Mobile phones as an extension of the participant observer’s self

Reflections on the emergent role of an emergent technology

Wendy Hein and Stephanie O'Donohoe
The University of Edinburgh Business School, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK, and
Annmarie Ryan
Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the value of mobile phones in ethnographic research, and seeks to demonstrate how this particular technology can support and enhance participant observation.

Design/methodology/approach – Reflecting in detail on one researcher’s experience of incorporating this technological device into an ethnographic study, the paper considers how new observational tools can contribute to research beyond data generation.

Findings – The study suggests that the mobile phone can be an extension of the ethnographer and act as a powerful prosthetic, allowing the researcher to translate ethnographic principles into practice.

Research limitations/implications – This paper reflects on the uses of a mobile phone in an ethnographic study of young men’s consumer experiences. Thus, the discussion focuses on a research site where the mobile phone holds a ubiquitous position. However, there are now more than four billion mobile phones in circulation worldwide, so whilst acknowledging important differences in research sites, this research can be seen to have wide implications beyond the study of young consumers.

Practical implications – The paper argues that mobile phones allow researchers to record their observations, co-create data and share experiences with their participants in ways that enhance the quality of ethnographic interpretations and understanding.

Originality/value – Little research attention has been paid to how emerging technologies support the more traditional participant observer, or how researchers actually embed them within their fieldwork. This paper addresses this gap and considers the wide-ranging role that technology can have throughout this research process.

Keywords Participant observation, Ethnography, Mobile phones, Technology, Interpretive consumer research, Mobile communication systems

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Emerging technologies influence marketing research practice in many ways, not least by adding new observational methods to the repertoire of data generation techniques (Lee and Broderick, 2007). Much discussion of technological advancement in research focuses on developments such as neuroscientific methodologies for observing brain activity (Senior et al., 2007; Kenning et al., 2007); mobile technologies for monitoring salesforce (Schlosser, 2007); and micro-cameras placed on consumers’ clothing to record experiences from their perspective (Starr and Fernandez, 2007). However, as Gummesson (2007) argues, researchers should not be thinking simply about how technological developments
can be applied in marketing research, but rather how they may solve specific research questions or challenges. Relatively little research attention has focused on how new observational tools might fit into the wider context of a study or the ontological and epistemological implications of using them. Moreover, theoretical or hypothetical accounts of technological applications may not provide sufficient insight into the implications of adopting such tools. Technology does not simply extend the methodological toolkit; it interacts with other elements, and can support and enhance existing observational methods (Blades and Brown, 2009).

Observational technologies such as cameras or eye scanning equipment (Lohse, 1997) have tended to be used in marketing research as relatively mechanical or passive data collection instruments. Indeed, Lee and Broderick (2007, p. 123) highlight the predominantly passive nature of observation in marketing research, noting that “participant observation as a methodology is generally uncommon in usage amongst marketing scholarly researchers”. Nonetheless, Gummesson (2007, p. 131) considers active participation combined with observation as “the ultimate in observational methods”, and emerging technologies seem to have an increasingly important role to play in more participative forms of observational research. This is evident for example in the emergence of online ethnography, or “netnography” (Kozinets, 2002, 2010; Langer and Beckman, 2005; Verhaeghe et al., 2008), where researchers use a range of technological tools to engage with as well as observe consumers online.

This paper focuses on the value of mobile phones in ethnographic research, seeking to demonstrate how this particular technology can support and enhance participant observation. We begin by reviewing literature on observation methods, particularly ethnography and participant observation, and on the role that technology has been seen to play in this context. We then provide some background to the study that led us to reflect on the role of mobile phones in ethnographic research. Next, we describe how a mobile phone emerged as a useful, unobtrusive means of recording observations in the field, but came to play a much broader and more significant role as the study proceeded. Finally, we consider the contribution of such technology to qualitative research in general and participant observation in particular.

2. Technology, participant observation and ethnography

Technological developments have had an impact on all stages of the research process from data collection (Deal and Hodson, 1997) to analysis (Catterall and Maclaran, 1998). More sophisticated computer software, increased availability and affordability of portable digital equipment, and greater opportunities for conducting research on the internet have been important factors here. Technological developments have facilitated the generation and presentation of rich qualitative data in many formats. For example, some researchers have used cameras and video recorders to document visual aspects of consumer experiences (Collier, 1967; Belk et al., 1988; Belk and Kozinets, 2005) or as a means of autodriving interviews (Heisley and Levy, 1991; Banister and Booth, 2005).

