

7-31-2021

## Age-based Marketing Practices and Young People as Economic Actors in the Mobile Telephony Market in Provincial Vietnam

Roy Huijismans

*International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), of Erasmus University Rotterdam, Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX, The Hague, Netherlands, huijismans@iss.nl*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/hubsasia>

---

### Recommended Citation

Huijismans, R. (2021). Age-based Marketing Practices and Young People as Economic Actors in the Mobile Telephony Market in Provincial Vietnam. *Makara Human Behavior Studies in Asia*, 25(1), 23-31. <https://doi.org/10.7454/hubs.asia.1180820>

This Original Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by UI Scholars Hub. It has been accepted for inclusion in Makara Human Behavior Studies in Asia by an authorized editor of UI Scholars Hub.

## Age-based Marketing Practices and Young People as Economic Actors in the Mobile Telephony Market in Provincial Vietnam

Praktik Pemasaran berbasis Usia dan Pemuda sebagai Aktor Ekonomi dalam Pasar Telepon Seluler di Provinsi Vietnam

Roy Huijsmans\*

*International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), of Erasmus University Rotterdam, Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX, The Hague, Netherlands*

### ABSTRACT

In this article, I conduct an analysis of age-based marketing strategies employed by network providers and present insights obtained from mobile phone history interviews with young people in provincial Vietnam. From these data I argue that young people are a perpetual demographic market frontier in the commercialized mobile media landscape of Southeast Asia. I indicate how network providers contribute to shaping contemporary childhood and youth with their age-based marketing strategies. However, young people's navigation of the commercial terrain of competing network providers is not determined by commercial forces solely but is also informed by various non-economic factors. This article finds that an appreciation of young people as consumers in the mobile phone era requires appreciating the powerful influence of network providers as well as the multiple relationships in which their economic decision-making is embedded.

### Original Article

\*Correspondence Author:  
Roy Huijsmans  
E-mail: huijsmans@iss.nl

Received: 10 December 2019  
Revised: 1 July 2020  
Accepted: 18 August 2020

Keyword: Age, consumption, mobile telephony, Vietnam, Youth

Cite this article: Huijsmans, R. (2021). Age-based marketing practices and young people as economic actors in the mobile telephony market in Provincial Vietnam. *Makara Human Behavior Studies in Asia*, 25(1), 23-31. <https://doi.org/10.7454/hubs.asia.1180820>

### ABSTRAK

Dalam artikel ini, saya melakukan analisis terhadap strategi pemasaran berbasis usia yang diterapkan oleh para penyedia jaringan dan menyajikan pemahaman yang didapatkan dari wawancara dengan anak pemuda di provinsi Vietnam mengenai riwayat telepon genggam mereka. Berdasarkan data-data ini, saya berargumen bahwa anak muda adalah kelompok demografi pasar yang selalu ada dalam lanskap komersialisasi media seluler Asia Tenggara. Saya menunjukkan bagaimana para penyedia jaringan berkontribusi dalam membentuk masa kecil dan masa muda kontemporer melalui strategi pemasaran berbasis usia. Namun, pertimbangan pemuda terhadap ranah komersil para penyedia jaringan yang saling bersaing ini tidak ditentukan oleh dorongan komersil semata, namun juga dipengaruhi oleh berbagai faktor non-ekonomi. Artikel ini menemukan bahwa apresiasi terhadap pemuda sebagai konsumen di era telepon seluler memerlukan adanya pengakuan terhadap pengaruh kuat dari penyedia jaringan dan juga berbagai relasi yang di dalamnya terkandung proses keputusan ekonomi mereka.

## 1. Introduction

Perhaps the most easily visible manifestation of the digital revolution that has unfolded over the past two decades throughout Southeast Asia region is the omnipresence of the mobile phone (Rumondor, 2019). This has developed within in a communication landscape where rates of both landline subscription and ownership rates of desktop and laptop computers have remained low (Warf, 2013). The availability of relatively cheap, regionally produced smartphones and the decreased cost of airtime and data bundle packages have transformed Southeast Asia's mediascape into a mobile media landscape.

The children and youth in today's Southeast Asia are growing up in this landscape and are active participants in it. However, they are largely absent from the flourishing body of literature that analyzes these developments in the Southeast Asian context. This is in sharp contrast with the state of affairs found in other areas. For example, the social science literature on the development of mobile telephony in Africa includes various studies that focus specifically on young people as mobile phone users (e.g., Geldof, 2011; Porter et al., 2015; Porter et al., 2016). Moreover, the rare studies that focus on children or youth in Southeast Asia typically concentrate on urban, middle-class youth (e.g.

