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## Always on and Connected:

young people and their mobile social media use in  
Japan, the US, and the UK

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### ABSTRACT

How similar are young people in different parts of the world in the way they use digital media? What do they share cross-culturally – and what not? Do cultural differences really matter when the technology is the same? The technology in question, the smartphone, has seen a meteoric rise in the past few years. It is now hard for most of us, and especially young people living in cosmopolitan urban centres, to imagine a world without the smartphone – and, for that matter, without their apps like social media such as Twitter, Facebook and LINE. The latter was only launched in 2011 by NHN Japan and has since become popular, not only in Japan, but also in Asia and Spanish-speaking countries. Precisely because the reach of such digital media is global, there is a need to understand how mobile social media are taken up and used in different places. As an initial step, this talk will present findings from a comparative study of digital media use amongst youth in Japan, US and the UK, focusing on their practices of connectivity, that is, connecting with both intimate and distant others through mobile social media.

## **1. Introduction: Always on**

Born into a digital world, the young of today inhabit a world that is markedly different from the previous generation. These “digital natives” or “the constant contact generation”, as they have been called, spend much of their waking time engaged in a wide variety of media including mobile phones, the Internet, video games, and TV. According to a Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications survey (2014), Japanese young people have a higher rate of Internet use than of television use (Figure 1). More than 60% own smartphones (age 13–19: 63.3%, age 20–29: 87.9%), and more than 70% use social media (age 13–19: 76.3%, age 20–29: 91.0%). I’d like to illustrate how young people constantly connect with their friends by introducing my informants.

Many of the young people I interviewed in Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom tell me that they never switch off their mobile phones. They even sleep with their mobile phones next to their pillows. If their mobile vibrates while they are asleep, they would inevitably pick it up and reply to text messages from their friends or comment on social media. No need to turn on the lights as the illumination of their phone screen would suffice. Interestingly, some may not

remember this engagement the next morning. Here, for example, is Yuki, a Japanese nineteen year-old female college student:

Yuki: I put my mobile phone in vibration mode under the pillow when I'm asleep.

Researcher: Don't you wake up when you receive messages in the middle of the night?

Yuki: I do. But I don't even remember opening or replying to the messages.

Catherine, an American college student confirms her similar iPhone engagement while she sleeps.

Catherine I can't switch my phone off.

Researcher Why?

Catherine Well, I mean if I do get a message then I will probably look at it.

Researcher Even you're sleeping?

Catherine Even if I'm asleep [laughs].

Researcher But you don't set it to silent mode?

- Catherine No.
- Researcher So it wakes you up?
- Catherine Yes, but I don't mind it that much.
- Researcher Really, that's the same thing - Japanese kids also said they don't mind.
- Catherine Yes, no I don't really mind.
- Researcher But sometimes they don't even remember that they have checked SNS and emails.
- Catherine Oh yes, that happens.
- Researcher Oh really [laughs]?
- Catherine Yes, it's very weird.
- Researcher That's because you like to connect with your friends?
- Catherine Yes. I like to be constantly, you know, I like to know people are okay and stuff like that. I like to know what people are up to as well.

Joe, an American college student demonstrates his accessibility by replying to facebook messages and text messages 24/7.

Researcher: Do you switch off when you sleep?

Joe: No.

Researcher: Never, you never switch off?

Joe: Yes. I'm always very accessible.

Researcher: Even while you are sleeping?

Joe: Yes. It's always on so people can always reach me... My sleeping schedule is kind of crazy. Sometimes I go to sleep at midnight, sometimes I go to sleep at like 4 or 5 in the morning.

Moreover John, an American 17 year-old-boy simply asked me, "why do we have to switch off?" People who have smart phones such as blackberry or iPhone do not check facebook any more. Instead, they stay on it 24/7. Tony, an American 16-year-old-boy explains:

Researcher: How many times do you check facebook a day?

Tony: I don't check it, I like literally stay on it. Like literally when somebody sends me a message my phone beeps. Whenever somebody chats with

me I get it on my phone, I can chat back and stuff.

## **2. Freedom and Control**

Children and young people connect with each other at home, school, on the street, during classes, dinner, and sleeping via mobile phones in their own social and economic settings. Mobile phones free them from the constraints of time-space and control from teachers and parents.

### **Freedom from Control of Teachers**

Consider how Rui, a sixteen year-old Japanese high school girl, talked about the use of mobile social media phones at school.

Rui: Some kids break the speaker of their mobile phones and take photos during the class.

Researcher: Really? Can you do that?... Actually it makes quite a loud sound when we take photos via mobile phone.

