

Chapter 1

Mobile Media and Asian Youths: Everything Everywhere All at Once

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Abstract

The rapid growth of mobile media use in Asia and its extensive access underscores the significance of understanding the pervasive role of mobile media among children and youths in Asia. Despite concerns about potential negative impacts on well-being, evidence remains mixed, reflecting the complexity of digital media effects. Focusing on identity, relationships, and empowerment, this compilation presents diverse research from Vietnam, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, China, and India, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges associated with mobile media. By including voices from various Asian countries, this work addresses gaps in global mobile communication scholarship and offers nuanced insights into how mobile media shapes the experiences and development of young people in the region.

Keywords: *mobile media, digital media, Asia Pacific, children and youth, well-being, identity development, relationship formation, empowerment*

Sitting in a modest farm nestled in the rural Sapa Valley in Vietnam, I found myself observing an unexpected cultural exchange. Two children who were about 8 years old, one from Singapore, and the other a local boy from the village, were engrossed playing a videogame on their parents' smartphones. Despite the language differences, there was

palpable energy between them as they interacted with each other and worked through an “obby” – internet slang for obstacle course type games – together. During the session, they laughed, gestured, and danced together. In that moment, a tiny device and the game played on it bridged cultural and language differences, enabling a sense of connection between two boys.

Such a moment speaks to the growing ways in which mobile devices are used by children and youths in Asia – from fostering and maintaining relationships to entertainment, learning, and self-discovery. This is on the back of unprecedented access and growth in the use of mobile media among Asian children and youths. In 2022, mobile cellular subscription rates reached its highest ever levels in East Asia & Pacific at 130% (The World Bank, 2022). In a study conducted almost a decade ago, it was found that 98% of parents in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia reported that their children between the ages of 3 and 8 years old have access to some type of mobile device (The Asian Parent Insights, 2014). This figure will certainly be even higher today. Time spent on devices among Asian youths has also ballooned, with children and youths spending a large proportion of their time on mobile devices. For example, it was found that one third of Korean teenagers spend more than 4 hours per day on their smartphones (Statista Research Department, 2024).

The growth of mobile telephony in Asia has been rapid since Japan kickstarted mobile access to the Internet for Asian users (see Lim & Goggin, 2014, for a historical review). Today, despite cultural, economic, and social differences, these patterns cut across different Asian nations, where many countries can be described as *mobile first* (e.g., Evans, 2017). The term *mobile first* is used to describe countries where almost every aspect of a person’s life is mediated through a mobile device (e.g., healthcare, communication, entertainment, commerce, etc), and where the *first* platform for these activities take place are on mobile devices (e.g., individuals turning to mobile devices as the *primary* means of playing a video

game or purchasing a drink from a vending machine, etc). Indeed, while mobile devices are increasingly used across the globe to access the web, countries in Asia such as Vietnam, India, Indonesia, China, Thailand, and Singapore see on average a greater share of web traffic coming from mobile phones when compared to several countries from the rest of world, such as the UK and the US (Kemp, 2024).

Contributing to these patterns of use is strong state support across several Asia-Pacific nations for digitalization across many areas of daily life, including in education. In the Philippines, the Department of Education Computerization Program aims to integrate technology into the classroom learning through provision of resources and training to teachers (Capule-Navarro & Alampay, 2020). In Singapore, a national policy was initiated to ensure that all students in secondary school – typically students between 12- and 16-years-old – will have their own personal learning device, in many cases an iPad, by 2028 (Ang, 2020). Similar efforts can be seen in other nations, such as in Thailand and India, among others (Sharma, 2013; Wancharoen & Sattaburuth, 2023). Beyond encouraging access to digital devices, the use of mobile and web applications for education is common, and traditional classes are often supplemented with mobile- or web-based activities. These efforts towards digitalization, while arguably mixed in its efficacy in improving educational outcomes, has contributed to *mobile first* societies.

