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### **Gender and the telephonic voice**

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## 32

GENDER AND THE  
TELEPHONIC VOICE*Cara Wallis*

In the 1870s Alexander Graham Bell introduced his “talking box” to the public, and although early uses included piping in news, church services, and music to people’s homes, relatively quickly the device became rather stabilized as a form of point-to-point communication. Since those early days, numerous sounds have been associated with landline telephony (buzzers and rings; new phrases and patterns of speech) and have been compounded by mobile telephony (ringtones, ringback tones, message alerts), but in this chapter, I draw inspiration from that early name for the telephone – the talking box – to focus on one particular type of sound: the gendered voice associated with the telephone. The telephone, and by extension, the voice associated with it, is intimately connected to culturally constructed notions of gender, and this has been true since the phone industry encouraged such associations, which early on were extremely limiting for women. At the same time, women’s telephone use has been constitutive of modes of individual and collective empowerment that have upset these taken-for-granted norms. Drawing from interdisciplinary scholarship, this chapter presents an overview of the evolution and meaning of this gendered voice, both human and mechanical – from the practiced voices of the early “hello girls” to the female “voice” in mobile communication.

Research on how the telephonic voice has been gendered has been situated within broader historical analyses of the telephone’s development undertaken by feminist scholars (Martin 1991; Rakow 1992) or within studies of mobile phone use in an array of contexts, particularly the home and workplace (Dobashi 2005; Poster 2007; Rakow and Navarro 1993; Wajcman, Bittman, and Brown 2008). Much of this work (see in particular Frissen 1995) derives its impetus either directly or indirectly from Lana Rakow’s (1992: 1) argument that the telephone is a sight for the negotiation of “gender work,” or “social practices that create and sustain individuals as women or men” and “gendered work,” or “productive activity assigned to women.” Rakow made this assertion based on her study of women’s use of the landline telephone in a small community in the United States. In this chapter I utilize her notion of gendered/gender work to synthesize research on the gendering of the telephonic voice in diverse contexts and to show how engagement with telephony has simultaneously reinforced culturally constructed ideas regarding gender while opening up space for resistance against and transformation of such norms, particularly on the part of girls and young women.

In what follows, in order to situate my analysis, I first provide an overview of Rakow’s (1992) argument regarding the gendered and gender work of telephony. The chapter then proceeds

in two main sections. In the first, I trace the gendering of the telephonic voice in the context of labor and industry, beginning with the early female operators in the US and Canada and continuing to the present in global call centers and smartphone apps. In the second, I focus on how users of telephony have gendered the telephone in ways that have both conformed to and resisted corporate and socio-cultural norms. Of course, mobile phones allow for voice as well as text and visual data. I argue, however, that this gendered voice still prevails in a textual medium. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how social media use follows prior patterns while having the capacity to shake the durability of the gendered telephonic voice.

### **The telephonic voice and gendered/gender work**

In her influential book, *Gender on the Line*, Lana Rakow (1992) provides insight into how the telephone operated as a gendered technology among her participants in a small midwestern community in the United States. Based on six weeks of fieldwork, she found that most women did indeed talk more on the telephone than men in the community; however, contrary to popular constructions of the “chatty” female, the bulk of their talk was anything but “idle” (a word even many of the women used to describe their time on the phone). Instead, Rakow shows how the women used the telephone in the maintenance of family and community life. Discussing the mutually constitutive nature of gender and technology, she argues that differential telephone use by men and women is not merely about culturally constructed notions of gender. Rather,

the telephone is a site at which the meanings of gender are expressed and practiced. Use of the telephone by women is both gendered work – work delegated to women – and gender work – work that confirms the community’s beliefs about what are women’s natural tendencies and abilities.

*(Rakow 1992: 33)*

In other words, the reason the voice on the phone was often female was connected less to women’s “natural” affinity for talking (or gossip) and instead to women’s location in the domestic sphere, where they bore the burden of care work for family. On the other hand, men’s minimal use of the telephone was a way for them to affirm culturally constructed notions of masculinity. Men’s aversion to using what they deemed a feminized technology meant that women became “operators” of the house via the telephone – scheduling appointments, shopping, checking in on loved ones, etc. – giving the women a degree of power and control even while they maintained traditional gender roles. However, although women could use the telephone for pleasure and to transcend their limited mobility, Rakow (1992) argues that the telephone also helped reinforce the isolation of women from the public realm of power and opportunity. Although Rakow focused on landline telephone use in the mid-1980s, her notion of the gendered/gender work of telephony has had continued salience in studies of both fixed and mobile phone use, as I discuss below.

