

WAP Age Verification: Adult Content on Your Phone

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes research and activities relating to the consumption of adult content in a mobile context. It also captures insights relating to the WAP Age Verification process at O2, one of the leading mobile operators in the UK.

As consumers of adult content on mobile phones are now required to verify their age, this paper delves into the motivational, contextual and practical aspects of this process. This paper concludes with recommendation for both the research approach and the usability aspects of the Age Verification process.

Keywords

WAP, mobile HCI, Adult Protected Content, Mobile Pornography, Mobile Usability, Age Verification.

1. INTRODUCTION

The availability of mobile devices with enhanced features such as colour screens, picture messaging, video cameras and internet browsers as well as the growing variety of content, has led the need to set measures in order to protect children under the age of 18 from unsuitable content.

Analysts expect spending on adult content for cell phones to top \$1 billion (777 million euros) world – wide by the end of 2005 [1]. This figure is expected to be as high as \$5 billion in 5 years. Cultural attitudes towards pornography and nudity have led mobile operators around the world to take different approaches towards this market potential.

Mobile operators in the UK have adopted a Code of Conduct requiring them to control access to adult content as of the beginning of 2005. The intention of this code is that parents and carers should have the ability to restrict children's access only to suitable content.

The code covers various types of content, including visual content, online gambling, mobile gaming, chat rooms and Internet access [4].

Following the adoption of this code at the beginning of the year, O2 customers attempting to browse to age restricted content sites for the first time are directed to an Age Verification WAP site. As there are no identification cards in the United Kingdom, credit cards are one of the few means that may be used to verify that a person is over 18. In this site customers are asked to enter their name, postcode, and credit card details. This data is then used to verify their age in order to determine whether they may gain access to adult content.

The following case study summarizes the pre-launch studies as well as the findings of the research performed to understand user behaviour in this context.

2. PRE-LAUNCH RESEARCH

A number of months prior to the deployment of adult protection measures for WAP access, qualitative research was conducted to gauge the level of interest in mobile adult content, entry barriers and related issues. Four focus group sessions were conducted with a mix of O2 and competitor pre-pay and post-pay mobile users (8-10 participants per group). Participants were grouped on the basis of their use of adult content, age, family status (specifically children at home) and other internal marketing segmentation criteria.

Findings suggest that all participants perceived that 'adult content' referred to 'visual' pornography without making an immediate association with gambling or other services such as premium chat. All participants were united in regarding protection of children from exposure to content of this nature as crucial.

Of the adult participants that had children, two thirds had Internet restrictions on their home computers. Safety and protection of children were the main worry for parents, going beyond the basic exposure to adult content (they were more concerned about chat rooms).

In two other focus groups looking at areas of interest and for WAP portals, participants said they did not expect mobile operators such as O2 to have explicit adult content categories on their portals. Most of the participants also mentioned that they would not see a need to allow access to this type of content from their mobiles. These findings suggest that a unique research methodology would be required to study this domain, as the social taboo surrounding pornography might be skewing results.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

As part of the adoption of the Code of Conduct by O2, an Age Verification process was introduced at the beginning of 2005, requiring customers that wish to access adult rated content via WAP to verify that they are over 18. 130,000 customers attempted to view adult classified content within the first two months from launch. It was found that over 90% of the customers chose not to attempt Age Verification. 63% of those who attempted to go through this process failed. Though it is apparent that there are several reasons contributing to these values (such as under aged individuals attempting to access content, 'occasional browsers' that had no intention to consume adult content etc.) it was necessary to validate that there were no usability issues preventing

customers from completing the Age Verification process.

This study attempted to explore how WAP adult content users view this process and whether they perceive it as a barrier that would prevent them from accessing adult services. This study was also used to gather some qualitative insights relating to the context of use and consumption of mobile adult content.