Barendregt, 2008; Donald et al., 2010), leaving out the rural areas where the majority of Southeast Asia's population lives (an exception to this trend is found in Huijsmans & Trần, 2015).

This state of affairs in the academic literature can be contrasted with the popular debate over children and youth in relation to mobile telephony in Southeast Asia. Here young people feature prominently. However, these debates tend to be highly polarized, either focusing on problems in young people's phone use, such as mobile phone addiction, or the new opportunities it offers for parenting, such as in GPS tracking of children's phones (see Bangkok Post, 2019a, 2019b). Notably, these debates in popular media are typically based on adults' opinions of young people's smartphone use and are not informed by research conducted with the cooperation of children and youth themselves.

This article foregrounds children and young people as situated actors in the rapidly transforming mobile media landscape of Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the empirical focus is laid on provincial Vietnam and young people in their second decade of life (mostly between 10 and 20 years old, and one 21-year old), when many are coming to possess their own mobile phone and begin to constitute a specific market segment for companies that provide mobile services. This article is driven by two related research questions: How do mobile services providers target young people, and what effect does this have? Relatedly, how do young people, as phone users, navigate the commercialized landscape of mobile telephony? By bringing a political economy perspective based on data about children and youth as social actors navigating mobile media landscapes to this question, this article produces an assessment that respects children and youth as experts of in their own life worlds without losing sight of the powerful interests and relations shaping these worlds (Huijsmans, 2016).

## 2. Methods

To address the research questions, the article unifies two lines of inquiry. The first focuses on age-based marketing strategies of mobile services providers, using the illustrative case of Viettel. The other focuses on the understanding of children and youth themselves and how they navigate decisions related to mobile phone use and the social aspects these are bound up with. Viettel was selected as the empirical point of focus for studying marketing strategies because it is a major mobile service provider for Vietnam. Like the other major providers operating in Vietnam, Viettel is a state-owned company, owned by the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense (Huijsmans & Trần, 2015; Thayer, 2017).

Mobile services providers were studied using digital methods and in interviews with company representatives.

Following the most prominent companies through their Facebook pages provided good insight into the range of promotional activities and events organized by the providers and enabled an understanding of how they targeted young people. In addition, the Facebook posts themselves often contained links to the companies' own webpages where further details were available on the specific offers advertised. Interviews with company representatives enabled us to triangulate our interpretation of the online material.

Interviews with young phone users were conducted in the town setting of Quảng Trị and the remote rural village setting of the district of Hướng Hóa in the North Central province of Quảng Trị. Urban and remote rural Vietnam differ in a number of ways, such as in the ethnic composition of the population, the incidence of poverty, common livelihoods (World Bank, 2009), and, especially relevant to this study, also in terms of network coverage (Huijsmans & Trần, 2015). At the same time, however, urban and rural Vietnam are not separate social spheres. Migration is common, and mobile phones are an important part of the social dynamics of rural and urban Vietnam as they are increasingly becoming interlinked (Nguyen, 2019).

The mobile phone history interview was designed to investigate the role that mobile phones play in young people's lives. When adult researchers interview children or youth, their importance is often hidden from view because young people tuck away their phones or turn off the music they were listening to. Thus, we explicitly asked the young respondents to show us their phones, let the music keep playing, and so on. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese through a research assistant, and the respondents participated after providing informed consent (parental consent was also obtained where appropriate). We began the interviews by asking the participants questions about their phone, including how they came to own it, what they used it for, what they (dis)liked about it, what phones they had used previously, what providers they used, and so on. In this way, we treated the young people themselves as experts on their own mobile phone use and history, thereby gaining an understanding of what they themselves found important about their phones and usage rather than what adults think about it.

The young people interviewed were between 10 and 21 years old and were selected from a data set generated through household interviews. The youngest respondents were 10 years old, as we did not find young people below this age who owned a mobile phone. At the upper limit, we did not follow conventional age-based definitions of childhood and extended our pool to 19-, 20-, and 21-year-olds as well because they were targeted with different strategies by companies that provide network services. For this reason, we use the terms children and youth

interchangeably, particularly as young people who are 16 or 17 years old can be properly referred to as either children or youth.