Mobile telephones, constant companion to many people, have allowed consumers to create short diary entries and share these with researchers through text messages (Patterson, 2005; Blades and Brown, 2009; Ravert et al., 2010). Online and social media have created opportunities for studying new research populations (Nancarrow et al., 2001) and an array of consumer communications. For example, social networking
and broadcasting web sites such as Facebook and YouTube have nurtured netnographies (Kozinets, 2002) and the study of consumer narratives (Pace, 2008).

Videographies and netnographies are examples of approaches emerging from the confluence of ethnography or participant observation and new technologies. However, little research attention has been paid to how emerging technologies support the more traditional participant observer in the field, or how researchers actually embed them within their fieldwork. The implications of incorporating such technologies for relationships in the field, and for researchers’ epistemologies and methodologies, also merit greater attention. In order to explore these issues, some further discussion of participant observation is required.

2.1 Ethnography and participant observation as a method

While ethnography and participant observation may not feature very prominently in marketing research (Lee and Broderick, 2007), “getting closer to consumers” and researching their lives, identities and practices have become increasingly important to marketers (Levine et al., 2000). Since the groundbreaking Consumer Research Odyssey (Belk, 1991), there have been many naturalistic and ethnographic studies in the field of consumer research, ranging from nonparticipant observation (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994) to prolonged, participative immersion in the field (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Kates, 2002; Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). Although practical experiences of fieldwork have been extensively documented, the role of technology has received less attention, perhaps reflecting perceptions of ethnography as a “craft” rather than a “technique” (Fielding, 2002, p. 453). Such perceptions have led to concerns that ethnography is too subjective or too dependent on the personal skills of the researcher (Atkinson et al., 2003). Although it encompasses multiple methods, ethnography is often perceived to be no more than participant observation (Stewart, 1998). In response to critiques of ethnography as too unstructured, textbooks such as Hammersley and Atkinson’s (2007) Ethnography: Principles in Practice seek to map out the process of ethnography and show how it comprises more than participant observation.

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), the process of ethnography moves sequentially from research design and site selection to negotiating access, building networks and relationships, collecting data through recording of insider accounts and documents, analysing data and writing up. Depending on what, whom and where researchers are studying, gaining access to a group or community is described as one of the most challenging processes of fieldwork (Wax, 1971). Site selection and access also facilitate researchers’ development of membership roles (Adler and Adler, 1987) as they work towards becoming fully accepted, perhaps even “native” co-participants. Relationships between the researcher and researched are therefore very important in ethnography, as they have particular implications for what – and how much – researchers are allowed to observe, and what practices they can participate in. There are no simple formulae to guide researchers in developing relationships with participants, negotiating access to the research site, or working out the appropriate balance between observation and participation.

One key aspect of interpretive research in general and ethnography in particular is that researchers themselves are the primary research instrument (Schensuel et al., 1999). Ethnographers are not only required to generate data by observing external processes but also to use introspective observation to build a reflexive understanding of how these processes are experienced and how they make sense. Stewart (1998) describes
this reflective process as the “ethnographer’s path”. Observations and interpretations therefore depend on the researcher and they often emerge from a position of distance and difference. At the same time, it is essential that close relationships are built with participants who allow the researcher to participate in and co-create their culture. Managing the tension between keeping one’s distance and becoming a native has been described as finding a role between “the Martian and the Convert” (Davis, 1973). In theory, prolonged and reflexive immersion in the field gradually builds ethnographic interpretations as the researcher becomes aware of underlying cultural meanings. However, putting this theory into practice remains challenging.

Multiple observation methods can and should be used for generating data as part of this ethnographic process including participant, nonparticipant and reflexive observation (Stewart, 1998). Ethnographic interviews also involve an element of observation as they usually take place within the natural environment of participants (Becker and Geer, 1969). Photographs can equally record observations and aid interpretation. “Go-alongs” (Kusenbach, 2003) involve researchers accompanying informants as they go about their daily business, and encouraging them to talk about their activities and experiences during this process. The “Mindcam” approach (Starr and Fernandez, 2007) seeks to observe consumer practices by embedding miniature video recorders in informants’ clothing and filming what they encounter from their perspective.

