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# Missed opportunities? A digital divide perspective on age related differences in the use of mobile communication

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## Background

In Switzerland as in many other industrialized countries, the number of mobile phone contracts is higher than the number of inhabitants (swissinfo 2007). However, social groups differ strongly with regard to their access and use of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) like the mobile communication by cell phones: Only 56% of the older generation (age 60-84) has access to a mobile phone, compared to an average access rate of 80% in the overall population (age 15-84) (M.I.S. Trend 2007: 16). Such differences are discussed under the heading of "digitial divides" and seen an as problematic from a normative point of view: If the access to ICT is associated with a number of social, cultural and economic opportunities, such digital divides have to be considered as exclusion of specific social groups (e.g. low education and low income groups, women, older people) from valuable goods and services. Many studies have investigated digital divides related to the Internet (Norris 2003; Stevenson 2009), but very little is known about digital divides related to mobile communication (MC).

## Objectives and research questions

This project will focus on digital divides between age groups. Knowing that young people are in general high intensity users of MC, the focus is on middle aged and old people (see below for operationalisation).

Research questions and methods: 1) What are age specific opportunities and threats of the use of mobile communication? There is some discussion of these questions in the theoretical literature: For the middle generation, opportunities of MC are the use of information and communication resources independent of space, but the loss of life-work balance due to ubiquitous access and the potential loss of privacy have to be considered as threats. For the older generation, opportunities of MC are emergency communication and the possibility to maintain personal relationships with remote family

member and friends. Threats for the older generation are the low user friendliness of hardware and software. It is an open question whether these theoretical considerations match with the empirical data.

2) What are the economic, cultural and social effects of low- or non-use of mobile communication? Are one or several age groups missing relevant opportunities due to non-use of mobile communication technologies? Or, to the contrary, are the non-users avoiding certain threats associated with the use?

3) To what extent are these effects of use differences problematic from a normative point of view because they are breaking social norms (e.g. equal opportunities, privacy)? To what extent are these effects simply to be judged as unproblematic consequences of different user preferences, resulting in different consumption patterns?

## Methods

There is only very little research literature (Döring 2008) and to our knowledge no quantitative studies that are addressing these questions. Therefore, this project will rely on a qualitative approach that is better suited to explore such a new field of research. The main aim of the project is to develop new hypothesis and theories, rather than testing given ones.

Focus groups are a qualitative technique of data gathering that will be used in this project. Focus groups are small discussion groups that are lead by a professional moderator. In order to get an in-depth view of the judgments of the participants, questions are posed in an open way. The debates are recorded, transcribed and analysed by the research team. Groups are composed in a homogenous way (bringing participants together that are similar with regard to one or several key criteria) in order to ease discussions. In this study, 3 criteria will be combined with the following categories: Age (middle (35-45 years) vs. old (65-75 years); MC-use: High (daily) vs. low (less than weekly); Gender: male vs. female). Combining all versions of these categories, a total of 8 homogenous focus groups.

The project is structured in 3 phases of 6 months each:

Phase 1: Desk research (review of the international literature) and some 6 expert interviews with stakeholders (representatives of old people organizations, telecommunication companies, privacy experts etc.). Output: Identification of age key opportunities and threats.

Phase 2: 8 Focus groups (qualitative group discussions) with high and low intensity users within two age groups concerning opportunities and threats. Output: Normative evaluation of the key opportunities and threats from the perspective of the research participants.

Phase 3: Publication and implementation of the results: Findings of this project will be presented at international conferences and discussed at a specific workshop with the stakeholders of phase 1.

## Expected results

First, the findings of this project are of scientific relevance: New hypothesis are developed that can be investigated in follow-up projects. In addition, it is plausible that some insights from these age related digital divides can be transferred to other divides (e.g. education). Second, the results are also of societal

importance, because they may indicate problematic zones of low technology diffusion or educational barriers hindering an intensive use of MC. The project provides a scientific data for the discussion of the relevant normative questions. Due to the integration of stakeholders in the project, the need and form of targeted interventions (e.g. age specific hardware and software, education and training, online services etc.) can be assessed.

**Literature**

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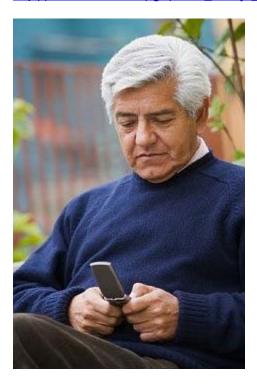
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Only 56% of the older generation (age 60-84) has access to a mobile phone (Source: M.I.S. Trend 2007: 16: Source of the image: © REB Images/Blend Images/Corbis