This study was conducted under budgetary restrictions, which has delayed its completion. The primary data were collected between 2014 and 2016. The snail's pace of the investigation is in sharp contrast with the rapid changes that characterize the technological and commercial landscape that it examines. This entails the necessity for the empirical findings to be appreciated as historical particulars; they capture a historical moment in provincial Vietnam when young people were first becoming (smart)phone users and were becoming increasingly recognized as potential users by mobile service providers. Although the data are thus rooted in historical specificity, the theoretical discussion of the role of mobile service providers in shaping childhood and youth and the way that commodity relations become entangled with other relations are quite relevant beyond the specific historical moment investigated.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### Mobile Services Providers and Age-based Marketing Strategies

The literature on children and youth as consumers in the Global North has showed the importance of children's role in commerce. For example, McNeal found that children and young people are a market in a triple sense: they make up a primary market with its own spending power, an influence market that shapes the consumption of their parents, and a future market (McNeal, 1999, in Zelizer, 2002: 378). Due to this important role, it is hardly a surprise that children are targeted as part of commercial marketing. In fact, the emergence of the teenager concept must be understood in relation to market forces.

In their book *Gender, Youth and Culture*, Nayak and Kehily (2013: 134) explain that "in western countries the notion of the 'teenager' as a distinct phase in the life cycle has been coupled with the emergence of a 'youth market.'" The authors link the emergence of the concept of the teenager to the rise in the manufacturing industry and the mass production of goods specifically for this age-based market segment. This is not least because in the post-Second World War period, young people in the Western world had command over increasing amounts of disposable income and became a progressively important target population for commercial actors.

The research on children, youth, and consumption is much thinner outside of the Global North, but the few studies that can be found suggest that these claims have

relevance for the Global South as well (Chee, 2000; Huijsmans, 2019). There too, children and youth often have access to small amounts of disposable income, they participate in age-group-specific consumption practices, and they are targeted as consumers by commercial actors in an age-specific way (Taye & Huijsmans, 2020). The fact that the young are recognized as an important and distinct market segment in the Global South too can be further illustrated in market-based research conducted in Southeast Asia.

In 2015, the Denmark-based market research company Epinion, in collaboration with OMD, a global media company with a head office in Singapore released briefs on market research reporting on young people in Malaysia and Vietnam. These reports were based on data obtained in panels including children and youth that Epinion organized in a range of Southeast Asian countries. The Malaysian data were based on responses from 325 young Malaysians aged 13–21 years (Epinion, 2015a), and the Vietnam data were based on responses from 710 respondents in the same age group (Epinion, 2015b).

The core message of these briefs is clear in the uniform title given to them: *GENZILLA: They're coming, get ready*. That title directly addresses brands targeting the Malaysian and Vietnamese markets, drawing attention to the fact that young people in the two countries constitute a sizable population (9 million in Malaysia, 14 million in Vietnam) with a certain amount of disposable income (monthly averages of RM 145 per capita in Malaysia, and nearly VND 2.5 m per capita in Vietnam).

These briefs illustrate that Nayak and Kehily conclusions can also be recognized in the Southeast Asian context. They make the case for the existence of a Southeast Asian youth market, but unlike the historical equivalent of the Global North that Nayak and Kehily discussed, the Southeast Asian context is increasingly closely coupled to the rapidly emerging digital economy. In addition, market research companies such as Epinion are making active contributions to the creation of a youth market by rendering this particular market segment legible by, for example, branding them Genzilla (i.e. Generation Z) and setting up panels composed of young people to determine their specific tastes, desires, and preferences.

Young people's relationship to the mobile phone is a core element of both research briefs. The key message here is captured in the title of the second chapters of both research briefs: "The mobile phone is Genzilla's lifeline." The data suggest that mobile phone ownership is high in both Malaysia and Vietnam, even in the youngest age group (13–15 years old).

**Table 1. Mobile phone ownership in Malaysia and Malaysia by age group and number of phones**

	Malaysia			Vietnam		
	13–15 years	16–18 years	19–21 years	13–15 years	16–18 years	19–21 years
None	21%	3%	2%	21%	10%	2%
One	41%	77%	64%	61%	65%	67%
Two or more	38%	20%	34%	18%	25%	31%

Source: adapted from (Epinion, 2015a: 20; 2015b: 13)

The Epinion data show that rates of mobile ownership increase with age or put differently that the share of the population without a mobile phone diminishes with age. This ownership pattern is important in its own right, suggesting that, especially during the second decade of life, young people are rapidly become a relevant market for mobile services providing companies. In the context of a virtually saturated adult market, the young population becomes a perpetual demographic market frontier for mobile phone subscriptions. This raises the question whether mobile services providing companies act on such generational dynamics and if so, what shape this takes.

