

VIEWPOINT

Hold the phone! Culturally credible research ‘with’ young people

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Introduction

This paper reflects on my experiences of using ‘mobile phone methods’ when researching ‘with’ young people (Leyshon 2002, 189, emphasis in original), over the course of a year (October 2013–2014). My research aimed to gain insight into the alcohol consumption practices and experiences of 40 young people, aged 15–24, living in the suburban case study locations of Chorlton and Wythenshawe, Manchester, UK. For the specific group of young people I was working with, mobile phones were important tools of communication and social actors in, and of, themselves. Considering it important to engage with young people ‘on their own terms’ (Leyshon, DiGiovanna, and Halcomb 2013, 180), I decided to enrol mobile phones as research tools. This Viewpoints piece proposes two mobile phone methods that were sensitive to the ways in which participants liked to communicate with me: mobile phone interviews and text messaging. I am not arguing that these methods are suitable for ‘young people’ (as a homogenous group). Instead, I contend that it is about finding bespoke methods that geographer’s can add to their methodological toolbox to enable specific groups of young people to communicate in effective and appropriate ways. In my research, I used mobile phone interviews and text messaging to supplement other methods, namely: interviews, participant observation, peer interviews, diaries, and drawing-map elicitation interviews. By presenting mobile phone interviews and text messaging as methods participants could ‘opt into’ (Leyshon 2002, 182, emphasis in original), alongside other long-standing and innovative methods, the methodology became inclusive; young people with a range of differing skills, both academic and non-academic, were able to engage in the research process in different ways (Walker et al. 2009). In what follows, I draw upon my experiences of using mobile phone interviews, and text messaging, respectively, to highlight their methodological contributions. Taken together, this article contributes methodologically to ‘the new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller and Urry 2006, 207).

Mobile phone interviews

I had planned to ask young people to send me photographs and videos on their nights out, via their mobile phones. Despite gaining ethical approval to do so, this approach was not suitable ‘in practice’ because of the costs involved with sending photograph and video messages. Whilst many young people in my study held a mobile phone contract, which usually allows unlimited text messages to be sent, often this does not include photograph or video messages, which, in the UK, are typically charged at 30–40 pence per message. I developed and refined the research

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design through listening to the experiences of the young people in my study; Heather (15, Wythenshawe, interview) stated: 'there's a party on Friday. I'll video some of it through the night on my mobile, like video bits and I'll come in and show you'. Griffin et al. (2009) assert that the use of mobile phones to video and photograph episodes during young people's everynight lives is very common, and plays a fundamental role in the recounting of drinking stories after the event. Mobile phone interviews involved asking young people to use their phones to take photographs and videos on their nights out. A few days later, I then met the young people individually, and asked them to navigate through relevant photographs and videos on their phones. I used the visual data they showed me as prompts to elicit discussion in an informal interview. The use of novel methods that respond to participants' preferences aligns with Law's (2004) notion of a 'method assemblage'. For Law (2004), 'method assemblage' is not a set of procedures listed in textbooks that need to be mastered, rather it is performative and more-than-representational.

For young people I recruited through schools, the mobile phone interviews took place in a private room at school. For young people recruited via other mediums, such as through youth clubs, radio recruitment, business cards, social networking websites, or word of mouth, the interviews took place in cafés of the young people's choice. As school is a space in which teachers typically banish, or heavily curtail, young people's use of mobile phones, participants felt empowered when participating in mobile phone interviews in such spaces. Interviews typically lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Mobile phone interviews enabled young people to take me with them on a tour of their mobile phone photographs and videos, often navigating through a variety of phone applications: for instance, Instagram; Facebook; and WhatsApp, and primarily their photography and videography albums. I did not have a list of prescribed questions to ask and, whilst I did have some prompts, I found I generally did not need to use these, as young people were easily able to talk around their photographs and videos. In other words, their photographs and videos provided 'a stimulus for story-telling' (Langevang 2007, 277), sparking lively discussions (Cook and Hess 2007).

As Albury and Crawford (2012) contend, young people make aesthetic discriminations about their use of mobile technology, and what to share with others. The use of a mobile phone is significant because, unlike disposable cameras, young people have more editing options, and opportunities to review images, to potentially delete them, and to retake them (Croghan et al. 2008). With the bricolage features of editing and deleting photographs and videos on mobile phones then, auto-photography and auto-videography are performances (Latham 2003), rather than reflections of actuality. Importantly, though, I advocate that mobile phones give young people more autonomy over their self (re)presentations, in comparison to using disposable cameras. Participants in my study provided intimate details of themselves and their friends' drinking practices and activities through the photographs and videos; this is something Trell, van Hoven, and Paulus Huigen (2014) likewise found when using participant-led video to research into young men's alcohol consumption practices in rural Estonia. Despite telling the young people in advance that I would not be disseminating their photographs and videos, several participants in my study showed me their photographs and videos, asking: 'are we famous?' It seemed that they wanted to be identified, and to show and tell others that they had been involved in the research (Wiles et al. 2010). However, coinciding with Trell, van Hoven, and Paulus Huigen's (2014) stance, I decided that revealing photographic and videographic data would compromise the anonymity and privacy of the participants, which may have negative future implications, for instance, when seeking employment. Consequently, as is commonly the case, whilst I utilised visual means of researching, the data from this method are presented as text in research outputs. This approach recognises, echoing Muir and Mason (2012), that photograph and video data can inform thinking and analysis in a backstage manner, without being publicly presented.

