needed things for school, they contacted their parents using the mobile phone (Jet and Dav).

Students like Mico, manager of his high school's cheering squad, and Sophia, member of her school's student government, used the phone extensively to coordinate meetings and school activities. Sophia, however, used the landline to delegate tasks—like asking classmates to bring a costume—because she got assurance from speaking to them directly. Similarly, Daniel preferred the landline when he would contact his classmates about schoolwork and assignments. He opined: “it costs less for me...it's more spontaneous...and definitely helps me to respond to them more.” Although the mobile provides accessibility, the landline is the preferred medium when interactions require more time.

Not only did the phone facilitate the participants' home and school routine, but their leisure life as well. Most elder children, like Fred and Dav, used the phone to organize activities like going out with friends or arranging (soccer) games.

Relational Maintenance

Data confirmed previous findings that the mobile aids people to connect with their social networks. Aside from using the phone to organize and accomplish tasks, participants sent text messages that help maintain their relationships with parents, friends, and sometimes relatives. They sent messages to “keep in touch” or “check on their friends.” These messages could be questions like “how are you doing?” or quotations. In the case of Aily, her parents usually initiated a call to find out how she was doing.

Most participants tended to use the mobile to interact only with their family and friends. A thorough discussion of the role the medium will be discussed in the section on Relationships in the New Media Environment.

2. Uses and Context of the Internet

Access and General Usage

Almost all of the participants had access to the Internet at home. Their computers were usually located in the living room, bedroom or common room. Parents or elder siblings usually

accompanied younger children when they were online. Such was the case with Isabel who used her sister's computer and Carlos who could only go online in the presence of his mother. This finding suggested that families of these children had an idea of regulating the use of the Internet at home.

Participants used the Internet to: e-mail; do research; play games; check sites of interests; download files (pictures or music), interact through Yahoo Messenger, chat with existing friends, shop (for elder children), visit Friendster (a website where one can post personal information, network with existing friends, and find acquaintances) and (an isolated case) pornographic sites. Participants had varied activities online that ranged from communicating to information seeking.

Participants usually spent 30 minutes to five hours per session. Time spent depended on purpose. Routine tasks like checking e-mail took less time than playing games, which required hours. Use of the Internet was more frequent during school days, usually three to five times a week.

Analysis of the participants' experiences with the medium indicated that it was used mainly for searching information, maintaining relationships, and entertainment in the context of school and home practices, and the children's personal interests.

Information Seeking

a. School Work

Children saw the Internet as an information medium. It was used for research. As most of the participants attended school, the Internet was a convenient source of information for their school requirements. Aily stressed: "I choose the Internet [over the library] because it is much easier to retrieve information." Noel also expressed the same convenience: "the Internet is a big help rather [than] reading a lot of books." These responses suggested that children would prefer doing research online than looking for or reading books in the library. Valuing convenience over the rigor of research is an emerging practice among young students and should be investigated in future studies.

b. Interests

Participants searched specific information about their interests. Data showed that children's hobbies and current interests—comic series, television shows, sports—predicted the type of information they searched on the World Wide Web. Elder children who played the guitar like Jet, Dav and Vincent visited sites that offered guitar tabs and song lyrics. Isabel searched for the lyrics of her favourite song. Female children like Timyas and Sophia checked out updates of their favourite

television show *American Idol*, a singing contest. Soccer players like Mico M. and Mico F. looked for soccer accessories and game facts online. Children with special interests like Bernice and Daniel went to anime and comic book sites, respectively.

Relational Maintenance

Email was the most common tool to communicate via the Internet. While the mobile phone was used for immediate friends and family members, data revealed that participants used specifically the email to contact distant friends, relatives and family members. Cristina pointed out that when her cousins and friends migrated to other countries, the email was “the only way to keep in touch with them.” The technology also helped Fred, Max, and Noel to remain in contact with their parents who were working overseas.

Leisure

Participants also reported that they passed time by logging on to game sites and interactive sites like Yahoo Messenger and chat rooms.

3. Synthesis

Table 2 shows emerging patterns, similarities and differences in the use of the Internet and mobile phone. The Internet is mainly used for information seeking, while the mobile phone is for coordination. Only in the context of the home is the Internet used for relational maintenance. This is attributed to its email function. Uses cut across all three contexts, but each context defines the experience of each use.