Digital and in-person research in Vietnam investigating Viettel suggests that mobile service providers target age-based groups and do so in specific ways. Viettel is one of Vietnam's leading mobile services providers companies and is particularly commonly used in remote rural areas due to the superior network coverage it provides (Huijsmans & Trần, 2015). At the time of research, Viettel's website offered different packages for various age-based groups. This included:

**7Colors:** A package designed for school students younger than 14 years. This package allows parents to control their children's mobile activities to some extent. For example, the SIM installation is confirmed with a parent's mobile phone number. Once this is done, parents can request the GPS location of their children's phone location by sending an SMS message. In addition, it allowed parents to top up their children's airtime from their own account, with the feature of having a ceiling of 50,000 VND a month on the amount that children themselves could put into their account. The package also came with free content such as educational quizzes.<sup>1</sup>

**Hi-school:** A package targeting high schoolers (14–18 years old). This includes a discount for calls and SMSs with other prepaid Viettel users. In addition, it offered a 50% discount on services such as ringback music, the Isign signature call (where a personal message appears on the screen of the receiver along with the name and

number of the caller). Hi-school users also receive free access to a number of e-books and to resources on [viettelstudy.vn](http://viettelstudy.vn), and a 10 MB bundle was included.<sup>2</sup>

**Student:** This package shares most of its features with the Hi-school package. Additional features include a 50% discount on the cost of calls and SMSs with other prepaid Viettel users and a 25,000 VND airtime bonus is allotted for free every month. Further, student package users have free access to a newly launched messenger service called Mocha that allows online chat and voice messages and could make free calls for employment counseling.<sup>3</sup>

These packages illustrate how mobile service providers like Viettel target the young with age-based market segments that mirror the age-based organization of the Vietnamese school system (Horton, 2016). The various packages indicate age-related marketing strategy. The package targeting the youngest users (7Colors) addresses parental concerns (including surveillance and educational content) while also seeking to make the package attractive to children (colorful design of the package). The packages targeting older users spoke more directly to teenagers' and youth's own priorities (e.g., playback music, discounts on airtime, and data bundles). Needless to say, these features may not appeal to all those targeted but, by coupling specific features to specific age groups, an age-normativity is implied (Huijsmans, 2016: 14). Consequently, those subscribing to these packages are provided with digital means of acquiring normative ideas about such agegroups (Laz, 1998: 87). The conclusion that follows is that age-based marketing practices contribute to the creation of particular age-based constructs, such as being a high school student.

It is important to realize that Viettel's strategies described here all relate to subscription-based packages. In the Vietnamese context, at the time of study, subscription-based mobile telephony is largely an urban phenomenon and is much more common among the middle and upper classes than among the poorer segments of the population. Interviews with Viettel representatives in

<sup>1</sup> Accessed on 17 February 2014 from <http://vietteltelecom.vn/di-dong/goi-cuoc-7colors-nao-cung-bay/gioi-thieu-bo-hoa-mang.html>

<sup>2</sup> Accessed on 17 February 2014 from <http://vietteltelecom.vn/di-dong/goi-cuoc-hoc-sinh-dong-hanh-cung-tuoi-xanh/gioi-thieu-goi-cuoc-1.html>

<sup>3</sup> Accessed on 17 February 2014 from <http://vietteltelecom.vn/di-dong/goi-cuoc-sinh-vien/gioi-thieu-dich-vu-2.html>

2014 indicated that the company was well aware of this reality. For this reason, representatives explained that it was only in areas already well-covered by the network (e.g., urban areas) that Viettel segmented its market by targeting different sub-groups of customers with specific packages based on their age, career, and location.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1. Mobifone and Viettel sponsored banners at secondary school QuảngTrị province, Vietnam (2014)**  
Photo credits: Tran Thi Ha Lan

Nonetheless, some age-based marketing strategies were also observed in provincial Vietnam that targeted young people who were unlikely to opt for a subscription-based package because they lacked the regular income this required. Such marketing strategies included mass campaigns organized or supported by Viettel focused on the young. For example, in 2014, Viettel acted as the main sponsor of the event “I am a student” that the Vietnamese mass organization for youth (the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union) organized for college students in the cities of Hai Phong, Da Nang, Can Tho, and Thai Nguyen, attracting the participation of numerous students. Similarly, it is common to see high schools decorated with advertisements for mobile services providers following the lunar New Year (Tết) celebrations. Banners combining moral slogans about education and Ho Chi Minh adorned with the logos and slogans of companies like Viettel and Mobifone often fly from school buildings (Figure 1).

