ICT and Mobile Phones as Resources for Marginalised Youth

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe the empirical results of our study concerning marginalised young people (MYP) and a respective explanatory resource model of marginalisation as well as the access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) with special regard to mobile phones among the target group.

Focus groups with marginalised young people and expert interviews were carried out in terms of an explorative research approach in the framework of the international study ComeIn – Online Mobile Communities to Facilitate the Social Inclusion of Young Marginalised People (funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme) which investigates and examines possibilities of mobile online communities as learning instruments which could foster social inclusion.

Keywords

Marginalised young people, mobile learning, needs and interests, use and availability of ICT

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the concept of marginalisation is widely used in research and debate of social science today, precise definitions do not exist. In our work we have brought together different academic considerations of marginalisation and contrasted them against the perspectives of our experts and of marginalised youths themselves. For our pool of experts we were looking for both practitioners who were currently working with affected youth and academics who were involved in related research activities, either marginalised youth and/or the field of ICT use. Considerations for choosing academic experts were the thematic relevance of their research, while among practitioners the representativeness for different fields of youth work or different groups of youths they were working with were decisive. In total, ten expert interviews

were conducted.

The participants of the focus groups were recruited through non-school related agencies. Youth workers who were in contact with marginalised youth were asked to invite young persons who matched the target group of ComeIn, i.e. young people between the age of 14 and 21 who are marginalised on different dimensions (economically and educationally). In total, we carried out three focus groups comprising 8 to 10 youths each.

Based on the findings from expert interviews and focus groups we have developed a multidimensional resource model that could identify the different dimensions and consequences of marginalisation. These factors constitute protective resources against marginalisation if available but contribute to marginalisation if several of them are not available.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
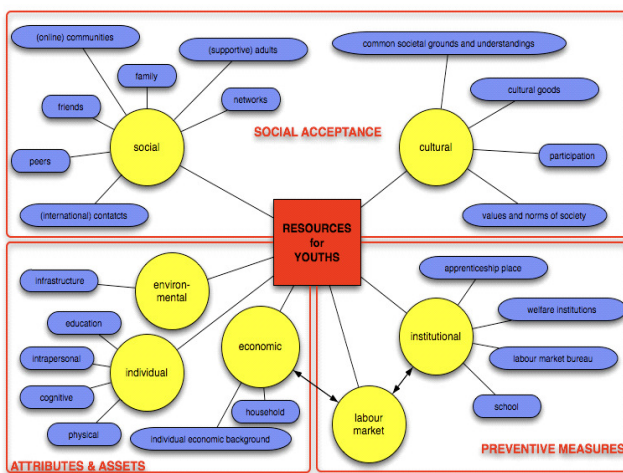
2.1 Marginalisation

In general marginalisation stands for limited participation in society in the political, economical and cultural realm. Accordingly it is manifest on different dimensions, for instance, in education or in the labour market. These facts cannot be considered detached from each other but rather in complex relationships influencing possibilities and limitations of societal participation among these young people. In general, it can be said that marginalised people have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them which drives them towards the border of society [2]. This means for individuals to have limited chances in achieving certain aims because of factors that are out of their sphere of influence. Marginalisation as such is a multilayered concept that cannot be perceived under one single aspect or from one perspective. Additionally, marginalisation is a shifting phenomenon linked to a certain stage of life, social position and status. When talking about marginalisation of certain individuals or groups often only a snap shot of the current situation can be taken. Marginalisation therefore cannot be understood as a status but as product of changeable factors and available resources.

As commonly seen there are six distinct dimensions of marginalisation [3]: economic, cultural, social, spatial and institutional dimensions as well as the labour market. According to our work we have complemented this model with the dimension of individual factors, which includes intrapersonal factors, cognitive and physical factors and education.

2.2 Multidimensional Resource Model

According to the dimensions and factors of marginalisation and their validation confirmed by experts and also youth themselves within our study we have worked out a multidimensional model of resources (cf. figure 1). In this model we have set resources opposite to needs (in terms of lack of resources). The underlying aim is to reformulate needs and lacks into positive aspects and so to be able to give a picture of all necessary resources that youths would need to avoid marginalisation. In this not deficit oriented but resource centred model each branch is broken down into levels as far as possible so as to come to a very precise description of concrete resources.

Generally we have clustered the model into three sectors: social acceptance, attributes and assets and preventive measures. On the first level we show the main fields of resources according to the

previously mentioned seven dimensions of marginalisation (yellow circles in figure 1). The second level (blue) describes resources more precisely, for instance the family. Further levels (green, orange) break down to more and more specific resources as we have worked them out during our study.

To summarise this model it can be said, if some of the branches are interrupted or missing and thus the resources are not available the youths are at risk for marginalisation.