Concerns about the impact of mobile media use on youths

Paradoxically, the rapid digitalization of childhood and education has driven concerns, or what some may call moral panic, over its impact (Drotner, 2016; Rao & Lingam, 2020). Such concerns about digital devices' impact on young people's well-being, development, and health has been hotly debated both within and outside the academic community (Haidt, 2024; Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017b, 2017a; Twenge, 2017, 2019;

Twenge et al., 2018; Yee & Chandrasekaran, 2023). Considering these worries, governments across the globe have initiated various efforts to address them (Kucirkova et al., 2023). The US Senate Judiciary Committee launched a hearing on online child safety against executives from major social media platforms such as Tik Tok, X, and Meta (BBC, 2024). In 2021, China had implemented its toughest crackdown on youth gaming, when children were banned from gaming for more than an hour on certain days (McCallum & McMahon, 2023). In Singapore, there has been increasing discussion on how best to mitigate the negative impact digital media can impact youths' mental health (Yeap, 2024).

Despite these concerns, scholars have long argued that the relationship between digital media use – or Internet use more broadly – is complex. While some researchers have found undesirable effects of screen and/or social media use on youth well-being (McAllister et al., 2021; Roberston et al., 2022; Twenge, 2019), others have suggested null, positive, or even inverted U-shaped relationships (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017b, 2017a; Vuorre & Przybylski, 2024). One reason for such conflicting findings is the way in which the phenomenon in question – some broad facet of digital *media use* – is conceptualized and measured (Kaye et al., 2020). Given the way that concepts such as mobile media use, screen time, Internet use, and social media use, among others, can involve a range of human activities, content, and conditions, it is no surprise that conflicting findings are found across the literature (Yee et al., 2024).

Indeed, as the processing power of mobile devices increase, so too the range of human activities that can be enacted on it. Mobile devices are currently the *primary* physical platform we use to engage in mediated experiences. As described by pioneers of the mobile communication field, mobile devices have extended across different domains of our lives and are embedded in the very fabric of our day-to-day lives, where we structure interaction with

each other holding the assumption that we are constantly connected to a network (Castells et al., 2006; Ling, 2012).

Media effects research since the 1920s has alternated between different views about strong, null, or weak effects (Livingstone, 1996). In other words, the conflicting findings above are not unique to contemporary research, but rather, a characteristic of the field itself, reflective of the negotiation between scholars about the theories, methods, and assumptions in a common area of research. To better understand the impact of media on people – including mobile media –, scholars have emphasized the need for scholars to further elucidate the nuances on “how the media contribute to making us who we are (Livingstone, 1996, p. 320)”.

How (mobile) media makes us who we are

Indeed, scholars have heeded this call over the years. There has been substantive growth in the study of mobile media over the past decade, with researchers utilizing different paradigms, methods, and theoretical approaches (Wei et al., 2023). With respect to children and youths specifically, researchers have examined how mobile devices are used to access sources of knowledge and information (Lin et al., 2010), entertainment (Sarwatay et al., 2023), discourse, and self-expression (Literat, 2021). For example, social media – commonly accessed through mobile devices – serve as spaces where youths experiment and make sense of complex concepts such as gender, race and age (Jaynes, 2020; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Mobile devices also serve as important tools in which young people develop micro-level social capital (Boase, 2021; Kimm & Boase, 2019).

In a review, Ling and Bertel (2022) highlighted the varied ways in which the mobile phone has been examined in studies involving children and adolescents. They also argue that mobile devices play a role in the emancipation of youths from their parents, as it affords

adolescents a kind of conditional¹ freedom to establish independence from their parents, connect with peers, and access to opportunities for identity development. It appears that adolescents themselves agree, viewing mobile devices as a portal to digital worlds where they feel empowered to interact with others and develop their identities (Shifflet-Chila et al., 2016). Such empowerment and sense of autonomy is not only crucial for well-being in general (Ryan & Deci, 2017), but also parent-child relationship quality and social functioning, especially among low-risk adolescents² (Boykin McElhaney & Allen, 2001).