This practice was confirmed by some of our young interviewees. A 20-year-old woman explained her choice of a Viettel SIM card as follows: “Viettel comes to our school in the beginning of the school year to tell us about their promotions and packages. Then, a lot of students buy Viettel SIMs.” This example illustrates the degree to which the digital capitalism of mobile services providers, have encroached state-administered spaces in provincial Vietnam, such as schools, designed for children and youth. This encroachment is also brought about by petty traders; itinerant SIM card vendors set up shop immediately outside of the school seeking to convince students to use the money they had recently received from relatives as part of the Tết festivities to purchase new mobile phone numbers (Figures 2 and 3).



**Figure 2. Itinerant traders selling SIM cards at a secondary school in QuảngTrị province following the reopening of the school after the lunar New Year (2014).**  
Photo credits: Tran Thi Ha Lan



**Figure 3. Students selecting phone numbers when buying a new SIM card**  
Photo credits: Tran Thi Ha Lan

<sup>4</sup> One of Viettel’s competitors, Vinaphone (also state owned, namely, by the Vietnamese Post and Telecommunication Group), focuses more on urban areas, and in its advertisements, it consistently presents the image of a young urbanite as the quintessential Vinaphone user.

### Young People's Stories of Phones and SIMs in QuảngTrị Province, Vietnam

Here, two mobile phone histories from two young people living in different parts of QuảngTrị province are presented. The first is a young woman (18 years old) of the Pa Coh ethnicity, living in a remote rural borderland area, and the second is from a young man (19 years old) living in the town of QuảngTrị and belonging to the ethnic majority population (Kinh)<sup>5</sup>. These two accounts present examples of how young people in provincial Vietnam come to own mobile phones and how they navigate the commercial landscape of mobile services providers. These accounts are in contrast to the top-down analysis presented in the previous section. Following the presentation of these cases, I discuss broader patterns that emerge from the qualitative data.

Khiang, a Pa Coh girl, was 18 years old. She was the fourth of six children and is currently out of school. She finished high school but failed the final exam and said she would try it again next year. Her father was a retired civil servant, and her mother was a farm worker. She described her family as poor. In 2011, her younger sister was the first one in the household to obtain a phone. Khiang herself also got a phone soon after, also in 2011. She was 13 years old, and she mostly paid for the phone herself, by selling her hair, for which she received 500,000 VND. She bought the phone together with her father in a nearby market town. It was a Viettel phone, colored black and red, with keys, a black and white screen, 1 SIM slot, no camera, and no internet functionality. The phone cost 550,000 VND, so her father helped her with the remaining 50,000 VND. She used it to listen to music, play games, and contact friends. Two years later, she lost her phone somewhere in a field. She went without a phone for two years and got a new one in the eleventh grade, a Wiko phone with a Viettel SIM. That year, her parents had a good cassava harvest, so she asked them for money for a phone. They gave her one million VND. Together with a more experienced cousin, she went to a shop selling used phones. Her cousin selected a phone for her that cost 900,000 VND. She bought a SIM card too, a Viettel again. The phone was okay, she said, and it was still working at the time of the interview. It had a yellow back cover and a black front. It had a touchscreen, a dual SIM slot, and full internet functionality. After a while, her Viettel SIM card was suspended because she had failed to recharge it, so she put in a new Viettelcard. She used this new phone for Facebook as well. Whenever she visited places, she looked for free Wi-Fi to go online. She said that she was happy with her current phone, but if she had the money

she would buy an OPPO. She considered this to be a higher-quality and fashionable phone. The OPPO she had in mind had a rotating camera function that she thought was especially useful. She explained that she opted for Viettel because she did not know anything about other providers. She liked that Viettel provided a lot of promotions but did not like it when they sent her junk messages and trapping messages (messages that trick one into making a purchase without realizing it). Khiang said that she spent about 20,000–40,000 VND per month on her mobile phone use. She considered this to be an average amount, and she paid it herself with the money she received from a development organization that paid youth in her village to take part in hip-hop dancing activities and from selling cassava she had collected herself. (Interview September 2016, respondent ID: TNAX11).