### **Inventing the operator**

When the first telephone exchanges were created, boys who had been employed in telegraph offices were brought in to operate the switchboards. However, management deemed their behavior unsuitable because they were rude to subscribers and delighted in pulling pranks such as deliberately crossing wires. A solution to such unruly boys was quickly found through hiring young women who, despite taking a job outside the private realm of the domestic home,

conformed to Victorian notions of proper femininity: they were white, US-born, and middle- or high-school educated, and they came from the middle class or those who had middle-class aspirations (Frissen 1995; Green 2001; Martin 1991). These young women were also thought to be serious, obedient, and patient, and they could be paid less. Furthermore, Kenneth Lipartito (1994) has argued that because most subscribers were upper-class men, phone companies “were not above exploiting male solicitude for the weaker sex” (Lipartito 1994: 1084). Thus, by the late 1880s the occupation of telephone operator had become gendered work in the United States, Canada, and several parts of Europe (Maddox 1977).

Because operators could be heard, but not seen, their voices became a central focus as telephone companies began constructing the “ideal” operator. As Michele Martin (1991) details in her study of the emergence of the female operator in Canada, this telephonic voice was not necessarily natural but rather was precisely shaped and disciplined in various stages. In the early development of telephony, the operator was supposed to have a pleasant voice, yet the content of her speech was not rigidly regulated, and conversations between operators and subscribers were fairly common. Operators were considered key resources, and they offered information on weather, train schedules, and sports results to subscribers who they most likely knew by name (Fischer 1992).

Once telephony started to develop as an economic enterprise, however, operators in urban areas were discouraged from talking with subscribers outside of a prescribed realm of phrases (their rural counterparts had much more freedom in this regard). In the mid-1880s more regulations were put in place, and a chief operator was installed to listen in on the operators’ interactions with customers (Maddox 1977; Martin 1991). By the turn of the 20th century, the decreasing autonomy of the operator was matched by the increasing focus on the quality of the operator’s speech. Operators were provided with standardized phrases to use with customers and standardized answers to their questions (Martin 1991). They also had to take enunciation classes and adopt a particular tone considered calming and that conveyed bourgeois norms of courtesy. The Bell Company actively produced the gender work of the operator, for example through such exhortations as, “Get the smile in your voice” (Martin 1991: 95). Summarizing this situation, Martin states (1991),

For operators, the voice itself, and not the worker as an entire being ... was the ‘agent’ representing the class, moral values, and personal characteristics of the operator.... The more mechanized the labor process became, the more impersonal was the contact between subscribers and operators, and the more important the voice.

*(Martin 1991: 92)*

Phone companies staked their success on the operator’s voice, and this voice was fetishized and objectified in the same way that visual mediums came to objectify certain female body parts. Just as the women’s bodies were invisible, their actual labor was elided in the public sphere. The gender/gendered work they performed was presented as a “labor of love” (Martin 1991: 60).

Although the phone industry constructed an extremely narrow role for operators, women who took these jobs knew they were entering into a profession that offered them a certain degree of respect and independence during a time when social mores relegated most women to the private sphere (Lipartito 1994; Mayer 2014). The work was demanding and stressful, but it also came with benefits not available in other types of employment, including meals, guaranteed breaks, athletic clubs, and other activities (Lipartito 1994; Martin 1991; Mayer 2014). For some women, the job also had the potential to fulfill fantasies of romance. This other meaning of the “labor of love” was certainly prevalent in the popular imagination, as novels and short stories

of the era frequently contained a heroine operator who met her wealthy, attractive husband because of her voice (Martin 1991: 95).

Clearly, the benefits and social mobility afforded the operators were mutually constitutive with the social exclusions upon which the idealized image of the operator was constructed. Although a common belief is that young women were hired because phone companies wanted to save money, Venus Green (2001) has argued that if that had been the case, women of color would have been chosen to fill the role. Instead, the “paternalistic racial ideology” of the telephone company managers meant that only white women could be civilized “lady” operators serving white upper- and upper-middle-class clients, and this ideology was perpetuated as telephony spread. It was indeed gendered work, but only some women could do this gender work. Early on, those with “strong ethnic accents” or those who were even assumed to have an accent based on their racial or ethnic background were prohibited from this career (Green 2001; Lipartito 1994).