It is crucial to note the risks and problems associated with mobile media use among children and adolescents, including risky behaviors – such as sexting, and mobile bullying, among others (Ling & Bertel, 2022). Mobile media use can also contribute to problems within the family, manifesting in family conflicts (Beyens & Beullens, 2017; Yang & Zhang, 2021). This is not to say that mobile media is inherently positive or negative for development, but rather, that it affords children and adolescents a channel in which they can experience and exercise their autonomy and to develop their identity.

The contributions in this volume

As mobile media becomes increasingly embedded in the everyday lives of children and adolescents, there remains a lack of research examining how mobile media is used among children and youths in Asia. First, global mobile communication scholarship remains uneven, with the bulk of scholarship being produced in the United States (Wei et al., 2023). Even within Asia, most studies have been based in South Korea (and to a lesser extent,

¹ It is conditional, since having a mobile device also means that a parent could call a child to enforce certain behaviors if they wanted to, such as asking them to return home from a social gathering (Ling & Bertel, 2022).

² This study found that *undermining* autonomy was related to poorer parent-child relationship quality and social functioning among low-risk families. The opposite was found for high-risk families, such that undermining autonomy has a positive effect on parent-child relationship quality and social functioning. High-risk families were identified as having household income at or below 200% of the Federal poverty line.

China) (Wei et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2016), with fewer studies conducted in less affluent Asian countries. This leads to some “knowledge blind spots”, since Asia Pacific as a region contains a blend of societies that vary widely in language, cultural influence, political systems (Abidin et al., 2023). Given that mobile media is a global technology, a fuller understanding of its role and impact must consider perspectives from a diversity of cultures.

Second, among the studies conducted in Asia, there has been even fewer studies examining mobile media in relation to the development of and daily lives of children and adolescents. Given the ubiquity and growing concerns about the impact of digital media on young people, there is value in presenting a collection of essays and studies which can contribute a distinctly Asian voice to the global conversation. The contributions in this volume also come from a diversity of epistemological approaches, which adds nuance and texture to the debates.

Overall, this volume presents research based in seven different countries across Asia-Pacific – namely Vietnam, Hong Kong, Singapore, Philippines, Indonesia, China, and India. The papers are organized around three main ideas surrounding mobile media use among children and youths that we alluded to earlier – *identity*, *relationships*, and *empowerment*.

Identity

We start with a discussion on how mobile media intersects with *identity* development among youths. In Chapter 2, Sun Meicheng examines the impact of mobile media on Chinese K-pop fandom, focusing on youth’s use of mobile apps to engage with K-pop culture despite China’s semi-official discouragement. She highlights the role of mobile media in transcending geographical, linguistic, and cultural barriers, enabling fans to participate in transnational fandom practices. She uses GOT7’s Chinese fandom as a case study to explore these dynamics, revealing how fans utilize various mobile media platforms for fan activities,

such as information sharing, merchandise purchasing, and community building. She also discusses the unique language use within the fandom, which includes transliteration and the creation of jargon, further solidifying fan identities. This phenomenon showcases the interplay between cultural consumption, identity formation, and the digital landscape in contemporary China.

In Chapter 3, Jonalou Labor and Cheeno Marlo Sayuno delve into the intricate relationship between mobile gaming and identity development among Filipino youth. They explore how mobile games are woven into their daily lives, influencing their well-being, social connections, and self-perception. Beyond experiences like community building and stress relief, mobile gaming also presents challenges such as addiction and cyberbullying. They find that youths navigate these dualities, balancing gaming with responsibilities and using their virtual personas to express and discover their identities. The paper underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of mobile gaming's impact on the evolving identities of young Filipinos in the digital age.