For the current contribution within the framework of this general model we have focused on the sector of attributes and assets and worked out needs and resources of young marginalised people linked with ICT in general and the possibilities of mobile phones in particular.
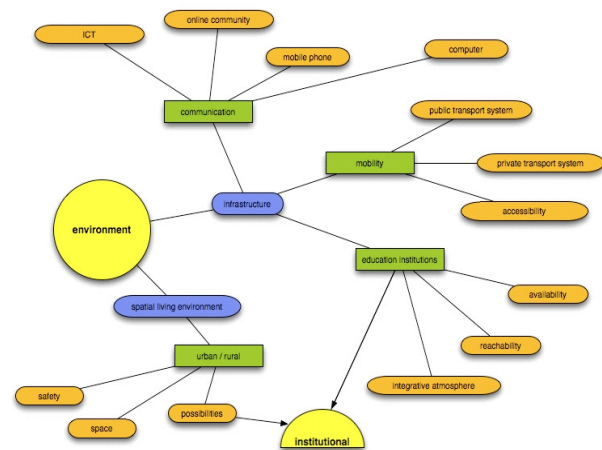

Figure 1 – multidimensional resource model (left: general view, right: zoom in environment)

3. RESULTS

For resources concerning ICT we focused on the environment. We have divided this level of resources into the spatial living environment and infrastructure. By spatial environment we mean the geographical environment, living in a rural or urban area, but also certain disadvantaged residential areas, remote areas or poor housing conditions. On the infrastructure side we have differentiated between education, mobility and communication. All three can be met by new media and therefore constitute resources for young marginalised people (MYP). ICT and mobile phones in particular can be very reliable resources.

3.1 Marginalised Youth and ICTs as Potential Resources

Based on our empirical data communication tools were considered as windows to the outside world specifically for marginalised young people who are often isolated and experience difficulties in establishing and maintaining direct social contacts. In this sense ICTs are auxiliary tools, even though in general youths are consumers rather than active contributors to technologies, with some exceptions such as the use of web2.0 features. Nevertheless, new media seemingly play an important

role among marginalised young people as well. However, ICT offers have to meet certain requirements to serve as practical resources for marginalised young people.

3.1.1 Requirements

Only if technology is fast and reliable it is seen as a resource. Another requirement is affordability and access at any time. Youths also seem to be more attracted if the technology allows for playfulness such as gaming. ICT gadgets also serve as prestige objects. Therefore, design as well as the brand of the tool is important. Being able to afford modern technology tools helps youth to signalise their societal inclusion. Being up to date is important in order to take part in a community and in this way to feel a sense of belonging.

Access to the Internet in general seems very important as well as home access or free access elsewhere. However, even when home access is given youngsters are often not allowed to surf the Internet in order to avoid costs. The place of access to the Internet varies: While some have home access others have to rely on different institutions such as youth centres, educational institutions, libraries or Internet cafes although the latter is associated with costs that youngsters often cannot afford. Access outside their homes often also means shared access with other people, but this fact was often appreciated by the youngsters as

being supportive as well. Accessibility often is insufficient for females, especially when they have to share devices with male peers.

Other personal gadgets at their disposal that were named by the experts were cameras or MP3 players, which were often already integrated in their mobile phone. Technical devices which experts believed youngsters did not have at their disposal were portable devices such as laptops or iPods. Offers or mobile learning programmes via such media therefore would not reach young marginalised people.

Media competence is commonly seen as a crucial resource preventing marginalisation. Young marginalised youth do not lack such competences in general. However often there are differences in ICT skills between MYP and their peers. This was noted, particularly concerning used software and tools. Problems would become manifest when using programmes such as spreadsheets or text processing programmes. Thus, marginalised young people would often limit their online activities to "fun" use such as chatting or gaming. ICTs are more likely to be associated with entertainment than with instrumental use. Also they would only use these tools for ad-hoc uses and would not be able to anticipate outcomes in the long term. Peer and adult support and concrete definitions of tasks would contribute to skills improvement.

Poor literacy in digital communication is not seen as such a big issue compared to paper based communication. For instance, poor skills do not prevent them from text messaging. Navigations based on symbols were seen as more useful than text based navigations. In general it can be said that transported information has to be short, simple, concise, immediate, relevant and clear.