The “white lady” image began to change in the United States in the late 1960s due to a combination of demographic shifts in urban areas and new federal regulations regarding equal employment opportunities. However, the hiring of substantial numbers of black women operators was not necessarily welcomed by the telephone industry or subscribers. As Green (2001) notes: “By the 1970s, for many subscribers and telephone workers, the operators’ reputation had changed from the selfless white heroine to the incompetent, lazy, rude, and undeserving ‘hardcore’ black woman” (Green 2001: 220). Bell propagated the notion of unqualified workers that they were “forced” to hire and allowed working conditions to substantially decline. Green goes on to describe customers in turn calling operators derogatory racial slurs and complaining that they were rude or did not have clear enunciation. Some also made sexual comments to them, presumably feeling license to do so because they were not “white ladies” but instead black women. Because the operators’ telephonic voice did not conform to previously taken-for-granted assumptions, they faced extreme prejudice and harassment, becoming a scapegoat for anxieties generated by larger cultural, economic, and demographic transformations. These women took such jobs because they believed it would be a form of social and financial advancement. However, at the same time that Bell was proclaiming its compliance with civil rights laws, it was moving toward a more automated system, in essence hiring African American women “into an occupation that not only paid low wages but was becoming technologically obsolete” (Green 2001: 227). Maddox (1977) notes a similar situation in Great Britain, when large numbers of immigrants from rural areas were hired by the British Post.

The shifts within the phone industry discussed by Green (2001) provide a foreshadowing of much broader transformations that would affect the voice of the operator as the world economy became more integrated and globalized. The confluence of technological developments, changing modes of economic production, and the desire on the part of industry for “flexible” labor gave rise to the global call center starting in the 1980s and 1990s. In locales ranging from western and eastern Europe, to South Asia, to parts of Africa, and the rural United States, employees in call centers follow a gendered division of labor reminiscent of the earlier US and Canadian phone industries. While males tend to be employed in IT services (with greater remuneration and opportunities for advancement), the majority of those who provide customer service are women (Belt, Richardson, and Webster 2002). Like their predecessors who served domestic customers, these women (and men) are the target of managerial control and discipline, which often focuses explicitly on the voice through scripts, training in a politeness, and exhortations to “smile” on the line (Belt, Richardson, and Webster 2000, 2002; Richardson and Marshall 1996).

In the global economy, call centers have become both a source of revenue for transnational corporations and anxiety for the employees who in turn are targeted by customers who perceive

them as “stealing” local jobs or not providing adequate service. Customers have no way of knowing where the person with whom they are speaking is except to concentrate on the voice – the phrasing, pitch, enunciation, pronunciation, etc. The fixation on the voice is so strong that in several global call centers, employees are trained to fake an American accent, even when their native language is English. In India, for example, call center employees, both male and female, are forced not only to adopt an American accent, but also to take on a whole new personality complete with an American name and hobbies (Poster 2007).

Call centers are associated with fixed-line telephony, yet in the age of mobile media and smartphones, the gendered/gender work of the female telephonic voice has found a new form in personal assistant applications such as the iPhone’s Siri. Originally available on Apple’s App Store, Siri was built into the iPhone beginning with the 4S in 2011. Users can ask Siri for help with everything from finding a restaurant to reciting the lyrics of a pop song. Although Siri will deny having a gender if asked, it is not incidental that the original version of Siri in the United States (and other countries such as Australia) had a female voice (though now users are allowed to choose voices). The voices for Amazon’s Echo, Microsoft’s Cortana, and other personal assistants are also female. Research into computer human interaction in the US has found that both men and women find female voices to be more pleasant (Griggs 2011). They are also thought to be helpful, particularly if the topic concerns relationships or care work, while male voices are thought to be more authoritative, especially regarding technical topics (Nass 2010). Such findings confirm longstanding, culturally constructed ideas regarding the “proper” tone of women’s voices. The telephone industry has constructed and capitalized on such notions, from the voice of the “hello girls,” to the global feminization of telephonic service work, to the female voice of Siri and other digital assistants.

