

From “Log In” to “Always On” – Examining Communicative Practices of Managing Relationships Among Young People in Taiwan and Austria

Margarita Köhl & Gerit Götzenbrucker

Department of Communication/ University of Vienna

Converging media technologies, such as smartphones, are now used around the world to micro-coordinate interactions and to manage knowledge and relationships. In particular the everyday lives of young people worldwide are increasingly becoming “mediatized”.

Particularly since the proliferation of 3G mobile standards new modes of digital self-expression, practices of life-streaming as well as new emotional modes of communication have evolved.

The increasing permeation of the digital and the physical realm by means of these mobile converging media technologies cannot be regarded as a neutral process, but changes the way in which we relate to others and to ourselves, thereby impacting the basic mechanisms of sociality. Users in Europe and Asia not only take advantage of the potential of widening cultural horizons beyond the barriers of locality, but also more importantly seem to adopt media technologies in order to foster social embeddedness in a culture of constant flux, as exemplified by studies on Taiwanese (Wei & Lo 2006) and European (Livingstone & Haddon 2009) online and gadget cultures.

Referring to an on-going transcultural study this paper analyses the practices and meanings of lifelogging and lifestreaming among young people in Taiwan and Austria by examining communicative modes and figurations instead of focussing on distinct devices and services. Addressing the question if culture – viewed as a repertoire of symbols and practices – impacts the ways of adopting and using converging media technologies we examine how new communicative practices interact with existing textures of sociality. Based on a combination of the perspective of *Apparatgeist* (Katz & Aakhus 2002) and the approach of transcultural communication (Hepp & Löffelholz 2002; Hepp 2014) similarities and differences regarding the practices of emotional expression and experience within the context of relationship-management will be analysed.

Firstly, a total of 50 qualitative episodic interviews (30 in Vienna, Austria; 20 in Kaohsiung, Taiwan) and 4 focus groups among students between 18 and 25 were conducted to uncover globalized practices as well as cultural differences with regards to the use of converging media technologies as lifelogging and lifestreaming tools. Secondly, a standardized online

questionnaire (n= 500 Taiwan and Austria) was applied to complement the results of the qualitative study, analysing the interrelationship of types of relationships, stages of intimacy and communicative practices.

The results show, that converging media technologies foster a more differentiated management of relationships (“*easy use and arrangement of contacts*”) and that socially homophile practices (contacts based on “*same interests*” or “*same school*”) ease the initiation of contacts, which is highly appreciated by all interviewees. However, “cultural models” (D’Andrade 1985) frame the ways these technologies are adopted to manage relationships, as well as which media channel is chosen for managing which type of relationship. Due to the fact that converging media technologies are ubiquitously and freely accessible, a new type of connectivity has emerged, arising from the shift of being logged on to being “always on”. The results indicate that lifelogging and lifestreaming practices on the one hand create a new type of reminiscence, which supports new modes of emotional expression and intimacy. On the other hand the young users experience a loss of privacy (“*I am never alone*”), peer pressure (“*fear of missing out*”), growing impatience, and new routines (“*checking behaviour*” or “*fluid dating practices*”), social comparison (“*like what my friends like*”), and moreover body-expression/posture (“*head down culture*” and “*wiping*”) and embodiment (“*phantom-pain if my smartphone is not here*”) evolve.

While there is a set of practices determined by technology but also characteristic for the life stage of young adulthood, culturally based differences could be identified with regards to the meanings of family and friendships as well as the related communicative practices and channels. Moreover, users from Taiwan attach more importance to the speed of reciprocity and are less critical about the ‘loss of privacy’.

References:

- Wei, Ran & Lo, Ven Hwei (2006): Staying connected while on the move/ Cell phone use and social connectedness, In: *New Media & Society* February 2006 vol. 8 no. 1 53-7
- Hepp, Andreas und Martin Löffelholz (Hg.). 2002. *Grundlagentexte zur transkulturellen Kommunikation*. Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH.
- Hepp, (2014): *Transkulturelle Kommunikation*
- D’Andrade RG (1985) Character terms and cultural models. In: Dougherty J W D (ed) *Directions in cognitive anthropology*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 112-148.
- Katz, James E. & Aakhus, Mark (2002) *Perpetual Contact Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press
- Livingstone, Sonia and Haddon, Leslie (Eds.) (2009) *Kids Online: Opportunities and Risks for Children*. Bristol: The Policy Press.