Table 2. Uses and Context of the Internet and Mobile

CONTEXT					
Home/Family		School		Leisure	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Value of security among family members ○ Home routines ○ Value of relations in the family 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Requirements like research and projects ○ Children's involvement in school activities ○ Home-school routines 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Favourite sport, hobby, music, celebrity and media product (TV shows, movies and books) ○ Peer activities 	
USES					
Internet	Mobile	Internet	Mobile	Internet	Mobile
- Relational Maintenance	- Coordination - Surveillance - Relational Maintenance	- Information Seeking	- Coordination	- Information Seeking	- Coordination

The imperatives and nature of family, school and leisure influence the way participants integrate the new media into everyday life. Family values such as security and relationships compel the acquisition and use of the mobile phone. Similarly, school requirements and activities necessitate doing information search online. The participants' interests also provide a reason and a background on why they utilise the Internet to search for relevant information.

4. Relationships in the New Media Environment

a. Peer Relations: *New Media reinforce existing networks*

Did the participants make friends through the mobile phone and Internet?

Participants tended to be critical of new relationships formed through and in the new media environment. Most of them were wary of entertaining strangers online. They refused to disclose personal information when approached by strangers in chat rooms or through the mobile. Children like Aily and Noel were conscious of the risks when going online:

We're not allowed to meet strangers even using the cell phone because I can meet criminals there, someone's gonna get advantage of me. (Aily)

I do not reveal information because sometimes it's dangerous for you to reveal personal information online. (Noel)

Participants tended to interact only with existing relations and people within their network of relations (friends from school, family members, relatives and friends of friends). This finding contradicts previous observations and common opinion that the new media environment creates

opportunities to make friends. Participants treated people they met online on the level of an acquaintance. As they tended to hold back truthful information about themselves, rarely did these relations progress to friendships.

How did participants view friendships initiated through the new media? Sophia opined: "I don't believe in friendships through the Internet *kasi* (because) there's no personal connection...you are not sure of the other person."

There were, however, exceptional cases: Fred had a different set of friends from the Internet, and Dav initiated friendships online. The latter shared:

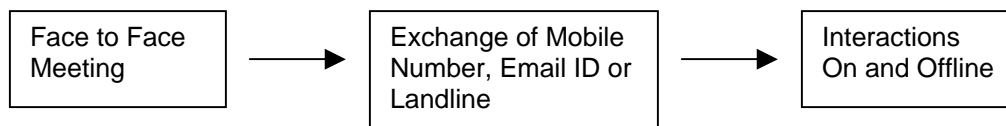
I usually chat with people I don't know yet. I use chat to develop friendships. I try to talk to people I don't know much yet...I've met up with some people I met online for me it's either face to face or chat...I invite them to my shows and then we go out.

Dav was a member of a theater group in school. He also reported that he had met new friends through his peers and interacted with them online where he got to know them better.

Data thus far revealed that participants were less likely to initiate friendships through the new media. In the case of two, it could be inferred that children were already entertaining the idea of expanding their peer networks through the technology. As participants of the study are limited, it would be helpful to probe further into this observation in future research.

So how do children usually make friends in the presence of new media? Interviews revealed that new friendships were still formed through traditional means; friends introduce their network to friends. There were also social venues like soirees and summer camps. Participants said that after they were acquainted face-to-face, interactions progressed through the mobile phone, landline or e-mail. Figure 2 illustrates how relationships develop in this context.

Figure 2. Progression of Interactions in the New Media Environment



b. Family Relations: *Contradictory views*

i. Parent-Child Relationship

Adverts of mobile phone service providers portray the technology as important to maintaining relationships in a fast-paced and mobile society. When asked if the new media improved relations in the family, participants reported mixed views. Accessibility and assurance were the major contributions of the mobile phone in parent-child relationships, especially with younger children. The use of the mobile phone did not necessarily improve relations; in fact, participants' existing communication and relational dynamics informed the use of the medium. It is also interesting to note that the Internet was rarely used for family communication, except in one case.

The previous discussion on surveillance and security suggests that the mobile phone provides accessibility between the parent and the child. The phone enabled both parties to know each other's whereabouts and activities and thus contributed to the level of assurance between child and parent. The examples of Noel and Isabela illustrate this point:

With my parents ya, unlike before they didn't trust me that much. "Ma, I'm going to this place." Of course there's a little doubt inside them *na ano kaya ang mangyayari sa anak ko...doon nga ba siya talaga pupunta* [about what will happen to my child...was he really going to that place] or something. But with the cell phone, they have a little more assurance than before *kasi naririnig naman nila yung background ko kung totoo talaga* [because they could actually hear the background (noise) if it's true]. I can say that we got much closer, especially when parents are out of the country. (Noel)

Yes, because I get to communicate with them more. I get to tell them where I am. And they do not worry...and then my three brothers, I can call them whenever I want to. And we get to *text* each other on what's happening especially when they're not in town. (Isabela)

Children whose parents or siblings were away valued the mobile phone. Cristina talked about his father: "He works in the province with my brothers...even if it's through the cell phone you still *kinda* feel protected 'cause they keep in touch." Similarly, Haji said, "I feel I am closer to them when I am away." Pertierra et al (2002) labels this feeling of being able to contact and be contacted (through the medium) as a form of telepathic tactility.