3.2 Marginalised Youth and Mobile Phones

Most young people including marginalised young people possess a mobile phone. Probable reasons for high penetration rates of mobile phones among young marginalised persons according to our interviewees were the following: It requires only basic alphabetisation, its portable, and it is convenient and thus affordable. However, the close relationship between mobile phones and the marginalised youth was apparent. They like to speak about their mobile phone, which is an important medium for them, not only to stay in contact with their group members but also to have the feeling of being integrated in society. Having a mobile phone is an absolute must and a central medium. Like a front door key, they take their mobile phone everywhere and look after it at any time. Figure 2 shows most relevant aspects of mobile phones for marginalised youth.
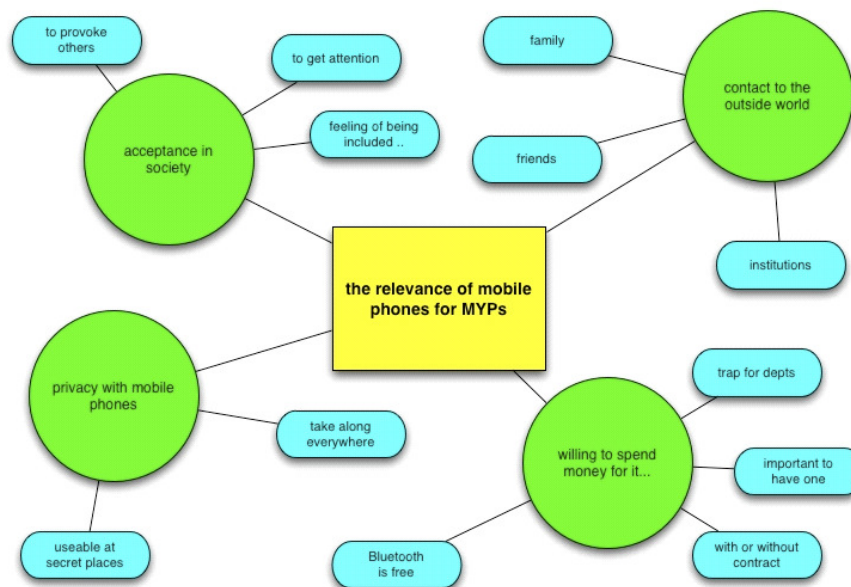
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Figure 2 – Relevance of mobile phones

However, in the handling of mobile phones marginalised young people as well as their peers show highly developed skills. This depicts that the mobile phone is an exceptional communication tool. Its popularity is not a short-term fad [1]. For that reason, the youths are willing to spend their money on their mobile phones, while at the same time trying to keep the costs as low as possible with cost-free tools like Bluetooth for transferring data or by using features of the mobile phone itself that are not associated with costs such as listening to music, playing games or giving somebody a missed call. In general and especially among their peer groups, the mobile phone is displayed as a status symbol. On

the one hand, the individuals could personalise their mobile phone individually and signalise to the others "*look, here I am*". On the other hand it could bind the group members together by listening to loud music and by demonstrating to non-group members "*look, here we are*". The mobile phone helps to express their individual personality, firstly by simply possessing one and secondly by the way of using it.

The personalisation of the mobile phone is done in an acoustic and visual way, like decorating it with coloured covers and special stickers. Some of them try to keep their mobile phones and ring

tones up-to-date or put their mobile phone settings into a special language, like a foreign mother-tongue, which could not be understood or read by others. The MYP are also editing the background image of their mobile phones, where friends and family are pictured and assigned special ring tones to each of them or to the whole group. So it is them not the caller who can decide how others appear on their mobile phones.

On the other hand, the mobile phone is necessary to keep the existing network alive by exchanging messages, pictures, ring tones, contacts, music and videos, being in contact with others, or organising dates. Especially giving somebody a missed call is often used since it does not cost anything but it can nevertheless signalise that "everything is okay". Therefore, special rules of "ringing someone" are agreed upon in their peer groups to enable a common understanding. Beside this, the mobile phone is also used as an instrument to warn other group members about risky places in the scene and to inform them, where something important goes on.

To sum up the mobile phone helps to regulate their personal privacy in their closer and wider social environment. It regulates how to get in contact with the outside world, break social isolation and implement the desired level of privacy. Thus the mobile phone plays an important role as a regulating tool between the individual and society.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Marginalised youth are keen to use the collaborative features of their mobile devices as well as its different types of communication. They decide about the form and quantity of their contacts independently. They use it individually but also collectively at every time and every place. Therefore many applications that require a flexible structure become possible. Mobile learning, for instance, enables especially those who have dropped out of formal education systems to adopt their individual learning styles and thus attract young people who do not enjoy traditional education. They can decide in which situation or place they want to learn. The individual features and characteristics of the mobile phone together with its possibility for constant presence and its different communication channels, contribute to the individual sense of identity. They can experience friendship, societal rituals like giving and sharing but nevertheless they can still decide about distance and closeness by themselves. With the mobile phone as a regulating tool they can actively take part in society without losing their privacy. As the future is seen as more mobile [4], more connected and more personalised, the impact of

the mobile phone as regulator will certainly be considered for further application features.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

5.1 Note

The results we are relying on are based on empirical results from expert interviews and focus groups with marginalised young people in Austria. Thus they reflect the Austrian situation which may differ from other countries. More comprehensive pan-European results will be available at the end of the ComeIn project (please see http://www.comein-project.eu/).

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