Rui: Yeah. So if I look at my friends' blog, she writes "Now in classics literature----" and uploads a photo.

Researcher: When did she take photos?

Rui: It said 10:46 am. It was in the class.

Researcher: What did she take?

Rui: She took her friend with a peace sign under the desk. (She showed her blog with a gesture of taking a photo.)

Again, this is not unique to Japan but seems to be also the case in the US and UK.

Young people there are more likely to be texting each other during the class although mobile phones are not allowed. The next example is from a focus group interview of 15 year-old girls and a boy of middle-class background in the UK.

Researcher Do you text each other in the class?

All Yes.

Sheryl Because we're not always together in the class so if we want to talk about something we will text... even if they're just like sat like across the classroom you still like text them so you can't get caught.

Jane Yes, exactly.

Researcher      What kind of texts do you send each other?

Nancy    Just like having like a chat sort of thing.

Jane      Nothing like important, just talking about anything.

Researcher      Like what, about teacher? [Laughs]

All      Yes.

Jane      Or how boring it is, or what you're going to do after school.

Tom      They say that but what they really text about is boys all the time!

### **Freedom from Control of Parents**

I also asked them if they connect with each other via their mobile phones during dinner. At first they told me they are not allowed to use mobile phones because they have to follow the traditional social norms. However they told me how much they care about mobile phones during dinner. Here, we see how mobile phone engagement may challenge traditional social norms at home.

Researcher      When you have dinner, if somebody texts, do you...

Sheryl    I'm not allowed to text back.

Tom      No, I'm not allowed to touch my phone at dinner.

Sheryl Yes, it's rude at the dinner table, apparently. So I'm not allowed.

Jane Actually I usually leave my phone upstairs so...

Nancy Yes, I don't like taking it to dinner, I have to like leave it in a different room when I'm eating, because it's like family time and time to sit down with your family, that's meant to be the traditional way.

Researcher Oh really, so you want to finish dinner as soon as possible or...?

Jane Yes.

Tom If someone texts I eat really quickly.

Researcher But you enjoy family time?

Nancy Yes I enjoy family time.

Jane I don't [laughs].

Sheryl I can say I'm not texting because I can text without looking at it.

Jane But that's the good thing about not touch screen, because a touch screen you won't be able to see what you're saying, so...

Sherly Yes, so sometimes I do enjoy just having like dinner time with family and sometimes, if I want to talk about something, I'll just do it under the table.

As this British focus group interview shows, parents' attempts to control their children's engagement with PCs and mobile phones often fall short. As an example, here is a case of an American father who tried to prevent his son from using PCs as social media, giving him a cheap, disposable phone to limit his usage. The boy, however, has been able to access a PC after school as a social and communication tool with his friends.

Researcher      Who pays for your mobile phone?

Daniel    My parents pay. They really don't like me to talk too much on the phone. My parents are very strict.

Researcher      So you have some rules?

Daniel    Yes, my father tells me don't go onto the laptops, like don't talk to your friends on MSN. Stop it. And then I obviously disobey him and just use that. I like to hang out with my friends...Laptop I don't use in the mornings, um but I do every time I come home at 5 or 6 after school. I'll be on my laptop until probably 2am.

Researcher:      What are you doing? 9 hours?

Daniel    Yes, facebook on, Gpop... PowerPoint, MSN, Gmail, skype, that's

basically it on my computer. That's it. And I guess that takes that long, I don't know. Time just flies when you're on the laptop of course.

### **Multi-tasking and Fulltime Intimate Community**

Thus young people constantly connect each other not only via mobile phones but also laptops. As soon as they go back home, they turn on their laptop as well as TV and engage with their laptop for six or seven hours after school until they sleep. They do their school work by multi-tasking, leaving multiple websites open on the laptop at home. At the same time, they are chatting via MSN messenger, SNS, or skype.

As Daniel described his multitasking and high engagement with his laptop after school until sleep, Rui, a Japanese high school girl spends together with her best friend via Skype in her bedroom until she falls asleep every evening. After dinner with her family, she goes to her bedroom at about 8pm and starts to chat on Skype with her best friend. She does her homework with her friend together via Skype, whilst chatting, talking or playing video games, until midnight. She always leaves Skype on when she is in her bedroom. This interaction continues sometimes until

4am, although they sometimes fall asleep in the middle of their chats or conversations via Skype.