Some of the benefits of mobile phone interviews are as follows: I found that asking participants to take photographs and videos provided me with ‘ethnography by proxy’ (Bloustein and Baker 2003, 72), for otherwise difficult-to-access spaces, such as homes of participants’ friends and relatives. Further, the mobile phone offered participants an opportunity to ‘show’, rather than solely ‘tell’, aspects of their identity that may have otherwise remained hidden (as Croghan et al. 2008 notes of photo-elicitation methods). In line with this, the interview acted as a means of triangulating what young people *said* they did, with what the photographs and videos *showed* they did. Further, mobile phones changed the materiality of interviewing participants; the young people were, to some extent, ‘in charge’, whilst I largely watched the scenes unfold. Moreover, as the young people looked at the photographs and videos on their phones, the situation felt relatively ‘casual’, enabling participants to talk freely, without continuous eye contact with me (Pyry 2015). ‘Thinking with’ the photographs and videos then, to echo Pyry (2015, 149), enabled participants to discuss themes that were important to them, in a manner that was meaningful to them. Further, still, this ‘methodological hybrid’ (Latham 2003, 1993) is of great value for its virtual mobility potential; instead of going to physical places, the phone virtually transported me as a researcher.

It could be argued that, through asking young people to photograph and video spaces on their alcohol-related nights out, I was potentially placing them at risk (as Leyshon 2002 recognised when encouraging his participants to video/photograph places within their villages), for instance, of having their devices stolen. I minimised this risk, by asking the young people to take photographs and videos using their own mobile phones. To expand, as I did not give young people cameras/video-cameras, I was not changing their habitual practices (Langevang 2007), which would have arguably placed them at greater risk of theft. There was, nonetheless, a chance that the young people’s mobile phones may be stolen. As Pain et al. (2005) argue, mobile phones are a significant site of victimisation. If young people are acknowledged as social actors, there is the argument that they have the necessary agency to avoid putting themselves at risk (Langevang 2007). Whilst appreciating this, I briefed participants beforehand, reminding them not to take photographs or videos in any situations where they do not feel comfortable. Moreover, I instructed the young people to take photographs and videos only in places they usually go, in ways that they habitually would, being mindful of the risks associated with roads and traffic. Despite these precautions, because photography and videography are a normal part of many young people’s nights out, I found that my participants did not have any concerns about their safety when undertaking this method.

Text messaging

Researchers often use mobile phones when conducting fieldwork, in order to contact participants. For instance, Pelckmans (2009) used mobile phones in his multi-sited fieldwork in Africa, noting that the devices enabled participants to connect with him anywhere, at any time. However, researchers have typically undervalued text messages as a source of data. Whilst diary entries are often perceived to require literacy skills, texting requires a different type of literacy skill, enabling the inclusion of young people with a range of abilities (Walker et al. 2009). Further, social anxiety may cause some young people to prefer technological communication, rather than face-to-face communication (Pierce 2009). As text messages were included in young people’s usual price plans, sending texts did not ‘price them out’ of taking part in my research. To explain, as previously mentioned, young people in my study had mobile phone contracts, in which they were able to send unlimited text messages with no associated costs. Other young people were on ‘pay as you go’ price plans, which had ‘bundles’ of text messages included in the cost. Young people typically funded mobile phone contracts and ‘bundles’ themselves; yet,

in some instances, parents assisted with the funding. Young people in my study had a great deal of autonomy over their mobile phone use, and no participant discussed being subject to the parental gaze over using their devices. This was important to determine from the offset because, if parents were to gain access to the mobile phone, it would have constituted a considerable breach of confidence, as the phone contains confidential material.

Before discussing how I used text messaging in my research, I provide a few examples where other researchers have used this method. Based on the notion that memory deficits lead to distortion when long recall periods are used to assess alcohol consumption, Kuntsche and Labhart (2012) developed an Internet-based phone-optimised assessment technique. According to the authors, this method provides a convenient means of obtaining detailed information about the progression of alcohol consumption for young people over the course of several evenings. Additionally, Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) conducted research into 10–13-year-old children's mobility in Denmark. Alongside ethnography, and global positioning system tracking, the authors deployed a rolling mobile phone survey. Each of the participating children was asked to answer questions five times a day, via text messages sent to mobile phones – 'an always-at-hand-media' (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009, 43). According to the authors, the interactive survey generated data about practices, activities, and social relationships in real time, thereby enabling the researchers to virtually follow the movements of the participants. In Mikkelsen and Christensen's (2009) study, all questions but one had fixed reply categories for the children to respond. In my study, I utilised text messages in a much more qualitatively driven sense, considering that quantification of young people's mobilities does not go far enough in enabling an elucidation of their subjective alcohol-related *experiences*.