Multiple observation and data generation methods have the purpose of creating “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) that allow experiences and interpretations to be recreated. These thick descriptions underline the importance of fieldnotes (Emerson et al., 2001; Sanjek, 1990). As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p. 146) note:

A research project can be as well organized and theoretically well informed as you like but with inadequate note taking, the exercise will be like using an expensive camera with poor quality film. In both cases, the resolution will prove unsatisfactory, and the results will be poor. Only foggy pictures result.

Fieldnotes ultimately inform the analysis and the production of ethnographic text (Emerson et al., 1995). The many variations in content and writing style of fieldnotes emphasise once more that ethnography is a “craft” rather than a “technique”. Of course, practical suggestions for writing fieldnotes abound. Lofland and Lofland (1984), for example, recommend the jotting of notes during encounters as a way of keeping track of interactions and remembering activities for a subsequent production of detailed fieldnotes. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest the use of a tape recorder but note that this can affect participants’ behaviour. Multiple methods yield many different types of data such as photographs, films, interview transcripts, fieldnotes and reflexive journal entries, posing challenges in synthesising material.

2.2 Changing epistemologies and ontologies of ethnography
Ultimately, how data are collected, written and analysed depends on the objectives of each project and the epistemological perspective adopted. Although researchers generally seek to present some version of a “truth” or social reality (Stewart, 1998), there are many perspectives on how much or what kind of reality studies claim to represent. Understandings of ethnography have developed and fragmented since the early twentieth century, with Denzin (1997) suggesting that contemporary ethnographies are in the “sixth moment”, having taken an interpretive turn. “Traditional” ethnography and its positivist influences (Lecompte, 2002) may have perceived the observer
as dominant and privileged, rather than viewing participants as the experts. These epistemological trends, which ultimately translate into methodologies and methods, are reflected in interpretive consumer research more generally (Tadajewski, 2006; Cova and Elliott, 2008). The interpretivist stance shares with postmodern theories an emphasis on the multiple, intersubjective and social construction of identities (Prus, 1996). Knowledge or reality is not claimed to be objectively presented; research in this tradition describes multi-faceted perspectives on lived consumer experiences, often through researchers’ participation in interactions (Tadajewski, 2006; Hogg and Maclaran, 2008). Theoretical contributions are made by adding to the diversity of interpretations, offering new angles or perspectives, and communicating the sense of “being there”. This has implications for the role of the researcher/observer, who does not seek to collect data in order to present objective reality, and who does not see interaction with participants as interference. Rather, through observation, participation and reflexive analysis, new insights into lived experiences are generated.

Interpretive researchers generally aim to present multiple perspectives on realities rather than aiming for the “true” or “closest” representation of reality. In the remainder of this paper, we argue that emerging technologies constitute observational tools that can help researchers align their work with these epistemological and methodological perspectives of “interpretive ethnography”. In making this argument, we draw on our observations and discussions surrounding the first author’s experience of using a mobile phone in an ethnographic study of young men’s consumption practices. Before describing how this particular technology facilitated a richer and deeper form of participant observation, we provide a brief overview of the research project itself.

3. Practical experience from the field: mobile phones and participant observation

This study sought to explore the construction of young men’s gender identities through individual and group consumption practices. As the study was intended to gain insights into their gendered consumption and lived experiences, ethnography was adopted as the chosen methodology. The research site was in Edinburgh, with initial access to participants gained by involvement with university societies appealing primarily to young men. Considering the practices of young men in this cultural context, group interactions revolved around football, games, pubs and nightclubs. For example, many participants tended to watch televised football games in specific pubs; to play football themselves in the park and football halls; and to support a particular Scottish football club by going to home and away games. In addition to these football-themed activities, some participants were avid poker players; most had an interest in team sports in general; and many also enjoyed going to nightclubs. As might be expected, alcohol consumption featured prominently in most of these contexts.