Thus young people connect with each other throughout the day using multiple channels of communication such as text messages, emails, blogs and SNS via mobile phones or skype via the PC in their bedrooms. One of the most popular early studies on youth and mobile phones in Japan, by Ichiro Nakajima, Keiichi Himeno and Hiroaki Yoshii (1999), suggests that mobile phones create a ‘full-time intimate community’ with close friends, boyfriends and girlfriends. The researchers claim that:

People who live in the city, who have gained their autonomy and have broken the hold of the village type of community, create a ‘full-time intimate community’, where they reinforce their connectivity with their close peer groups whom they frequently meet, and where they feel a 24 hour a day psychological togetherness. (Nakajima et al., 1999, p. 90)

The more that mobile phones with internet access and smartphones become

embedded in people's everyday lives, the more people have mobile access to social media, and thus the 'full-time intimate community' (Nakajima, et.al, 1999) or 'always-on intimate communities' (boyd, 2010) are being formed both in terms of text messages on mobile phones and of social media interactions facilitated by mobile devices (Takahashi, 2010).

### **3. Social Media Management: LINE, Twitter, Facebook**

We see how much young people connect beyond time-space via mobile media.

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are embedded in their everyday life.

They engage with multiple social media and manage each social media depending

on the people with whom they want to connect. Here I would like to consider

how they manage different social media from a case of Japan.

LINE is currently the most popular form of social media among young people in

Japan (age 13–19: 70.5%, age 20–29: 80.3%) (Ministry of Internal Affairs and

Communications, 2014). How many people of you use LINE? For people

who do not know about LINE, I'd like to show you a video clip from my

fieldwork in Tokyo. We carried 5 video cameras in Ikebukuro, Harajuku,

Shibuya, and Shinjuku, which are the most popular cities for young people and interviewed them about mobile phones and social media on street.

There are at least three good reasons why LINE is so popular among Japanese young people: it is free of charge; it operates as a closed space; and it enables the sharing of emotional feelings by the use of ‘stickers’. With LINE, one can create different groups among your contacts, which are closed off to others. So you can constantly communicate within the group and not worry about others who do not belong. There are strict implicit rules among young people such as responses immediately to emails and constant comments on others’ blogs on SNSs within *uchi* (Nakane, 1967; Takahashi, 2009).

“*Uchi*” is a useful concept which enables understand social reflexivity to be understood in terms of SNS engagement in Japan. The Japanese concept of *uchi* has been notably investigated by Japanese social anthropologist Chie Nakane (1967) in the 1960s. *Uchi* (inside, us) is opposed to *Soto* (outside, them) and it exists in the form of social groups linked by close interpersonal relationships. In the 60’s and 70’s, Nakane argued that the internal structure of the *uchi* emerges

through its ‘tangibility’, the constant sharing of the locale and constant face-to-face interaction. She argued that a person can belong to only one such *uchi*, due to its conditions of membership requiring exclusive loyalty and commitment of time and energy. She claimed that a woman’s *uchi* is her family, a man’s is his company and a child’s is his or her classmates. It is belonging to an *uchi* which gives a person their ‘social capital’ (the commodity of social interaction) and without this, an individual is nothing. If someone leaves the locale, they lose their social capital as it does not extend beyond space – *uchi* is intrinsically connected to the locale.

Against this view, my primary ethnographic research, conducted at the beginning of the twenty-first century, has revealed that the structure of the *uchi* manifests itself not only in face-to-face interaction in spatial localities, but also through constant mediated interaction via the internet in non-spatial localities.

In the contemporary context, where the Internet is so widespread, constant contact and sharing of emotions using a combination of texts, emoticons and images within closed communication spaces such as LINE serve to reinforce social intimacy within the group.

For Japanese youths, they can use LINE to create and reorganize multiple *uchis*.

As each group is a closed communication space that they created from among their contacts, users of LINE can feel secure from unwanted intrusions from those they regard as “outsiders”, their *soto*. This is unlike more open social media such as Twitter. A study of high school and university students which I conducted in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area in 2013 shows that LINE is being used for contacting close friends, both as a space to be shared among intimate circle of friends and for strengthening bonds. It thus plays a role in reinforcing their *uchi* groups such as family and friends.

The traditional social norms of Japanese society, such as *uchi* and *kuuki* (a social atmosphere created by the need for harmony and conformity pressure), are being reconstructed through complex online and offline interactions, thus reinforcing their collective identity.