Finally, in Chapter 4, Ina Ratriyana sought to explore the impact of social media on young Indonesian influencers' identity development during the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights how TikTok became a crucial platform for self-expression and connection, especially for fashion influencers who adapted their content to resonate with audiences confined at home. The study delves into the narrative storytelling of these influencers, exploring how they navigated identity representation and class through the content they create and share.

Relationships

In exploring of how *relationships* are formed and affected by mobile media use, Chapter 5 kicks off with Becky Pham exploring how Vietnamese families appropriate

YouTube in the home environment. Specifically, she highlights the cultural tensions between traditional Vietnamese values and global influences, termed “glocal intimacies.” She uses netnography to analyze online discussions and interviews with parents, revealing a dichotomy: the public upholds conservative values, while parents adopt a global outlook.

Chapter 6 details the shifting dynamics of family relationships in Singapore during the Covid-19 lockdown, examining how parents adjusted and changed their parental mediation strategies on children’s mobile device use. Jiow Hee Jhee, Lionel Goh, Ida Lian, Elizabeth Mascrinhas, and Theodora Tan highlight the importance of supporting families in navigating the increasing exposure to digital media brought about by the pandemic.

In Chapter 7, Julianne Thesa Y Baldo-Cubelo and Ma Rosel S San Pascual discusses how friendships are enacted and maintained before and after the pandemic, particularly in the context of online and offline interactions. Through qualitative interviews, they fleshed out the nuances of mediated communication and the role of technology in shaping modern adolescent friendships in the Philippines.

Last, in Chapter 8, Yang Xiaodong and Li Yijing examine how specific parenting styles can affect greater parent-adolescent conflict over mobile phone use in China. A central finding was that parental responsiveness plays a crucial role in reducing conflicts surrounding mobile device use, and that different children require different strategies and approaches.

Empowerment

Along the theme of *empowerment*, Chapter 9 sees Sharanya Shanmugam and Mark Findlay discuss the importance of involving youth in the creation of online safety and privacy regulations in Singapore. They critique current paternalistic approaches that impose top-down restrictions, which often fail to resonate with young users and can lead to evasion tactics. Instead, they advocate for a co-creation process, where youths and policymakers collaborate

to develop regulations which reflect the actual needs and preferences of young digital citizens. They emphasize that empowering youth in regulatory discussions leads to more informed and sustainable digital engagement.

In Chapter 10, Hang Li, Raymond Chi-fai Chui, Wang On Li, and Jason Tak-sang Chow explore whether different types of social media use – namely social versus entertainment use – has an effect on conventional versus radical political participation among youths in Hong Kong. While both types of social media use have positive associations with conventional political participation, entertainment use was negatively related to radical political participation while social use was positively related. This highlights the importance of considering the type of use when examining the role of social media on political participation.

Finally, in Chapter 11, Abza Bharadwaj and Daljeet Arora analyze the digital media landscape in India, particularly in relation to its impact on children and young people. They highlight that the growth in access to mobile devices and the Internet brings both opportunities and risks; while it empowers young users with information and connectivity, it also exposes them to cyber-crimes and psychological threats. They argue that legal measures alone are insufficient to protect youth in the digital space. Instead, echoing Sharanya Shanmugam and Mark Findlay in Chapter 9, they advocate a holistic approach that includes the voices of children, parents, and communities.

The conversation on mobile media use among children and youth has lacked authoritative voices from Asia. While it does not fully address the shortcomings of the global mobile communication scholarship, the contributions in this volume, spanning across seven different countries in the Asia Pacific, widen our perspectives on mobile media effects on youth and children. It provides unique insights into how mobile media effects interact with

the diversity of language, culture, and political systems in the Asia Pacific region. This is essential to our understanding of the roles and impacts of mobile media as a global technology. Importantly, amidst the backdrop of the field of mobile communications where there is yet a definitive value judgement on the influence the mobile media has, this volume offers a deeper understanding of how mobile media empowers youths, shapes identities, and impacts the relationships of children and youth in the Asia Pacific Region.

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