### **Shaping the voice of the subscriber**

The gendered and gender work just discussed in relation to telephone operators is no less evident when examining the telephonic voice of subscribers. However, although early on the industry constructed a masculine telephonic voice, women actively shaped what came to be predominant uses of telephony. Moreover, the gendered patterns later associated with the landline (discussed below with a focus on western contexts) have been multiplied but also transformed with the global spread of mobile communication.

When the telephone first began to diffuse, it was only affordable to relatively elite members of society. Despite most subscribers’ social standing, however, a “high-class” technology quickly became associated with “low-class” behaviors – shouting, cursing, and mumbling. Thus, in the eyes of the telephone companies, just as the ideal operator had to be shaped and disciplined, so too did the ideal subscriber. Although some training focused on the technical aspects of telephony, such as how to call the operator, the majority focused on telephone etiquette that related directly to the voice – clear enunciation, a pleasant tone, proper volume, and polite language (Fischer 1992; Martin 1991; Rakow 1992). Michele Martin (1991: 134) notes that even the ubiquitous “Hello” was initially seen as rude (“Are you there?” was more appropriate).

Just as phone companies sought to shape the subscriber’s voice to align with notions of Victorian propriety, they also had a narrow view of who that subscriber should be: namely white, male, and elite. The telephone was gendered masculine in advertisements that portrayed it as a tool for business that enabled a “Multiplication of Power” and “The Voice of Success” for the “Man for the Moment” (Fischer 1992). When residential service was first advertised, the emphasis was similarly on business, with the businessman’s wife portrayed as an efficient household manager thanks to the telephone (though ad copy stressed that women should obtain



their husband's consent in obtaining a phone) (Fischer, 1992). By the turn of the century, as housewives were increasingly targeted in ad campaigns, the focus was still on utilitarian uses such as shopping or to reduce labor and drudgery. Only after the 1920s, and particularly after the Depression, was the phone marketed as a way to enrich relationships or alleviate loneliness (Fischer 1992; Frissen 1995; Martin 1991).

Despite the industry's narrow conception of telephony, several scholars have shown that women ignored such strictures and were instrumental in transforming the meaning of the telephone. When women's voices began to occupy the telephone, however, there were numerous complaints and resistance to their "chattiness," "frivolous" uses, and "idle" talk (Fischer 1992; Martin 1991; Marvin 1988). Rural women in particular were stereotyped as gossips and eavesdroppers on party lines, the primary mechanism of early rural telephony. For example, in a letter to a Kansas newspaper in 1911, a man wrote that "when two old windy sisters on a party line once get astraddle of the wire, nothing short of re-enforced lightning will ever shake 'em loose under an hour" (Kline 2000: 45). Such sentiments were common in newspapers and magazines of the time and later in early films.

The gender and gendered work of telephony is revealed both in its early masculine construction as a tool for productive labor and women's use of the phone for undertaking uncompensated reproductive labor. Importantly, Rakow (1992) shows how the women in her study made a distinction between "visiting," which "creates and maintains the relationships upon which families and communities are built," (Rakow 1992: 37) and "gossiping," which is "idle" or "selfish" (41). Researching Australian women's use of the telephone, Ann Moyal (1995) also found that "'kinkeeping' floods the lines" (289). Similarly, Brenda Maddox (1977) cites a 1970 survey of 31 American women (most were married) in which they connect their telephone use largely to domestic duties, even using the phone receiver as an early DIY baby monitor while at a neighbor's house. Studies from Canada, France, and England have also revealed that women were more likely to talk on the phone than men (Claisse and Rowe 1987; Fischer, 1992; Frissen 1995; Smoreda and Licoppe 2000). Thus, Martin (1991) attributes the shift in industry attitudes towards sociability via the telephone to women's practices. Several scholars have also noted how the ability to communicate orally without visual cues allows for a certain type of intimacy that differs from (and can be easier for some than) face-to-face communication, and that women were more likely to appreciate this aspect (Moyal 1995; Rakow 1992).

It was not just grown women who came to be most associated with talking on the telephone and who appreciated the intimacy it afforded. Mary Celeste Kearney (2005) has shown that as the telephone diffused more broadly across the US after World War II, the white, suburban "chatty" girl monopolizing the family phone was a common trope in fiction and non-fiction popular writing. According to Kearney, middle-class teenage girls "challenged the traditional dynamics of private and public spheres by deprivileging the domestic roles and practices associated with members of their sex in favor of non-domestic roles and practices associated with members of their generation" (Kearney 2005: 584). In photo essays in publications like *Life* magazine, girls are described as engaging in "gab fests" and "jabbering into the phone" (Kearney 2005: 584), much to the consternation of parents, especially fathers who wanted to use the phone for business. Rakow (1992: 35) relates how people in the community she researched thought that young women were constantly on the phone. A young woman told her, "Girls *talk* on the telephone, guys say what they have to say and get off. Girls are different. That's the way girls are" (italics in original).