Pertierra et al (2002) found that Filipinos could express more their affections through the mobile phone. However, some participants viewed the technology as neutral in the sense that it maintained the existing communication and relational dynamics in the family. Mico, whose mother worked in the US and is a single parent, argued: "*Hindi rin. Kasi* bottom line when it comes to parents

kabit lagi kayong nag-tetext, eh kung senseless din-umawi ka na dito-mga ganoon...nangyayari lang yung improving relations with parents *kung talagang magkasama kayo. Pag contact sinesermonan.* [The bottom line is, even if you communicate regularly through text, if it's a nagging message like 'come home now' etc...relations with parents only improve if you are actually with them. If I am contacted, I am being nagged.] Mico found it awkward to communicate affection through the new media.

Bernice and Jet shared the same view: "I don't *text* nice stuff to my parents (functional messages only), pick me up, etc" (Bernice). "We don't usually text each other in the family; (we use the mobile phone) for practical purposes *lang* [only]" (Jet). A reason could be Jet's attitude: "I don't usually emote to them, even personally."

ii. Sibling Relationship

Data revealed that participants rarely used the new media to communicate relational messages with their siblings, except for urgent or task-related messages. When asked if new media improved relations with their siblings, Sophia said, "Not really, because I see them all the time." Dav rather conversed with his siblings face-to-face; and Daniel talked with them at home. However, for Isabela who said that her brothers were usually away, the mobile phone was more valuable. These responses seem to suggest that the use of the medium depends on the context of the parties involved, whether they are near or far from each other in place and time.

According to the survey conducted by Pertierra et al (2002), majority of the respondents said yes when asked if the mobile phone helped improved relations in the family. Results from this study, however, provided contradictory views and explanations. Data indicated that the mobile phone did not guarantee improvement in family relations; rather, existing family communication practices and relational dynamics informed the use of the medium.

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging the lack of empirical studies on children and new media, this study asked how a sample of Filipino children integrated new media into their everyday lives and in their relationships with peers and family members. It sought to understand the uses of the Internet and mobile phone in the context of home (family life), school, and leisure activities of children. A contextual approach to the use of new media looks at how these technologies are incorporated into

everyday routines and acknowledges how values and social practices influence new media uses. By comparing Internet and mobile phone uses, this preliminary study sought to ascertain the meanings of these two different but related media among Filipino children.

Data suggested that the contexts of family, school, and leisure defined the uses of the new media. The Internet was used mainly for information seeking related to school and interests, relational maintenance (friends and relatives) and leisure. On the other hand, the mobile phone was used for coordinating day-to-day practicalities, relational maintenance among family members and peers, and was deployed by parents as a means to monitor their children's whereabouts and activities. In turn participants construed the medium as an extension of parental presence.

The study also probed into family and peer relationships of participants in the new media environment. The goal was to provide evidence that would support or contradict opinion regarding the potential of the medium as an environment where social relations are created or maintained. Findings suggested that the media were used primarily to maintain the participants' existing social networks rather than creating new ones. Rarely was the medium used to create new relations. It is important to note that existing relational dynamics in the family largely influence interactions on the mobile phone. Although the phone provided accessibility, it was not a guarantee in improving relations between parents and children, and among siblings.

What does this set of findings tell about the social consequences of new media? The way these technologies are integrated into the everyday life of these children suggests more continuities than changes. The importance of family and exclusivity of peer relations among Filipinos, the participants' activities in school and with their peers, and day-to-day routines dictate upon the use of the mobile and Internet. New media are appropriated to suit the needs of family and school and interests of children.

The obvious change is the accessibility and convenience that these new media provide to facilitate information search and communication. The impact can be seen in the way children do research and regard reading books. As the study unveiled, participants tended to spend less time in the library and get their material instead online, where information is easily copied. The ways school children do research on the Internet could be investigated in future studies. This finding also suggests a need to emphasize critical media literacy among young people that would train them to be critical consumers and users of online information.

However, accessibility does not necessarily alter existing social and cultural practices; for example, participants tended to communicate more within their network of relations. Indeed for this sample of children, Filipino family and peer relational dynamics still find their way in the new media environment.

Since the study is preliminary, the statements above are tentative unless tested in a larger scope. The following courses of action are therefore recommended:

- a) Selection of a wider sample base that includes children in different social and economic conditions;
- b) Development of a quantitative instrument;
- c) Incorporating observation as a data gathering tool to validate data gathered through narratives;
- d) Refinement of the conceptual framework.

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