

Between Cram School and Career in Tokyo

DIANE J. SCHIANO
AME ELLIOTT
VICTORIA BELLOTTI
Palo Alto Research Center

In a series of studies (including interviews, observations, surveys and focus groups), we explored the leisure practices of young adults in Tokyo. After initial fieldwork with a wide age-range of participants, we narrowed our focus to 19-25 year olds, who have more leisure time and for whom leisure activities hold greater significance. In this paper, we briefly characterize these transitional “golden years” between cram school and career in Japan, and illustrate how a grounded understanding of leisure preferences and patterns can help suggest issues and opportunities for design.

Introduction

This paper provides a brief discussion of a set of age-related findings from a series of studies exploring the daily lives and leisure practices of young adults in Tokyo. Our primary interest was in exploring practices around discovering, planning and engaging in leisure outings, to inform the design of new mobile leisure support media for the Japanese context. Tokyoites are highly mobile and travel overwhelmingly via public transport. Coordination of leisure outings can be quite complex, with groups of dispersed friends who might each easily live over an hour’s train ride apart. Young people in Tokyo also have a plethora of leisure resources available, from traditional leisure magazines to new mobile internet sites offering such leisure-relevant information as restaurant recommendations and movie listings on the ubiquitous mobile phone, or “keitai.” Most keitai owners subscribe to a mobile Internet service, which also provides mobile email.

Our initial fieldwork with a wide age-range of participants (16-33 year olds), showed patterns suggesting that we narrow our focus to people between the ages of 19 and 25, a period sometimes referred to as the “golden years” in Japan. Most Japanese high schoolers must supplement long days in the classroom with extended evenings in “cram schools,” in preparation for the all-important college entrance examinations; and the prototypical *salaryman’s* career is still expected to be one of selfless loyalty and 70-hour workweeks. But once accepted into college—and until they begin working in earnest—Japanese students enjoy a unique time of freedom from external constraint as they transition between cram school and career (White, 1993). While this transition occurs in all cultures,

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the Japanese “sociotechnical experience” is unique in several ways: the marked relaxation of constraints even while living at home with limited personal space, the context of high urbanization and mobility (via public transport) and the ubiquitous presence of advanced mobile technologies (see Ito et al, 2005).

After describing our methods, we briefly characterize our findings concerning this transitional “golden age” in Japan. We then quickly sketch two examples of how a grounded understanding of leisure practices during this period can suggest opportunities for design.

Methods

This research was done in collaboration with a large Japanese printing company; our interest was in gaining a grounded understanding of the resources and practices Japanese youth currently use in discovering, planning and conducting leisure outings, and to then explore implications for the design of new mobile leisure support media. Only a very brief description of our methods and general findings can be given here; please see Schiano et al (2005) for more information.

As background research for this project, we read leisure guide content on- and off-line, made informal field observations of popular youth “hangouts” in Tokyo, conducted interviews with editors of major leisure publications, and held discussions with technically savvy university students. Next, we conducted the first phase of formal fieldwork. Twenty participants from the Tokyo area were recruited by a market-research firm, and completed an initial survey with about 30 open-ended and multiple-choice questions about typical daily schedules, leisure planning resources, leisure activities and technology use. Everyone then participated in individual in-depth interviews. In the interviews (conducted in Japanese and translated into English), we further explored how leisure time was spent and why, and then asked for descriptions of specific recent leisure outings and the details of how they were planned and executed.

In analyzing the results of the first phase of field studies, we decided to revise our recruiting to focus on 19-25 year-olds, because they have more leisure time and leisure activities hold greater significance for them. In the second phase of the research, all participants were in this age-range. Five studies were conducted: 1) an online survey with questions like the first phase, 2) an in-depth interview study with 12 participants conducted in a naturalistic setting of a restaurant or café rather than an office, 3) a follow-up focus-group with all interviewees 4) a focus-group study specifically on mobile phone use, and 5) a mobile-phone diary study in which 10 participants recorded their leisure activities throughout one day, sending their responses hourly via mobile email.

Results and Discussion

Our initial fieldwork suggested that people in the “golden years” show very different leisure patterns than those of the other age groups. For example, the daily patterns of high schoolers (16-18 years) and older “young adults” (26-33 years) are in some ways more similar to one another than those of either group are to those in the “golden years” (19-25 years). The younger and older groups had more regular schedules, woke up earlier and had longer commutes and longer work or school days than the middle group. Both the younger and older groups tended to stay home during free time, especially during the week. Nineteen to 25 year olds kept more variable hours, devoted more of their income to leisure, and described going out with friends more, on weekday evenings as well as on weekends. They also estimated spending much more time in leisure activities (43.1% overall) than did the younger (28.2%) and older groups (28.7%).