The counterpoint to this audible telephonic voice is, of course, the inaudible voice at the other end of the line and the anxieties it engenders. In the early days of telephony, long before the girls who were the subject of Kearney's (2005) analysis territorialized the phone lines, there was particular fear that daughters would enter into "irregular associations" (Marvin 1988: 79).

Similarly, in the media that Kearney surveyed, parents of teenaged boys did not have a problem with their use of the phone; however, when their teenaged girls called boys there was disapproval (this was true in Rakow's community in the 1980s as well). Girls were seen as violating social norms of proper behavior and evading parents' supervisory role. When parents were present or tried to clandestinely eavesdrop, girls would use their own secret telephonic language to keep their conversations private. Nonetheless, even with the girls' tactic, the phone enabled anxious parents to contain their daughters in the safety of the domestic sphere (Kearney 2005: 1355).

Such gendering of the telephonic voice has been heightened, but also broken down, with the global diffusion of mobile telephony, as evidence from a wide range of geographical locales and among diverse populations suggests. Leopoldina Fortunati (2009) has argued that we should understand the gendered and generational uses of mobile phones in terms of the mobile's linkage to immaterial labor, primarily the domain of women, and which includes communication and emotional labor for "interaction, affects, love, [and] sex" (Fortunati 2009: 31). At the same time, mobile phones have particular affordances, such as text messaging, that have enabled new practices that both affirm and challenge prior notions of the gendered voice on the line. The literature on gender and mobile telephony has become quite vast, but the following discussion focuses on themes that reveal the durability, but also the flexibility, of the gendered telephonic voice: mothering/reproduction; intimacy; and the (dis)empowerment of adolescent girls and young women.

First, however, to speak of the gendered mobile "voice" requires a brief qualification. Questions have arisen as to whether and how much mobile messaging resembles speech or written language, and though a fine-grained analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter, a simple answer is that it appears to resemble aspects of both. Pertinent to this discussion is that text messaging is speech-like in its immediacy, interactivity, and degree (or lack) of formality (Ling, Baron, Lenhart and Campbell 2005). Although a text is ostensibly inaudible, there is nonetheless a textual voice, as evidenced by the extensive ways that users (especially teens and young adults) try to insert their "voice" into their texts through such strategies as omitting final punctuation, avoiding capital letters, adding extra letters (for example, "heyyy"), and inserting emojis so as not to sound short or rude (Ling et al. 2014). Moreover, people speak of being able to "hear" their interlocutor's voice in a text message (Hjorth 2011). In much of the research discussed below, the authors often do not distinguish voice calls versus text messages, and with applications such as Siri, this blurring has only increased.

The mobile phone, like the landline before it, was initially marketed to relatively elite businessmen, who made up the majority of early adopters globally. Despite such intentional marketing, when early survey results of US mobile use were published, headlines played upon the seeming reversal of previous gender stereotypes by announcing, for example, that guys "gabbed" more (Cingular 2003). Upon closer inspection, such surveys revealed that men were using mobile phones for work obligations (or as status symbols), thus maintaining earlier associations with telephony as a male tool for business. Nonetheless, many surmised that the mobile phone was a technology that potentially blurred the previously taken-for-granted association between masculinity and technology. For example, Lemish and Cohen (2007) argued that Israeli men and women characterized the role of the mobile phone in their lives in very gendered language, yet their actual practices did not manifest such large differences.