The way Japanese youths use a more open communication platform like Twitter and Facebook, for example, makes for an interesting contrast. Tadamasa Kimura

(2012) suggests that the reason for the recent popularity of Twitter in Japan is that there is no obligation to reply to others' messages immediately. One of the most influential Twitter critics, Daisuke Tsuda, identifies the reasons for the popularity of Twitter in Japan as being due to “*Yurui* (loose)” ties and *kuuki* feeling’ (Tsuda, 2009, pp. 40-41)

According to Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2014), 75% of Twitter users use their accounts anonymously in Japan, while 35% of the US users and 31% of the UK users do so. For example, a Japanese female college student creates 6 different nicknames for 6 different Twitter accounts depending on people with whom she wants to connect. She manages the kind of information she should share and how she writes about her messages each account, for instance, she expresses her feelings through each account at different levels from positively to negatively. Twitter is used to acquire information on one's friends, to construct new networks, or just killing time or releasing one's stress.

In addition, Facebook is also used for connecting with the *soto*, such as friends from one's past or just people out there in the world. Furthermore, on Facebook,

since people are supposed to use their “real” identities (or so they are encouraged to do by the site), Japanese youths often create, or rather recreate their self-identity through ‘impression management’<sup>1</sup> (Goffman, 1959). On Facebook, Japanese young people do this by, for example, uploading large number of photos (sometimes decorating them with stars or hearts using the photo function of mobile phones), and by tagging each other in order to present themselves as active and popular. While managing the different forms of social media in such ways, young people today may be said to be seizing the wealth of new opportunities on offer.

#### **4. Opportunities and Risks of Social Media**

It can be seen how mobile social media provide us with an important means of connectivity with family, close friends and partners and provide continuity of identity beyond time and space. Cathy, a British college student told me how important facebook is as a connectivity tool “because people can lose their phones but they can’t lose their facebook account”.

Michael, an American college student also told me he could connect with his

friend forever as long as they have Facebook.

Michael: Facebook, I guess, is a way that I can communicate with friends that otherwise I wouldn't be able to. I know that like my mom, her friends in college and high school, she will never be able to like realistically find them again... well I suppose she could on facebook. But um, finding them again will be really hard. But for me now they are just... they're on facebook and I can stay in touch with them forever basically, as long as they have facebook and I have facebook I can still have that community and meet with them and hang out and have fun because we're friends and we enjoy each other's company. And they are great people and I would miss losing such people from my life. So making new friends and keeping the old friends, so I guess that's the best thing about facebook that you don't lose contact with people that you want to be friends with and stay in touch with.

While young people take new types of opportunities through multiple social media management, the constant connections of social media are also giving rise to new types of risk. American clinical psychologist Sherry Turkle (Turkle, 2011)

initially offered a positive perspective on technology but, concerned about young people growing up with an expectation of constant connection, she has since investigated the powerful psychological influences of mobile communication and social media on young people who ‘connect’ with each other all day rather than ‘communicate’:

Their digitalized friendships – played out with emoticon emotions, so often predicated on rapid response rather than reflection – may prepare them, at times through nothing more than their superficiality, for relationships that could bring superficiality to a higher power, that is, for relationships with the inanimate. They come to accept lower expectations for connection and, finally, the idea that robot friendships could be sufficient unto the day. (Turkle, 2011, p. 17)

Such concern about high levels of dependence on social media is not limited to the United States. Even in Japan, the LINE function of displaying whether (how immediately) messages have been read is causing the acceleration of pressure to emphasize “emotional bonds” and “constant contact,” generating the risks such as “LINE fatigue” and addiction.

While the constant connections of social media can thus yield new opportunities for reinforcement of social intimacy, network building, social sharing, and impression management, the risks such as cyber bullying, defamation, infringement of privacy, “digital tattoos” (information that can never be deleted), stalking, over-dependency, and addiction have emerged. Therefore, even for the young people known as digital natives, there is also a need for a new type of digital literacy to address the issues that have arisen in the rapidly changing contemporary society. This will enable users to fully enjoy new opportunities whilst minimizing the risks of harm.

### **5. Why do young people want to connect constantly?**

I have shown how young people constantly connect via mobile social media through my fieldwork among Japan, the US and the UK. Why do they want to connect constantly even though there is an element of risk in doing so? It could be explained by the psychological need for connectivity of human beings as social actors universally. Then why do they have such a strong social need as “constant connectivity” via mobile social media? What kind of social factors

influence young people? I suggest there are three key factors. First, in the process of socialisation, in a certain period of their life course, children and young people are highly interdependent of each other in their peer group. In my interviews, they express how much peer group is important and how much they have their commitment and care about their friends. They reflexively create their identity through social interaction with their peer group. Secondly, there is an emerging youth culture in the digitalised global world that emphasizes participation. This participant culture may be seen by how they would create and remix music, vocaloid, anime and video clips together, play online games together, share their subculture via mobile social media. Thirdly, some enduring features of the cultural context in which the youths in question find themselves do not simply fade away. Instead, they continue to negotiate with the more traditional social norms around them. For example, in Japan, which may be described as a collectivist and high context culture, the notions of *uchi* and *kuuki* continue to exert some pressure to conform. On the other hand, we find an emphasis on active participation for the purposes communication and community or voluntary spirit in the individualistic and low context cultures such as the US<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps because it sees itself as the heterogeneous nature of society, in the US, dialogue, verbal

communication and active participation for communities are regarded highly important. In an individualistic society, the capability to help members of social groups and communities to which individuals belong is regarded as highly valuable. Here an individual identity has emerged through constant connectivity on ‘an individual-centred network’ (Castells et al., 2007) via multiple social media.