I made it clear to young people at the outset that text messages we exchanged were not casual interactions. However, due to the significant amount of time I spent with some participants over the course of a year, I experienced a problem identified by Cotterill (1992, 599) of the blur between 'research friendship and friendship'. It was thus extremely important to keep reviewing informed consent, to remind the participants that I am not only a friend, I am also a researcher. I used text messages as data in two predominant ways. First, conversations I had with the young people, via text messages, regarding nights out they invited me on were a valuable form of data. I asked them about their plans for: where they were going; what they would wear; what they would drink and how they were sourcing their alcohol; where they were going; whom they were meeting, and so forth. Second, I asked participants to update me, via text messages, of their experiences and practices during their nights in/out involving alcohol, when I was not present. The use of text messaging was beneficial, as I was only able to undertake participant observation with one group of young people at a time (Christensen et al. 2011). By still maintaining contact with other participants through text messaging, I did not completely 'miss out' on their drinking experiences as they were occurring.

An additional benefit of text messaging is its ability to update me of events that occur without my presence. For instance, one club was notoriously cautious about letting groups of young men in. When I accompanied the young men during participant observations, they had no problem entering the club; when I was not with this group on another occasion, they texted me telling me that they were not permitted to enter. My presence during participant observations, as a female researcher, thus interrupted how the young men typically experienced their nights out, whereas text messaging was beneficial in enabling insight into the usual proceedings. Further, text messaging is a beneficial method because most other methods, such as diaries and interviews, require participants to remember and recall events. However, the date-and time-stamped text messages provided me with an 'experience snapshot' (Plowman and Stevenson 2012, 539) of young people's alcohol-related, present-tense, action. Overall, text messaging offered an

informal, undemanding, and unobtrusive means of understanding young people's drinking practices and experiences, as they unfolded.

One of the limitations of this method is that often, as the young people were becoming increasingly involved in the night's activities, and as their levels of drunkenness increased, they forgot to send texts, or the language in their texts became less decipherable. Further, there were occasions when young people told me their mobile phones ran out of battery, restricting me from understanding how their nights unfolded. Another word of caution, when using this method to explore young people's drinking experiences, is that young people may send text messages in the mire of drunkenness that, when sober, they may no longer wish to be used as data. To overcome this ethical quandary, I met participants a few days after their nights out, and presented them with a printed copy of the text messages they had sent me, and asked if they were still happy for me to use these data. No young people withdrew any text messages they sent me. As the text messages remained on young people's phones, they had physical evidence of the texts themselves. Many young people recalled sending me these 'drunken' texts and sent follow-up texts the next day. Young people found their drunken texts comical, and were excited about them being used as data. Again, the 'are we going to be famous?' vibe shone through.

Text messaging is a research technique in line with many young people's every night practices. For young people in my study, and as Leyshon, DiGiovanna, and Holcomb (2013) make clear, text messaging is a culturally credible means of communication. Text messaging is, as Thompson and Cupples (2008, 100) articulate, 'a comfortable, easy and effective means of communication for young people'. More than this, text messages have the ability to provide insight into young people's situated practices and lived meanings across time and space. With its practice-based and present-moment focus (Dewsbury 2010), one may conceive of text messaging as a more-than-representational research tool.

Concluding comments

This paper has elucidated two methods that, when undertaking my research, I found fitted well with young people's lives, and how they document and share information. Mobile phone interviews and text messages were not used in isolation, but were enrolled in a methodology drawing upon other methods, including: interviews, drawings, diaries, and participant observation. Young people could 'opt into' any method(s) they wished, and mobile phone methods proved to be very popular. Cumulatively, these methods enabled me to gain insight into the lived experiences of young people's alcohol consumption practices and experiences. I recommend that mobile phone interviews and text messaging are best adopted at a later stage in the research process, when the researcher has formed relationships with participants, built rapport, and gained mutual trust. Combining long-standing and innovative methods provides young people with the space and time they need to communicate the complexities of their lives (Langevang 2007). Nevertheless, mobile phone methods do provide a novel perspective on young people's drinking experiences. In my research, mobile phone interviews proved to offer adaptive and creative means of understanding young people's drinking micro-geographies. Further, I found text messaging beneficial in offering insight into the temporal unfolding of young people's alcohol consumption practices and experiences, something that may be overlooked when using other forms of data collection. Due to their ability to offer novel insight into the spatio-temporal specificities of young people's everyday/night lives, mobile phone methods may be beneficial for other researchers aiming to gain insight into the spaces, mobilities, and rhythms experienced by different groups of young people.

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