



Article

Decolonizing the pocket monster: Smartphones, Pokémon Go and generational conflict in Malaysian Borneo

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Abstract

This article analyzes the generational politics of smartphones in the Malaysian state of Sarawak in the context of Bornean history and contemporary Sarawakian political economy. We respond to a global north bias in the standing literature on smartphone media and suggest approaches to improve representation of global south perspectives. Concretely, we propose three programmatic maxims as a methodological guide to incorporate perspectives and concerns from the global south more fully. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in Sarawak, we demonstrate the value of these suggestions by framing smartphones in the perspective of Bornean history as tools for maintaining instrumental social networks more than exchanging information across spatial disjunction. These tools are used differently by young urbanites and older rural populations. This leads us to show how Pokémon Go refracts generational conflicts by becoming the cultural touchstone of the changing political economic conditions of Malaysian urbanization.

Keywords

Borneo, critical development studies, decolonial methodology, decolonial theory, generational conflict, Malaysia, Pokémon, political economy, Sarawak, smartphone

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Introduction

Smartphone applications' (apps) are at the center of key contemporary social conflicts. Consider how various transport, shopping and delivery apps mediate new modes of exploitative labor relations (Minchin, 2020). Yet, how to research these smartphone centered social conflicts without overprioritizing the concerns and assumptions of the global north remains profoundly challenging (Van Doorn, 2013). In this article, we draw on long-term ethnographic commitments in the Malaysian state of Sarawak to demonstrate how to improve smartphone research's receptivity to concerns from the global south.

The literature on smartphones has developed quickly and now spans complex discussions across multiple interrelated domains of political discourse (Aziz, 2022), spatiality (Van Doorn, 2013) and social connectivity (Jin and Park, 2013) as they intersect in the sociotechnical construct of smartphones. Social scientific research on smartphones thus converges in a complex interdisciplinary space where highly technical features of smartphones and quantitative surveys (Amez et al., 2023; Sumter and Vandenbosch, 2019) are brought into difficult dialogues with ethnographic (Soriano et al., 2019), philosophical (Wilson and Thang, 2007) and qualitative methodologies (Hjorth, 2008). We align ourselves with the qualitative and ethnographic approach (Hjorth and Chan, 2009; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020) to build upon hermeneutically and contextually oriented research on smartphones that have foregrounded smartphones as sites of complex social interaction and catalysts of social discontent (Carolus et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2021). Though this work attends conscientiously to smartphones as impactful technologies we agree with critical hermeneutic scholarship that these approaches often fail to consider the concerns of globally marginalized people (Waltorp, 2020; Watkins et al., 2012). Considering the distinct concerns of smartphone users in the global south adds important breadth of perspective to our understanding of how these devices are used by depicting their place in meaning making and politics through such diverse complications as managing urban noise in Ghana and visualizing mining protests in Colombia (Ben Elul, 2021; Specht and Ros-Tonen, 2017). But beyond expanding the variety of experiences considered, we argue that by rigorously analyzing experiences from postcolonial places like Sarawak we can reconsider seemingly fundamental aspects of technologies such as smartphone media.

These complexities of smartphone usage and media in the global south are well illuminated via the social and political ramifications of Pokémon Go. Hjorth & Richardson articulate the unique value of studying Pokémon Go which, "sits at the nexus of several technological and cultural trajectories." (Hjorth and Richardson, 2017: 5). Such trajectories include game design, digitalization of space, augmented reality, digital performativity and the politics of the digital as part of people's lifeworlds (Hjorth and Richardson, 2017: 5–6). While Hjorth and Richardson importantly foreground how Pokémon Go connects a variety of social domains through a singular constellation of media and technology, our analysis instead focuses on the specific confluence of Malaysian urbanization and the history of Japanese occupation which leads Pokémon Go to heighten rural-urban intergenerational and economic differences in Sarawak. We thus join critical scholars in emphasizing Pokémon Go's intersection with generational politics and political economy (Evans and Saker, 2019; Frith, 2017; Laor et al., 2022). As we will show,