Tuan was 19 years old, living in the town of QuảngTrị in 2014. He was the first born and had two siblings. He described his household as average in socio-economic terms. Both of his parents were working for Vietnam's state's road transport company. Tuan was studying in Da Nang, where he was in the second year at the Junior College of Traffic and Transportation. In addition, he also had a part-time job at a restaurant. Tuan explained that his parents were the first to own mobile phones in his household. They both had had phones since about 2005. He and his younger brother each got one in 2012, at about the same time. He got his first phone in the eleventh grade. It was a Nokia 1202 with a Viettel SIM card. He explained that it was a used phone that he got from his grandfather. He was given it because his family wanted to be able to contact him because he had started attending private classes at another location. He used the phone for about a year, and then he got another phone from his aunt. It was a basic phone with a black and white screen, a keyboard, and a Viettel SIM card (tomato package). He used it mostly to contact his relatives. Half a year later he gave it away to one of his cousins and took his father's old phone, a Q-mobile M22i. It had a color screen and 2G technology. He used it mostly to go online and download games and music. He continued using the same Viettel SIM. When Tuan entered college, his aunt bought a new phone for herself and gave her old one to Tuan. It was a Nokia C5 with a touchscreen, 3G technology, and full internet functionality. He put in a new Viettel SIM under the student package. Soon after this, his aunt gave his grandfather a new phone, who in turn gave his old phone to Tuan. This was a Samsung 5035 with a sliding lid. For this, he used a Mobifone SIM card because most of his contacts in Da Nang used Mobifone. However, for the

<sup>5</sup> Kinh make up the majority of the population of Vietnam. Vietnam is home to over 50 different officially recognized ethnic groups, who together make up about 15 per cent of the total population (World Bank, 2009). The Pa Coh people are a sub-group of the Tà Ôi ethnic group (speaking a language in the Mon Khmer group).

past few months, Tuan has only been using his Nokia with the Viettel SIM. He said that using two phones simultaneously was not very convenient. At the time of the interview, he had just lent his Nokia to a friend. He said that he would get it back when he returned to school. If his parents gave him money for a new phone, he said he would buy a new Nokia 730, which would cost about 3.5 million VND. Tuan spent about 50,000 to 100,000 VND per month on data and airtime. He paid for this himself, and he said that compared to others, he thinks he spends relatively little money on phone use. (Interview August 2016, respondent ID: HHQT86-4)

These accounts reflect some differences between young people's mobile phone use in the remote or rural and more urbanized parts of QuảngTrị province. First, in the remote rural setting, it appears that it is not uncommon for children and youth to be the first in the household to own a mobile phone, while in the more urbanized parts of the province, in many cases, households' history of mobile phone ownership begins with the parents. Second, in the remote rural setting, it was seen that young people hardly experience the selection of mobile services providers as a choice. In this area, young phone users mostly use Viettel because the other networks had poor coverage. Consequentially, traders also did not bother to promote any competitors, leading some young people to equate Viettel with mobile telephony at large.

The two settings also show similarities. First, mobile telephony is now part of young people's lives, across socio-economic or ethnic divides, although differences in usage were seen. Second, the two accounts suggest a pattern in which young people come to own and aspire to own increasingly more expensive and technologically advanced mobile phones as they age and accumulate more experience. Third, we also noted a number of exceptions to this pattern, indicating that young people are also becoming more conscious consumers. The interviews were replete with stories of phones being lost or stolen, and some respondents explained that they had downgraded to a more basic mobile phone for this reason. Quite a few respondents reported having done so upon entering university because they feared that a more attractive phone would likely be stolen in shared student accommodations. One young woman (18 years old) put it in this light: "I have no plan to change to another phone yet. As I will enter university soon, I don't think I should have a new phone for fear of it getting lost. Most of us have the same thinking, we prefer using modest phones when going to university for that reason." In addition, a male youth in remote rural QuảngTrị province explained that he had stopped using mobile phones altogether, as he was not interested in them any longer.

