

When it comes to apps Mum and Dad know best

By Lucy Neiland, May 2011

The teenage techno wiz-kid is a staple cliché in this age of personal technology. Whether it's Mark Zuckerberg developing Facebook, or more mundane examples of teenage authorities providing their luddite parents with a technological education, there is an assumption that teenagers are at the cutting edge of personal technology.

A recent advert from Yell illustrates this well. It shows a father searching fruitlessly around the old-fashioned record shops for the record he produced as a DJ some years ago (a nod to J.R.Hartley) but to no avail. Eventually his daughter (she looks about 16) suggests he uses the Yell app on her iPhone, and so saves the day.

However, during our recent ethnographic research into the use of apps, this is not what we have seen, over and over again, in our real-life observations in the field. Based on our observations, it seems very unlikely that a 16 year old would have such a functional app on her phone, and far more likely to be Dad showing Daughter.

Our recent research conducted amongst kids from early to late teens (and sometimes in to their early 20s) has thrown up some eye-opening patterns that run contrary to the wide-spread perceptions of the teenage expert, innovator and early adopter that influence a lot of corporate marketing. Instead we are seeing that kids of this age are not the real early adopters of technology, especially when it comes to the app market, a finding that was so surprising to one of our clients that they needed to study the video evidence themselves.

As Ethnographers, it is part of our method to understand what people say they do, or even what they may think they do, and the often diverging reality of what people actually do in context. And while it may be common for society at large and, in particular, for corporations, to assume the technological know-how of teenage kids, it is rarely the case that this is grounded in anything other than a desire to fit in with a commonly repeated narrative and a fear of departing from it.

Instead we have found that it is adults in their late 20's and 30's or, more particularly, at the age when responsibility comes (having children, serious jobs, and so on) that are the heavy users of apps. Most pronounced is this group's use of apps as tools. Tools that replace other functions in their lives, that save time and help them research and carry out tasks that need to be completed. Sometimes these parents will introduce their kids to apps that their kids could benefit from. For example, one musician father showed his musician son a guitar-tuning app. Not once did we see this happening in reverse - that is kids showing their parents apps they might like.

Young people, we found, generally fell in to two camps: the 'Un-appies' and the 'App-tarts'. The Un-appies have very few apps at all on their devices (not counting the apps included as standard when they buy their device) and have little idea how to download apps, some having never tried. In contrast, the App-tarts have many apps, but these were restricted to generally free and short-lived games and time-fillers: horoscope readers, snake, chat-up lines, and so on. The young people we talked to generally didn't express the idea that apps might function as tools. Not one had a 'Wiki app', for example. Hence we came to know them as App-tarts: they flirted with apps, but it never got serious.

Two key reasons presented themselves for this emerging trend amongst teenagers: 1) the teenagers' lack of online financial independence; 2) the total dominance of social networking in teenagers' use of personal technology.

First the lack of financial independence - it was parents who typically paid for teenagers' phone contracts and many kids, even into their late teens, might not yet be practised in internet banking or online purchasing. Many did not have their own iTunes accounts, but may share their parents email addresses for the app market (one daughter couldn't download apps any more, as her mother had forgotten her own password).

This generation are not using email like their parents. Emails are replacing letters – they are for formal communication, rarely checked, and full of junk. The lack of email use may restrict teenagers' online commercial independence, but it did not inhibit their communication because, for them, Facebook has replaced emails, and everything is organised via Facebook. This brings us onto the second key reason.

The teenagers' lack of commercial and technological curiosity into apps was starkly contrasted with their dedication to social networking. For many of our participants there was a new liminal space created by their devices. When they talked to us, they did so while simultaneously BlackBerry messaging, Facebooking and replying to texts. They did this under the table at dinner time, laying in bed before going to sleep, and when they woke up in the morning. A few of our participants seemed to be unsatisfied from all this activity, frustrated by the realisation that if they pulled out of this new liminal space then their friends would move on without them and they'd miss out on a full social life (which, if you can't remember what its like to be a teenager, it is very important not to be out of the loop even for a moment. A lot can happen in an evening after school). One of our participants showed us a new red dress that she had bought. She had worn it only once, at a work party, but now, because she had been tagged in Facebook photos wearing the dress that evening, she felt she couldn't wear it to other up-coming events. The dress had seen its day; it was now over-exposed. The Facebook world seemed almost to run ahead of people's true-life worlds. Break-ups are announced to social groups before one of the former couple may be ready to tell the world. This may be obvious but a less observed side-effect is that while the teenagers' social lives move like a whirlwind, their expectations of the technology they are using are relatively modest.

With their heads in social networking, many teenagers appear to be missing out on the world of useful apps. But for younger kids (toddlers to about 10 years old), it's a different story. Kids as young as 8 months (as any parents of young kids with iPhones out there will know) can unlock phones and start playing with apps, and they are being encouraged to do so. For parents of younger children, some apps can provide a safe haven, and can be safer than Google and YouTube. Kids' toilet humour can be satisfied with whoopee cushion apps, without the risks of unwanted search results. It is the younger kids that like them and get to play with them. The teenagers remain Un-appy, or at best, flirtatious.


In a recent conversation with a school teacher, he told me that he has a 'Doctor Who' app on his iPhone that he pretends, to the kids in his class, can detect whether they are wearing make-up or not (make-up is not allowed in his school). Remarkably, the kids don't question whether the detector is real or not, but accept that Teacher would be able to acquire and set-up such an app on his phone. He is confident he won't be challenged, as the teenagers phones are alive with their social life, rather than app technology.

About ExperienceLab

Putting human insights at the heart of design and innovation

ExperienceLab have been studying people, processes and technology for over forty years, and are proud to have some of the best researchers in the business. Our staff are skilled at gathering deep insights from people, based both on their real lives, as well as the views and preferences they express in a lab environment.

Our approach is informed by the expertise built up in the team over decades, and brought to bear on every project. Our work helps to direct strategic thinking, drive innovation and shape the design of new products and services. We call our people-centred research approach, DeepSight, and it draws on the range of techniques below.

DeepSight	ExpertView	LifeView	LabView
	<p>Features: Expert reviews, usability and accessibility audits, competitive analysis, and desk research.</p>	<p>Features: Ethnographic research: participate, interview, observe, contextual analysis, and longitudinal in-context studies.</p>	<p>Features: Usability testing, interviews, card sorting, prototype evaluation, and user focus groups.</p>

Ethnography at ExperienceLab

ExperienceLab has recently expanded and now has an in-house ethnographic research unit, delivering strategic analysis, actionable insights and recommendations. Ethnography involves spending time with participants in their own contexts, finding out, for example, how people are really experiencing and sharing technology. It identifies patterns of behaviour, not just relying on what people say, but also observing what they do.

If you would like more information about ExperienceLab or our ethnographic research, please get in touch:

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