Data were generated over 13 months, beginning with nonparticipant observation during which possibilities for gaining access and undertaking participant observation were sought. After approximately nine months of prolonged participant observation, ethnographic interviews were conducted with nine key informants to add insights from individuals. Additionally, shopping “go-alongs” (Kusenbach, 2003) were undertaken with three key informants.

Although the process outlined above is not dissimilar to other ethnographies in consumer research, one factor which posed particular challenges was that the researcher
was a woman. Of course, there have been many consumer research studies where men have interviewed women or vice versa (Thompson, 1996; Thompson et al., 1990, 1994; Tuncay and Otnes, 2008), but an ethnography posed particular challenges in this respect. While some may argue that studying groups of men and engaging in meaningful participant observation as a woman may not be possible, in this case the gender difference was seen as an opportunity for fresh perspectives and further insights into young men's consumption practices and constructions of masculine identities. With a visibly “Martian” researcher, a certain distance was inevitable, making the negotiation of access, the building of relationships, and simply fitting in with the settings and observed practices particularly demanding.

3.1 Negotiating access, taking fieldnotes and building relationships
Given the scope of this paper, access issues are discussed in terms of ongoing fieldwork rather than initial approaches to participants. Throughout the process of data generation, it was challenging to be comfortable in the simultaneous roles of researcher and active participant. Taking notes during encounters was a constant reminder of these conflicting roles. As a woman participating in male-dominated settings, the differences between researcher and participants already appeared significant. Although her personal social network meant that the researcher was very comfortable in predominantly male company, it was challenging to negotiate these young men’s gender-related expectations in order to become more accepted as a co-participant in various practices. Documenting interactions often seemed to make matters worse, reminding participants of the researcher’s different role as well as her different sex and gender. At the same time, there was a certain comfort in taking notes as it prevented the researcher from becoming too immersed in what was happening. Taking notes facilitated a reflexive distance and reminded her of the purpose of describing interactions.

Problems associated with note-taking emerged at an early stage of fieldwork. While it was relatively easy to take notes from a passive outsider perspective, it became clear that this would be more problematic during the participant observation phase of the study. Taking notes felt unnatural and not easily reconciled with being a (somewhat) inconspicuous researcher in the field. Concerns about not building connections with participants added to the challenges encountered during access.

Considering solutions to deal with these conflicting roles and make her role of observer less obtrusive, the researcher tried using the voice recorder function of her mobile phone instead of leaving the scene to hand-write notes. The mobile phone, a Nokia 6230i, was a common model at the time of the fieldwork (2006/2007), and its technological applications were far less advanced than those available today.

Note-taking through voice recording involved the same “stock taking” (Lofland and Lofland, 1984) as written notes, detailing information such as the date, time, location, people present, activities, objects involved and conversation topics. These recorded notes were subsequently transcribed or listened to in order to trigger memories to aid the writing of more detailed fieldnotes. This process was found to have several advantages. In practical terms, voice recording took far less time and effort than hand-written notes. As fieldwork progressed, it became easy to withdraw briefly with the phone rather than disappearing for longer to write notes. Pen and paper were not required, which made the recording of data less intrusive and the role of the researcher less conspicuous; it appeared that the observer was simply talking on her phone, as the young men...
Most fundamentally, mobile phones are so deeply embedded in the lives of young people (Blades and Brown, 2009) that using this particular technology was a point of commonality between the researcher and researched, and could even be seen to make the study more “naturalistic”.

Although the format of written notes differed from that of spoken notes, recordings added further nuances of the encounter such as background noises, words or expressions used and the way they were said within a specific context. The mobile phone recorded the context of “being there” along with the co-production of language and practices. Listening to recordings at a later stage encouraged further recall and reflection concerning the where, who and what happened during these encounters. They indicated how the observer was changing and adapting to various contexts. Hearing her own voice encouraged reflexive consciousness, as it highlighted the researcher’s role as a co-participant in activities as well as an observer processing and analysing the experiences of others.