## **6. Social Media and Global Connections**

As a final point, I would like to touch upon the potential of social media as it relates to global society. As of August 2014, the total number of LINE users worldwide exceeded 500 million people with over 85% of them being users outside of Japan. ‘Global’ social media such as Facebook and LINE enable users to connect with people transnationally.

For people who used to live in foreign countries in their childhood or who have close friends or family overseas, or who have a dream to succeed globally, transnational connectivity plays an important role in their everyday lives. For example, after Jimmy, an American college student, joined facebook in high

school, he connects with over 100 students from all over the world on facebook after summer camp each year. Now he keeps up with them through their walls on facebook. When he hears of someone visiting Boston, he can easily meet her/him and catch up. Gimmy expresses how important the transnational connectivity with those friends is in his everyday life. Mike, a British music college student who has a dream to be a professional musician in future, keeps contact with people outside of Britain on Facebook.

Researcher        So you have many friends from different countries?

Mike    Yes, because meeting people here and then they go... when they leave here and they live like the other side of the world or... yeah. But we can still talk, still keep in contact.

Researcher        What kind of countries, can you give me examples?

Mike    Like China, South Korea, Germany and other places in Europe, Switzerland.

Japanese students who have never left Japan and cannot speak English also connect with non-Japanese people via LINE. The affordances of stickers and

images of LINE are helpful to go over their struggle against differences of languages and cultures which they may encounter in transnational communication.

Ai, for instance, communicates with her Syrian friend (who lives in Japan) and her Thai friend (who lives in Thailand) by using stickers in her everyday life.

Ai: The stickers are good because I can communicate with foreigners in Japanese and they are not good at Japanese. We can understand each other with stickers on LINE more than by emails or other social media.

Researcher: Don't you have miscommunication with stickers? They might interpret the meaning of stickers differently?

Ai: No. Because I choose only simple stickers, like a smile or angry face. Everyone can understand the meaning.

Researcher: I see. But then do you choose different stickers for non-Japanese from your Japanese friends?

Ai: Yes. I choose very different stickers.

As well as selecting words and languages, they use universal images in order to show their care and emotions to 'distant others'. Turkle is concerned about

superficiality of ‘digitalized friendships-played out with emoticon emotions’, however, I believe they do not just connect but also ‘communicate’ with each other with text, emoticons and images which enable them to create emotional bonds, thereby enriching online communication. These social media maintain connectivity and social intimacy with ‘distant others’ through their interactions. By frequently interacting with ‘distant others’ via mobile social media, ‘others’ are gradually embedded into their local everyday life. In these contexts, social intimacy and emotional bonds with ‘others’ are developing, and ‘distant others’ are becoming mentally ‘close *uchi* members’. Social media created by both Western and non-Western communication styles could provide mutual communication time-space to create global *uchi* through constant transnational connectivity and emotional bonds beyond languages and cultural context.

### **Notes**

- 1) “Impression management” is a concept originated by American sociologist Erving Goffman. It states that people select which aspects of themselves should be hidden and which ones should be shown, and thus to manage and

control the impressions that other people have of them.

- 2) The American cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1976) investigated high context culture and low context culture in the 1970s and this work is still influential in the field of intercultural communication studies, social linguistics and business. In communication studies, Steinfatt (2009, pp. 278-279) introduces this binary concept as follows:

In a high-context culture, the significance intended by a message is located largely in the situation; the relationships of the communicators; and their beliefs, values, and cultural norm prescriptions... High-context cultures usually emphasize politeness, nonverbal communication, and indirect phrasings, rather than frankness and directness, in order to avoid hurt feelings. They emphasize the group over the individuals and tend to encourage in-groups and group reliance... In a low-context culture, the meanings intended by a message are located in the interpretations of its words and their arrangement. These are carefully selected in an attempt to express those meanings clearly and explicitly... Low-context cultures often place a high value on the individual, encouraging self-reliance.

Within this framework, the United States can be understood as a low context culture while Japan can be identified as a high context culture.

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