As noted, the selection of a network provider could not really be described as a choice for respondents residing in remote rural QuảngTrị province, where only Viettel

network coverage was available. However, young people who moved to other places in Vietnam for work or study and those residing in the town of QuảngTrị, opting for one or another network provider became a choice. When explaining their choice of network provider, some young respondents rationalized it on the basis of network features and economic considerations. For example, a young woman (20 years old) explained: "I prefer Vina[phone] because it provides higher internet speed. It also provides more promotion offers and a greater variety of apps such as ringtones, music online. However, Vina is more expensive than Viettel. So, I use Vina as my fixed SIM and Viettel as my additional SIM."

Decision-making driven by economic utility, however, was the exception rather than the norm. More commonly, it was found that seemingly economic decisions were deeply entangled with other relationships. As the two accounts showed, phones are often passed on to children and youth as gifts from relatives and siblings (see also Oreglia & Kaye, 2012), they are purchased with money given by parents, and knowledgeable and trusted kin often provide important advice about them. Young people are often provided with SIM cards through gifted phones or are advised to use a certain network rather than another. Of course, young people do not always remain with the network provider they were set up with, and if they do so this is often a conscious choice based on social rather than economic considerations. For example, one young man (19 years old) gave us the following reason for sticking with Viettel despite his dislike of its practices: "Viettel often traps its users into losing money for unnecessary services. I don't like this but I still use it because my relatives and friends here use Viettel." The fact that Viettel is owned by the Vietnamese military was another non-economic factor that appealed to some. For example, a young woman (20 years old) said that she used a Viettel SIM card because "I love the army and always wanted to support the army's business because my father and my uncle are in the military and they also use Viettel."

As young people mature, their social networks diversify. This is especially true as they move away from their birthplaces for study or work. In this circumstance, several respondents opted to use two (or more) SIMs simultaneously that were often from different network providers. For example, a young woman (21 years old) explained why she used SIMs from two companies in her dual SIM phone as follows "I use a Viettel SIM [for relatives] and a Mobifone SIM. Both SIMs are with a student package. I have a part-time job and many of my colleagues are Mobifone users." Maintaining a dual SIM strategy was commonly reported by students from remote rural QuảngTrị who were studying in urbanized centers of Vietnam. These young people maintain their Viettel SIM for contact with friends and relatives in the remote rural parts of the province and use other network

providers for contact with fellow students from urban areas. The brief examples discussed here illuminate how young people pursue economic decision-making and how their navigation of the commercial terrain of competing network providers is informed by a range of non-economic factors.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this article, I combine research on young people's own accounts of their mobile phone histories with research on Vietnamese mobile services providers. Integrating a political economy perspective with a child- and youth-centered approach highlights the power of commercial actors to shape childhood and youth in the mobile phone era, while also presenting young people as situated actors in Southeast Asia's rapidly transforming mobile media landscape. In addition, the article's focus on young people in provincial Vietnam also provides an important counterpoint to the bias toward the capital city found in most research on young people and mobile telephony in Southeast Asia.

A key finding of this research is that in a rapidly saturating market for mobile phone subscriptions, young people are a perpetual demographic frontier for the market. This is illustrated by the results obtained from the young people and their expressions of desire for mobile telephony. In addition, study of mobile services providers companies has demonstrated that these companies contribute to realizing this dynamic by targeting the young with specific marketing strategies, including age-based subscription packages, organizing and sponsoring events for young people, and rolling out commercial campaigns at schools. The latter practice indicates that in late socialist Southeast Asia, state spaces are also permeated by commercial interests. In spite of the degree of adult concern regarding young people's mobile phone use, critical discussion of the commercial infiltration of such statespaces for children and youth is long overdue.

Interviews with young mobile phone users illustrated the marketing strategies that mobile services pursue for young people do in fact reach them, including those in provincial areas. In addition, they affect their consumption practices. Nonetheless, the interviews also indicated that deciding on a network provider is often driven by more than mere economic concerns, as it is closely tied to young people's social networks (and changes in them), shaped by the geography of network coverage, and occasionally connected with political loyalties. Appreciating young people as consumers in the mobile phone era thus requires recognizing the powerful influence of network providers and the multiple relationships in which their economic decision-making is embedded.

#### Acknowledgments

The financial support of the Political Economy of Resources, Environment and Population (PER) research group of the International Institute of Social Studies is gratefully acknowledged. I also thank Tran Thi Ha Lan and Tran Phuong Ha for their excellent research assistance.

