

# Keitai and Japanese Adolescents



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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescents are among the world's more enthusiastic users of mobile phones, demonstrated particularly by their early adoption of data and text-based features, such as mobile e-mail and ringtone downloads. Much of the scholarly attention paid toward Japanese mobile communication activities focuses on *keitai*, which are an early type of feature phone primarily used in Japan and characterized by capabilities such as Internet browsing, e-mail, and support for the creation and consumption of a variety of media. This article discusses the integration of *keitai* into the lives of Japanese adolescents, concentrating on ways in which adolescents influenced *keitai* designs and functions, how *keitai* have helped adolescents reconfigure their social ties, and how they support new forms of expression and identification through their media capabilities.

The Japanese phrase for a mobile phone is *keitai denwa*, but the word *denwa* (telephone) is frequently omitted, shortening the phrase to simply *keitai*—literally, “something you take with you.” This term is an apt descriptor given the constant presence of *keitai* in everyday life. Okabe and Ito, two leading scholars on *keitai*, explained that:

*In contrast to “the cellular phone” or “the mobile” which stress technology and function, the Japanese term stresses the relation between user and device. A keitai is not so much about a new technical capability or freedom of motion, but about a snug and intimate technosocial tethering, a personal device supporting communications that*

*are a constant, lightweight, and mundane presence in everyday life. (Okabe & Ito, 2005, p. 1)*

In this article, we use the term *keitai* rather than mobile phone, following the recommendation put forward by Matsuda (2005a) that this term allows one to refer to mobile phones as existing within and shaped by Japanese society, rather than external objects. This is intended to support a conception of *keitai* as more than simply cell phones used in a particular region, but as cultural artifacts deeply informed by Japanese customs and culture.

During the 1990s, *keitai* were designed with communication as their main purpose, but since 2000 have come to permeate numerous other everyday activities. This has led young people to joke that “they would not be able to ride the train or even get up in the morning” without their *keitai* (Matsuda, 2010, p. 32). One of the most striking aspects of *keitai* compared to mobile phones in other regions is the rate at which they are used for accessing the Internet. The emergence of mobile media activities in Japan was supported by the launch of i-Mode by NTT DoCoMo in 1999, which was the world's first commercial mobile Internet service. Although i-Mode quickly developed a large user base, many adolescents bemoaned the high cost of bandwidth, using the term *pake-shi* (packet-death) to refer to using *keitai* services they couldn't afford (2010, p. 33). These concerns were one reason that some users limited themselves to basic Internet features, such as e-mail, which became extremely important for young users particularly. A survey conducted in 2002 indicated that 89.2 per cent of teens (ages 12–19) used the e-mail

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function of their *keitai*, 82.7 per cent of users in their twenties, 66.8 per cent of users in their thirties, and a steadily decreasing percentage of users in older demographics (Matsuda, 2005b, p. 124). A 2001 survey indicated that they are the most zealous users of mobile e-mail, typically devoting for 1 hour 58 minutes each day to exchanging e-mail on their *keitai* (2005b, p. 126). The introduction of flat rate data plans in 2003 encouraged heavier use of rich Internet services (2010, p. 33). Internet use became diversified across a variety of functions, such as social networking and exchanging media. A survey in 2007 indicated that far more teenagers accessed the Internet via *keitai* than by PC, illustrating the *keitai* to be their primary media device (2010, p. 34).

Hjorth (2003) at RMIT University and Rheingold (2002) were among the earliest to publish in English about the integration of *keitai* into Japanese youths' daily lives. These works were preceded by research from Japanese scholars including Matsuda (1999, 2000) at Chuo University, and Fujimoto (1997) at Mukogawa Women's University. Since *keitai* research has become more established, Ito at University of California, Irvine, Matsuda at Chuo University, and Okabe at Keio University are among its leading experts in English language scholarship (Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005; Ito & Okabe, 2005; Ito, 2006; Matsuda, 2010).

## **OVERVIEW**

English-language sociological research of *keitai* began to emerge in the early 2000s. The first major analysis of the integration of *keitai* into daily life to be published in English was Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda's book *Personal, portable, pedestrian* (2005). Most of the articles in this collection are translated from Japanese. Matsuda explained that many of the contributors have been publishing in Japanese about *keitai* since the mid-1990s (2005a, p. 21). Thus, the intellectual history of *keitai* has

two branches: A relatively short tradition of *keitai* scholarship in English, and its more established Japanese roots.

This article discusses the English-language scholarship, which will be considered in the following categories. First, a major topic approached by *keitai* researchers during the early and mid 2000s is how social and cultural influences in Japan shaped *keitai* technologies and activities. Social constructionist approaches to technological study inform these analyses. Such research concentrates on the types of individuals who have contributed to the shaping of *keitai*. In exploring this body of literature, this article focuses on how the activities of adolescents in particular were influential. Second, considerable scholarly attention has been paid to how the pervasiveness of *keitai* has affected the structures of adolescent social interactions. This research considers the role of *keitai* in established structures such as school and family, as well as emerging social norms among adolescent peers. Finally, an increasingly prominent object of study in recent years is the variety of new forms of media and creativity engendered by *keitai*. Media capabilities are an established part of *keitai* functionality, and improvements to mobile networking infrastructure during the 2000s supported the ability for youth to share their creations, blurring the line between media creators and consumers. Through discussing the history of these three areas of research, this article will provide an overview of scholarship about *keitai* and adolescents in Japan.

## **CURRENT KNOWLEDGE**

### **Social Construction of *Keitai***

English-language sociological studies of *keitai* first emerged in the early-to-mid 2000s. Extending from the notion of *keitai* as culturally embedded, several of these studies explored how Japanese sociocultural factors shaped *keitai* development.

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