In addition, the leisure priorities of the three age groups differed markedly. In the initial survey, 16-18 year olds chose “Communication” as their top priority; 19-25 year olds chose “Companionship” and 26-33 year olds chose “Relaxation” (although Relaxation figured highly for all groups). This pattern was supported in the interviews; high schoolers mentioned communicating with friends more, the middle group mentioned going out with friends more, and the older group mentioned watching TV more. Moreover, our interviews with lifestyle magazine publishers suggested that this middle age group is their prime readership, since it is a time when people are developing a sense of their own style and preferences that they will carry with them into adulthood. After age 25, people are less likely to seek guidance on leisure opportunities and are more likely to simply know what they want and search directly for it online. These factors contributed to our decision to focus the remainder of our fieldwork on 19-25 year olds, the age-group most motivated to use leisure resources and most likely to provide useful challenges for the design of new ones.

Our findings suggest that leisure outings tend to be undertaken by small groups of friends (2-6 people). Typical outings include: shopping, window-shopping, going to a café/restaurant, going to movies, karaoke, bowling, sports events, concerts (or other live music) and hobby or club-related activities. Somewhat more special activities include: visiting friends “back home,” a hot spring or spa, Disneyland or other amusement park, ski trips, music concerts, school or club field trips and tourism.

Generally speaking, the initial discovery of leisure opportunities seems fairly effortless, with leisure topics tending to “come up naturally” in conversations with friends or family, or while TV is playing in the “background.” Personal recommendations are especially valued, and ads are viewed with some suspicion. Once an interesting option is encountered, however, planning and coordinating a specific outing can be a very active, effortful task. One person in a group tends to take on this task, usually on a PC. The mobile Internet seems to be rarely accessed for information, with the occasional exception of train schedules and weather reports. Discussion and co-ordination of schedules with others tends to be done in email, typically via keitai. Arranging group schedules and commutes can be

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difficult, so plans tend to center around an initial meeting place (often a train station), close to a planned primary activity (e.g., going to a movie). This also provides options for the common addition of secondary, more serendipitous activities (e.g., going to a restaurant or café) to supplement the planned primary one. Still, even in serendipitous browsing for a place to eat, there's a marked tendency to rely on personal recommendations, choosing a place that someone in the group had been to before or had heard about from a friend.

The emphasis on personal recommendations seems especially strong for those in the “golden years.” With increased leisure time comes more opportunities to “go out” and explore, but there is also a strong tendency to seek guidance first—recommendations from people they know, and also from “experts” or people whose taste they appreciate and want to emulate in forming their own sense of identity (as in magazines articles). This emphasis on both peer group feedback and aspiration fits well with the psychosocial stage of identity construction marking the emergence from adolescence into adulthood (Erickson, 1968).

We also note that keitai contact (largely via email) was described as a “necessity of social life” by our college-age participants. The keitai clearly serves not only to help coordinate leisure activities, but also as a form of leisure activity in itself. The keitai is an always-available, always-on personal technology; people feel lost and disconnected without it. Moreover, it provides something to do when feeling “lonely” or “bored”. Most contact is with a few (2-5) well-known intimates; brief “check-in” emails tend to be sent spontaneously and in rapid succession, similar to SMSing in Europe (see also Ito et al, 2005; Ling 2004). This effectively provides a continual sense of virtual companionship with a few important people in one's life, while also facilitating instant access to an expanding social network. For those in the transitional college years, “hyperconnectivity” with a small group of friends and family members can provide an ongoing sense of security while one is also extending oneself outward into the world. The keitai can thus help mediate the transition to adult independence by providing a sense of social connection transcending physical boundaries, whether one is connecting to friends while at home or family while away.

Our fieldwork findings were rich and extensive, with compelling convergences across studies. In a series of discussions we explored emergent themes and potential design implications. We now sketch two broad design opportunities suggested by this work.

First, our findings on leisure activity discovery and planning suggest a “division of labor” in which PCs are used for intensive Internet search in planning activities and keitai are used for discussing and coordinating them in email (supplemented perhaps by mobile checking of train connections). This may partly reflect that Internet access is cheaper on a PC, with easy access to much wider content than proprietary keitai carrier services currently allow. However, it is also clear that when one is not on the go, a larger screen is likely to be more convenient for researching things to do. Further, some participants explicitly complained that using the Internet on the keitai is currently very unwieldy, perhaps due to poor interface design. Facilitating easy transfer of information researched and gathered on the PC onto the keitai to allow using that information in combination with phone

capabilities is intriguing from a design perspective, and could help support both advanced planning and serendipitous discovery of leisure activities.

Secondly, the increasingly advanced capabilities of the keitai, its ubiquity, and central status as an always-on personal technology suggests that it is a natural platform for advanced mobile leisure support technologies. Yet people do not seem to want to learn about leisure options through effortful information search, especially on the mobile Web. Instead, the strong emphasis on natural communication and personal recommendations suggests a different approach. As methods for aggregating the thoughts, experiences and recommendations of multiple people online are refined, end-user generated content—particularly on the keitai—could prove an especially welcome leisure resource. The striking success of moBlogs in Japan lends support to this view; careful interaction design focusing on sociality, communication and ease of use would be essential. Imagine, for example, easy, secure access to personal recommendations in context—perhaps from one’s social network or perhaps from lots of “people like me”—while browsing in an unfamiliar place. This could make finding good leisure options on the fly more effective and more fun, whether one is in the “golden years” or not.

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