Recording notes this way was not always feasible; in bars and nightclubs or during football games, for example, it was more difficult to disappear to record notes. Similarly, during shopping “go-alongs”, key informants took the researcher through the shops they usually frequented, talking about the route they took and commenting on their experiences. In such instances, instead of using the mobile phone’s voice recorder function, the researcher jotted notes on the notepad. Again, this behaviour did not seem strange to participants, as it looked just like sending text messages, which was common practice for them as well. The following is an example of the type of note recorded in this context:


As indicated above, with the notepad editor open during go-alongs, fieldnotes could be added quickly, building a type of storyboard. They helped the researcher remember which shops were entered, what items were of interest or actively rejected, and certain expressions or terms, such as the pejorative “poof” and “Yah” above, used by participants.

As fieldwork progressed, the benefits of ubiquitous mobile phones emerged in further contexts. Thoughts about what had been observed often came to mind when least expected – while waiting for the bus, for example, in the supermarket or during conversations with friends and colleagues. A mobile phone was a steady companion, enabling ideas to be recorded as they occurred, anywhere and any time. This ultimately supported the process of interpreting and analysing data. The mobile phone’s recording and notepad functions were used in similar ways to a traditional paper notepad to build a reflexive journal that followed the “ethnographer’s path” (Stewart, 1998). These notes were
subsequently transcribed and translated into fieldnotes, forming the basis of the interwoven yet differentiated data streams of observations and reflexive journal.

3.2 Supporting multiple observation methods and data formats
In addition to recording fieldnotes and reflexive thoughts, ethnographic interviews (Becker and Geer, 1969) were conducted within the student homes and residences of key informants. With an average duration of 2.5 hours, all interviews were recorded using the mobile phone. Seeing a mobile phone rather than a less common piece of technology on the table appeared less intrusive and participants seemed to feel at ease quickly. Indeed, with a mobile phone always to hand, unexceptional and accepted by everyone, it was increasingly used to record interactions and conversations during participant observation.

Fieldnotes on student housing and the experience before and after interviews were also recorded in this way. These included descriptions of posters on their walls, products in their bathrooms and the contents of their fridge. When interviewing participants at home, the mobile phone was also used (with participant’s permission) to take photographs; again this was easier and felt less intrusive than introducing an additional camera at that point. Of course, another practical advantage was the digital nature of mobile phone data, making it easy to transfer files directly to the computer via a USB cable.

A further role for the mobile phone emerged serendipitously. In an attempt to gain greater insight into their experiences, and into how their practices may differ without the presence of a female researcher, two participants were given disposable cameras to record activities where the researcher could not be present. One of these events was a “Burn’s night” supper, a celebration of the Scottish poet Robert Burns from which women were traditionally excluded. Another event was a beer festival which the researcher was simply unable to attend. In both cases, the photographs provided insights, but not as anticipated. As the Burn’s night celebrations were cancelled, the first participant took photographs of his student residence instead. The second participant took pictures of the beer event as expected, but these showed a “front stage” setting and passive behaviour (Goffman, 1959; Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994) rather than active participation in processes, events or practices. In both cases, then, while the photographs were interesting, they appeared to have been taken in order to present to a researcher rather than to share with a co-participant. In other words, the disposable cameras constituted an observational technology that served as an extension of a researcher, rather than a participating member of their community. They introduced an alien, unnatural and uncomfortable element into the relationship. Upon meeting in the pub to talk about beer festival pictures, it emerged that the informant had taken further photographs with his own mobile phone, and he offered to transfer pictures from his phone to the researcher’s via Bluetooth. Connecting the mobile phones in this way contributed to the study in ways that went beyond data collection, storage and analysis; it opened up further possibilities for accessing first-hand perspectives on the young men’s consumption experiences. These photographs, transferred to the researcher’s phone as an afterthought, were of experiences that the participant himself considered worthy of recording for his own purposes. Those experiences were captured through a device that may be considered part of his extended self (Belk, 1988) and sharing the images via Bluetooth allowed the participant and researcher to engage with each other in a way that was a natural part of everyday life and social relationships for both. In this way, mobile phones supported the building of relationships as co-participants.
Clearly, mobile phone technology has developed considerably since this study was undertaken; with the advent of smartphones, consumers have found many more uses for their mobiles. Even during the period of this fieldwork, however, it was clear that mobile phones fitted seamlessly into participants’ lives, and were used in ways that went well beyond calling, texting and taking photographs. For example, they thought nothing of using and sharing a mobile phone as a radio to listen to football matches while travelling to watch the team they supported in action.