#### References

- Bangkok Post. (2019a). Addicted to Smartphones. *Bangkok Post*.  
<https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1757314/addicted-to-smartphones>
- Bangkok Post. (2019b). App to Allow Parents to Track Children's School Buses. *Bangkok Post*.  
<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1618550/app-to-allow-parents-to-track-childrens-school-buses>
- Barendregt, B. (2008). Sex, cannibals, and the language of cool: Indonesian tales of the phone and modernity. *The Information Society*, 24, 160–170.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01972240802020044>
- Chee, B.W.L. (2000). Eating snacks, biting pressure: Only children in Beijing. In J. Jing (Ed.), *Feeding China's Little Emperors: Food, children and social change* (pp. 48–70). Stanford University Press.
- Donald, S.H., Anderson, T.D., & Spry, D. (Eds.). (2010). *Youth, Society and Mobile Media in Asia*. Routledge.
- Epinion. (2015a). *Genzilla: They're coming, get ready*. In: Media Prima, OMD, and Epinion.
- Epinion. (2015b). *Genzilla: They're coming, get ready*. In: Epinion, OMD.
- Geldof, M. (2011). Earphones are not for women: Gendered ICT use among youths in Ethiopia and Malawi. *Information Technologies & International Development*, 7, 69–80.  
<https://itidjournal.org/index.php/itid/article/view/792>
- Horton, P. (2016). Generationing school bullying: Age-based power relations, the hidden curriculum, and bullying in northern Vietnamese schools. R. Huijsmans (Ed.), *Generationing development: A relational approach to children, youth and development* (pp. 127–150). Palgrave.
- Huijsmans, R. (2016). Generationing development: An introduction. R. Huijsmans (Ed.), *Generationing Development: A relational approach to children, youth and development* (pp. 1–31). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Huijsmans, R. (2019). Becoming mobile and growing up: A “generationed” perspective on borderland mobilities, youth, and the household. *Population, Space and Place*, 25(3), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2150>.
- Huijsmans, R. (Ed.) (2016). *Generationing development: A relational approach to children, youth and development*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Huijsmans, R., & Tràn, T.H.L. (2015). Enacting nationalism through youthful mobilities? Youth, mobile phones and digital capitalism in a Lao-Vietnamese borderland. *Nations and Nationalism*, 21(2), 209–229. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12095>
- Laz, C. (1998). Act Your Age. *Sociological Forum*, 13(1), 85–113. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022160015408>
- Nguyen, M.T.N. (2019). *Waste and wealth: An ethnography of labor, value, and morality in a Vietnamese recycling economy*. Oxford University Press.
- Oreglia, E., & Kaye, J. (2012). A gift from the city: Mobile phones in rural China. In *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (pp. 137–146). ACM.
- Porter, G., Hampshire, K., Abane, A., Munthali, A., Robson, E., Bango, A., de Lannoy, A., Gunguluza, N., Tanle, A., Owusu, S., Milner, J. (2015). Intergenerational relations and the power of the cell phone: Perspectives on young people’s phone usage in sub-Saharan Africa. *Geoforum*, 64, 37–46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.06.002>.
- Porter, G., Hampshire, K., Milner, J., Munthali, A., Robson, E., De Lannoy, A., Bango, A., Gunguluza, N., Mashiri, M., Tanle, A., Abane, A. (2016). Mobile phones and education in sub-Saharan Africa: From youth practice to public policy. *Journal of International Development*, 28(1), 22–39. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3116>.
- Rumondor, P. (2019). Is there an application for improving marital satisfaction? An overview of smartphone usage in urban young adults' marital interactions. *Makara Human Behavior in Asia*, 23(1), 97–112. <https://doi.org/10.7454/hubs.asia.1190718>
- Taye, F.N., & Huijsmans, R. (2020). Monetised childhoods: Money and consumption among young weavers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 10(2), 183–194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610619895021>
- Thayer, C.A. (2017). The political economy of military-run enterprises in Vietnam. In P. Chambers & N. Waitookiat (Eds.), *Khaki Capital: The political economy of the military in Southeast Asia* (pp. 130–160). NIAS Press.
- Warf, B. (2013). Geographies of global telephony in the age of the internet. *Geoforum*, 45, 219–229. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.11.008>
- World Bank. (2009). *Country social analysis: Ethnicity and development in Vietnam*. In Washington: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank.
- Zelizer, V. (2002). Kids and commerce. *Childhood*, 9(4), 375–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568202009004002>