Despite the possibility of the mobile phone disrupting the gender and gendered work noted earlier, research examining women and care work has found that mobile phone use confirms and exacerbates previous patterns. In one of the earliest studies, Rakow and Navarro (1993) observed that mobile phones enable "remote mothering," meaning that middle- and upper-class women who were early adopters of mobile telephony in the US used their mobile phones to handle domestic responsibilities related to caregiving. Women were working "parallel shifts," with family matters often bleeding into work hours via the mobile phone, while men used the



phone as “an extension of the public world” (Rakow and Navarro 1993: 155). Chesley (2005) also found that women experience more “family-work spillover,” and Wajcman, Bittman, and Brown (2008) noted that men’s mobile voice is often for more instrumental purposes. Indeed, women’s use of mobile phones for carrying out domestic caregiving has been observed in a wide range of locales (Dobashi 2005; Lim and Soon 2010). In transnational contexts as well, mothers working abroad use mobile phones for what Madianou and Miller (2013) call “intensive mothering,” often much more so than fathers (Parreñas 2005). Summarizing these phenomena, Lim (2014) argues that mobile phones have not alleviated women’s burden of “double work.”

If remote or intensive mothering has been portrayed as sometimes adding strain to women already juggling work and home, it also gestures to a positive feature of the gender/gendered work associated with mobile telephony; that is, how mobile phones, like the landline before, amplify relational intimacy. For men and women, the mobile phone is a personal technology, often carried on the body and carrying inside intimate details of one’s life. However, as Hjorth and Lim (2012) argue, “mobile intimacy,” or the “*overlaying of material-geographic and electronic-social*” (italics in the original) has seemed to be inordinately linked to women. This intimacy has been observed between mothers and daughters (Wajcman, Bittman, and Brown 2008; Tacchi, Kitner, and Crawford 2012) and grandmothers and grandchildren (Sawchuk and Crow 2012), and among women and their intimate partners (Hjorth 2011).

Compared to adult women, in the lives of female adolescents and young women the linkage between mobile communication and gendered/gender work is more ambiguous. On the one hand, studies have found that girls emphasize the interactivity of mobile phones, and they are more likely to have longer conversations and send longer text messages than boys (Oksman and Rautiainen 2003; Ling et al. 2014). Moreover, among teens and young adults of diverse ethnic, religious, socio-economic, and geographic backgrounds, the stereotype of the “chatty” female persists (Green and Singleton 2007; Wallis 2013). On the other hand, scholars have observed that girls and young women feel empowered to use mobile phones to break down gender stereotypes (Ellwood-Clayton 2003; Hijazi-Omari and Ribak 2008; Wallis 2013). For example, mobile phones enable young Chinese migrant women – culturally constructed as “not knowing how to talk” – to have a voice, and they, as well as Palestinian girls in Israel, use phones to autonomously forge intimate and sexual relationships outside the purview of parents and in defiance of conventional gender norms (Hijazi-Omari and Ribak 2008; Wallis 2013). Within these same relationships, however, phones can be disempowering when used by intimate partners for surveillance and control. Among adolescents worldwide, one of the more recent practices that blurs issues of intimacy, empowerment, and control (as well as voice and image) is sexting. Statistics reveal that boys and girls participate nearly equally, yet girls are more likely to be victims of non-consensual sharing of images and the social shaming that accompanies the fallout (Hasinoff 2012).

## Conclusion

Since the landline telephone was introduced, the gendered telephonic voice has taken on distinct meanings as a result of particular values, norms, and ideologies. This chapter has presented an overview of how this gendered voice is linked to social constructions of masculinity and femininity as well as work that is gender delineated. Such gendering has been prevalent in industry and among everyday users of telephony. In the landline era, the telephone was linked to productive and reproductive work that reinforced women’s role as the predominant providers of service and care. Although teenaged girls used the telephone in ways that resisted some of these prescribed roles, their emphasis on telephony and interpersonal communication nonetheless conformed to dominant notions of gender. In the mobile era, these same patterns emerged;

that is, mobile telephony has been used in ways that affirm and challenge prior notions of the gendered voice on the line. Although western contexts were the focus of scholarly literature on the landline (in line with its pattern of diffusion), studies of mobile telephony have been global from the start. This latter body of scholarship reveals how the gendered telephonic voice has had resilience even while emerging from distinct socio-cultural contexts.

In this chapter, I used an expansive definition of “voice” in analysing gendered/gender work via mobile phones. Now, with the predominance of social media and image-based digital culture, this gendered “voice” still underlies such usage. In many settings, girls and young women have been found to be the most active users of various types of social media and the users most involved in creating content (Vermeren 2015). This, too, is a double-edged sword as it allows recurring themes of reproductive labor associated with telephony – emotional labor, relationship maintenance, intimacy, sexual exploration – that can be nurturing and empowering but also exhausting and disempowering. How to promote the former is still a topic ripe for further exploration.

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