Mobile phones with cameras were so ubiquitous in the field that this observational technology blended into the background; everyone took photographs and was used to featuring in posed or unposed pictures. Mobile phone pictures were taken by everyone in pubs and football stadia; moments after entering Celtic Park football stadium, for example, everyone reached for their phone to take pictures. It became apparent that it was also considered natural and acceptable for the researcher to take pictures of activities, practices, interactions, participants, scenes and settings. This helped the study in many ways. By documenting particular details of settings, these photographs triggered more detailed recall of events and experiences afterwards, and increased sensitivity to the context in which the study was unfolding.

Of course, all these photographs, whether taken by participants or the researcher, represented and recorded performances. What was important here, however, was that participants’ pictures represented performances to one another, rather than to the researcher in particular; thus their own mobile phones took more naturalistic pictures than any camera that could be given to them or any pictures the researcher could take. As participants shared photographs with the researcher, they offered further insight into their personal perspectives on their practices and experiences; the researcher could observe what practices were important to them and how their photographs represented this. Sharing photographs was often accompanied by discussion, adding an autodriving element (Heisley and Levy, 1991) to the short, informal interviews that took place throughout the study. Permission to use their pictures was readily granted as it seemed to recognise and acknowledge their expertise in these practices.

In addition to taking photographs, participants used their mobile phones to take and share videos. Observation data therefore emerged in various formats, generating insights through multiple media formats and points of view. Emphasising once again the seamless role that mobile phones played in participants’ social lives, photos taken from events such as football games were subsequently displayed on social networking sites. These web sites and personal profiles also provided insight into how individuals were connected to groups and practices. One specific incident highlighted how various data formats, media, perspectives and experiences intersected. Visiting the pub prior to a game of live football was common practice. In these contexts, the usual supporter songs were sung over pints of beer. After one of these pre-game drinking events, one participant encountered a video on YouTube that had been filmed by an unknown supporter with his mobile phone. This participant embedded it on his Facebook page, disseminating the message to the group. This film featured the researcher in the company of participants, serving as a vivid reminder that much of the material commonly considered as “data” enriched and was part of participants’ lives. It also showed how many different perspectives on experiences exist that we may not be aware of, but can now draw upon through new technologies. Furthermore, it gave the researcher the salutary experience of seeing herself through eyes that she did not know were upon her.
4. Discussion
If, following McLuhan (1964), we view media as the extensions of man, then this study suggests that the mobile phone can be an extension of the ethnographer. Indeed, this prosthetic appears to be both powerful and prosaic; it helps the ethnographer to translate ethnographic principles into practice, and as a constant, unremarkable companion in the lives of many people, it serves as a bridge between the researcher’s personal and professional lives, and links these to the lives of participants. Clearly, this study concerned young adults, who are particularly comfortable with mobile technology (Ravert et al., 2010; Blades and Brown, 2009). But, as Cohen and Jacobs (2010, p. 1) observe, there are now more than 4 billion mobile phones in circulation worldwide, making them “the new mass distribution medium” and:

[... ] the one device where consumers can access audio and video, while communicating with friends, family members, and co-workers via text, email, social media, and web browsing [...]

More than eight in ten Americans won’t leave home without their mobile device, while Synovate reports that nearly half sleep with them.

This paper has discussed how a mobile phone, initially used as a tool to record observations from an ethnographer, gradually assumed a broader and more significant role in an ethnographic study and, we believe, enhanced the quality of fieldwork, data and analysis. In the remainder of this paper, we seek to reflect on the value of incorporating this observational technology into ethnography by considering its contribution in terms of methodology, methods and epistemology before concluding with some thoughts about future research.

4.1 Contributions to ethnographic methodology
From an ethnographic perspective, mobile technology mainly supported the challenges of access, building relationships, taking fieldnotes and the generation of data through multiple methods. Most importantly, it supported tackling the dual role of researcher and participant. In generating access and building relationships, it provided support precisely because it shared the ambiguous meanings of being a recording tool but also a natural participant in interactions. It therefore had similar characteristics to the dual role of the ethnographer. It was simultaneously a “Martian” and a “Convert”. In this study, the additional challenge was to bridge the differences between researcher and researched based on sex and gender, particularly during the initial stages of fieldwork. Being able to record fieldnotes less obtrusively, share experiences and include data generated by participants facilitated participant observation from different points of view. Mobile phones may be able to provide similar support when studying communities that do not have a “natural fit” with the researcher, due to differences in age, ethnicity or sexuality. In fact, a difference in perspectives and backgrounds may further enrich interpretations of communities. These practical insights may therefore open possibilities for site selection and choosing what to study in the first place.

4.2 Contributions to observation methods
Considering participant observation and ethnography as methods, this paper has shown how mobile phones can play a key role in generating, storing and analysing a range of data. They facilitate the taking of fieldnotes that describe both external interactions and reflective processes following the “ethnographer’s path”. In the case discussed above, the various possibilities for recording data, including camera, video, notepad and voice
recorder functions, became invaluable observational tools, in both nonparticipant and participant observation phases of the study. Moreover, multimedia applications generated data in several formats that added to the thick and layered descriptions from various perspectives. In general, using a mobile phone highlighted the possibility of combining various data sources and formats, joining texts, photographs, films and social media from both the researcher and participants. This indicates the potential of mobile phones for integrating multiple observation methods from multiple perspectives. With the advent of more sophisticated technology and smartphones, this may allow us to combine netnography, videography and more traditional methods of participant observation. A mobile phone may be the glue that joins these different methods and sources of data to provide insight into cultures, communities and practices. It may allow us to generate data and present a much richer picture of layered social realities than any of these methods used in isolation. As this paper has shown, combining these observation methods creates opportunities for experiences, mediated experiences and their representations to interact. Most importantly, mobile phones make it easier than ever for participants to share spontaneously, autonomously generated photographs and films, allowing their observations and perspectives to be incorporated further into studies of their experiences.

4.3 Epistemological contributions
By facilitating the exchange of data between researchers and participants and the incorporation of multiple subjectivities into the interpretation of ethnographic data, mobile phones can support the translation of social constructionism (Burr, 1998) and interpretivism (Tadajewski, 2006) into practice. Indeed, it could also be argued that incorporating experiences from participants’ vantage points adds phenomenological elements to participant observation (Katz and Csordas, 2003) and gains some distance from the position of the privileged observer (Prus, 1997). In this study, data were generated that presented intersubjective experiences, transforming observation methods into a joint, shared activity; and again, multiple methods supported the presentation of these multiple perspectives and interpretations. Technology therefore does not need to be seen only as capturing observations of a singular reality more “objectively” or “accurately” through removing researcher interaction or bias. As this example shows, it allows researchers to observe and gain insight into multiple social realities, which further inform and shape our understanding of lived consumer experiences.

4.4 Future prospects, limitations and caveats
Considering the advances in technology, mobile phones may have much more potential for participant observation than has been recognised here. The digital format of data and interaction between various media phenomena such as Web 2.0, blogging and Twitter suggest further possibilities. Smartphones may now allow us to generate and store data entirely through mobile technology, incorporating a variety of data generated by participants such as films, photographs, text messages and maps of social networks. As with traditional qualitative studies, however, researchers still face questions of representation and the challenge of synthesising data from different sources and in different formats. However, there are many fresh opportunities for presenting observations in different formats, combining text with photographs, audio clips and film for example. An additional possibility through sharing and exchanging data generated with mobile phones is the potential for studying otherwise inaccessible settings or activities.
One example cited above was the opportunity to gain insight into a Burn’s night celebration from which women were excluded. Since young consumers have particularly embraced mobile technology (Spero and Stone, 2004) data generated by children through their mobile phones may offer insights into their lifeworlds which adults may otherwise struggle to access. At the same time, this raises important ethical concerns about representing young informants in film format and receiving film data from them which shows them with others who may not have realised that their image would be used for research purposes. While such ethical issues are particularly salient with younger groups, it is important to acknowledge that the ubiquity and normality of data captured through mobile phones may serve to “camouflage” the process of research, eroding participants’ ability to exercise their rights in terms of informed consent. This raises questions about the ethics of using material for research purposes generated by participants that features other people not directly involved in a study.

Although Jacobs and Cohen (2010) see mobile phones and their varied uses as having mass appeal, it may be that studies with other groups besides young, technologically experienced consumers cannot take full advantage of mobile phones’ functionality. In some settings, mobile phones may not be as “natural” as was the case in this study and how research populations use mobile phones will affect how the technology can be used for generating data. In particular, the taking or the exchange of film and photographic data may not always be an option, and it may be the case that only some uses such as voice recording and fieldnote tools can be applied. As with any method, researchers need to consider what is appropriate for the context. Some elderly consumers may consider frequent note-taking via “texting” to be rude, for example, and an all-singling, all-dancing mobile phone may be an inappropriate research tool for studying homeless culture (Hill and Stamey, 1990; Hill, 1991).

We also need to consider the impact of introducing another medium, another lens and possibly another discourse through fieldnotes in SMS format. In this study, text messages were used as notes and long fieldnotes were written in full after observations had taken place. Drawing once more on McLuhan (1964), if the medium is the message, taking notes via a mobile phone’s voice recording, SMS and notepad functions may add a new dimension to the processes of observation, reflection and analysis. This can also change the way observations are written and subsequently processed which may have further implications for interpretations and analysis. As discussed above, mobile phones themselves may be both “Martian” and “Convert” to researchers, embedded in their own everyday lives but less familiar in fieldwork settings. This may create tensions between the novel and the taken for granted that need to be negotiated as part of the ethnographer’s path.

Overall, then, it seems that mobile phones have considerable potential as observational tools for ethnographic studies. In this paper, we have sought to demonstrate how mobile phones can be used to overcome some of the problems and challenges encountered during participant observation, and we hope that these reflections may help other researchers considering ethnographic research. The position of participant observer can be lonely and demanding, but mobile phones have the potential to connect the lifeworlds of researcher and participants, while helping researchers to record observations, co-create data and share experiences with their participants in ways that enhance the quality of ethnographic interpretations and understanding.
The experience of this study suggests that mobile technology can play a rich and varied role in participant observation, but there are many unknowns and several caveats associated with its use in particular contexts. Perhaps, the most important insight from this study is that it is not just technologies that are emergent; incorporating them into a study involves a process of learning and experimentation, and may well have consequences unanticipated at the outset.

Note
1. “Yah” is a derogatory term used to describe wealthy, public-school educated English students in Edinburgh.

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About the authors

Wendy Hein graduated with a PhD from the University of Edinburgh in 2010. Her research interests include consumption practices and the construction of gender identities, with a particular focus on masculinities and the socio-cultural, collective and individual dimensions of gender. Through her ethnographic research of young men’s consumption in Scotland, her interests also focus on ethnographic methodologies, participant observation and the implications of gender differences. She currently explores further extensions and managerial implications of participant observation beyond marketing and consumer research. Her work has been presented as a videography at the North American ACR Conference Film Festival. She has also presented at several ACR Gender, Marketing and Consumer Behavior Conferences. Wendy Hein is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: w.hein@ed-alumni.net

Stephanie O’Donohoe, PhD, is a Reader in Marketing at the University of Edinburgh Business School. A graduate of the College of Marketing and Design (now DIT) and of Trinity College, Dublin, her PhD, undertaken at Edinburgh, explored young adults’ experiences of advertising. Her current research interests include the practices of creatives in advertising agencies and consumption experiences and service encounters during bereavement and in the transition to motherhood. Her work has been presented at international marketing and interdisciplinary conferences, and published in edited collections and journals including the *European Journal of Marketing, Human Relations* and the *Journal of Marketing Management*. She is on the editorial boards of the *International Journal of Advertising, Young Consumers and Marketing Theory*, and she is the Book Review Editor for the *International Journal of Advertising*.

Annmarie Ryan’s research interests include inter-organizational relationships between business and nonprofit organisations and issues relating to sustainable business practices more generally. Central themes of her research include relationship dynamics, change and learning, and the role of social bonds in business relationships. She also has a keen interest in research practice and has presented work on this area at a number of conferences including the IMP Group Conference, and the Nordic Workshop on Relationship Dynamics. Her work has been presented at many other international conferences including the American Marketing Association, EMAC and the Academy of Marketing (UK). Her work has been published in the *Journal of Marketing Management, European Journal of International Management, International Journal of Non-Profit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* and the *Irish Marketing Review*.

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