4. THE WAP AGE VERIFICATION

The WAP Age Verification process is triggered when customers attempt to view adult content for the first time from a mobile handset. When attempting to access an adult rated page, customers are redirected to a page in which the operator explains that their age must be first verified, using their credit card details, before accessing the premium content. When approved they are directed back to the original content they were attempting to access. Customers failing this process may not access adult content as of that point.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Participants

8 men aged 18-38, all O2 customers using various handsets were interviewed. All of the participants used WAP on a daily, monthly or weekly basis. 5 of the participants accessed adult services very occasionally, one did so on a weekly basis, another on a monthly basis while the last participant had never accessed these types of services from his phone.

5.2 Setting the Scene for Interviews

It was assumed that both cultural issues relating to pornography as well as usability issues may be influencing user behaviour, therefore it was determined that personal interviews would be the most appropriate method to collect customer feedback.

The interviews were conducted by a young male in a relaxed setting. The sessions took place in an office room, which was set up as a living room (including arm chairs, a coffee table and a television) during the evening. The room did not have a one-sided mirror like typical usability testing laboratories, and for privacy reasons participants were not filmed or viewed during sessions. Voice was recorded during the interviews, and later when the usability test was conducted, the interaction was filmed.

Prior to the actual interview the moderator engaged in 'small talk' to help the participants feel comfortable. Interviews were conducted in an open-ended exploratory manner [2, 3]. The participants were asked some personal questions, and their attitude towards pornography as well as their typical consumption context. The interviews covered the experiences participants had using WAP and particularly adult content.

It was anticipated that due to the nature of this topic, participants might need to be encouraged to share their views. The exploratory interview allowed the moderator the freedom to delve into issues that the user seemed to feel comfortable discussing. In some cases the moderator had used hypothesis questioning to allow the user to disagree with or support a concept rather than bring it up. This was used to introduce issues like social acceptance into the

conversation.

Participants were asked whether they were familiar with the Age Verification concept and how they perceived it. They then went through the actual WAP process and were encouraged to 'think aloud' (Protocol Analysis). This part of the session was dedicated to usability testing and attempted to gauge the reason 63% fail to complete the process.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Accessing Adult Content on Mobiles

Participants mentioned a variety of contexts in which they consumed mobile adult content. One participant was a student with limited internet access. Another worked night shifts and found these services as a means of passing time during quiet shifts or boring meetings. Some participants mentioned they used these services in a wider social environment, while they went out with friends at night.

The different context of use also imposed on their willingness to enter credit card details. The participant who used the service while at boring meetings felt too indiscrete to be seen entering credit card details in this context, but might do so while at night shift. On the other hand, participants that used the service in a social context did not mind entering their credit card details.

One of the participants was accessing the adult content in social context with friends, but being a father, was mostly worried about his children having access to the content the next day. Some participants had less motivation to go through the process. They mentioned that they would feel more comfortable going through the process once re-assured by O2 that their details would not be provided to third parties. This was true especially in cases where content was previously purchased from an unreliable party and did not actually get delivered. These 'border-line' users were also more receptive to incentives like free downloads, or alternatively stated that they would only go through the process if the target site was highly recommended by a friend.

6.2 The WAP Age Verification Landing Page

During the interview all participants accepted that there is a need for their age to be verified. Later in the session, once directed to the Age Verification landing page, some users were reluctant to go through the process. The fact that they were required to put in their credit card details put off most participants. They found it difficult to understand why they had to enter personal details that O2 already has. The re-direction from the desired content page to the landing page confused some users and led them to believe that the content provider is asking for their credit card details.

The readability of text and tone of voice on this page were not found to be satisfactory. Customers did not understand why 'Safety' was mentioned in this context. This could be a contributing factor to the fact that 90% of customers do not attempt to start the process. In addition, alternative ways to verify age were recommended by the users, and were to be added to the page footer with a link back to the O2 Web Age Verification landing page. It was also determined that cross-selling via a link to softer content on the O2 WAP portal ('O2 Celebs and Babes') was not appropriate.

The following figure demonstrates the changes made to the Age Verification landing page, including the different links.

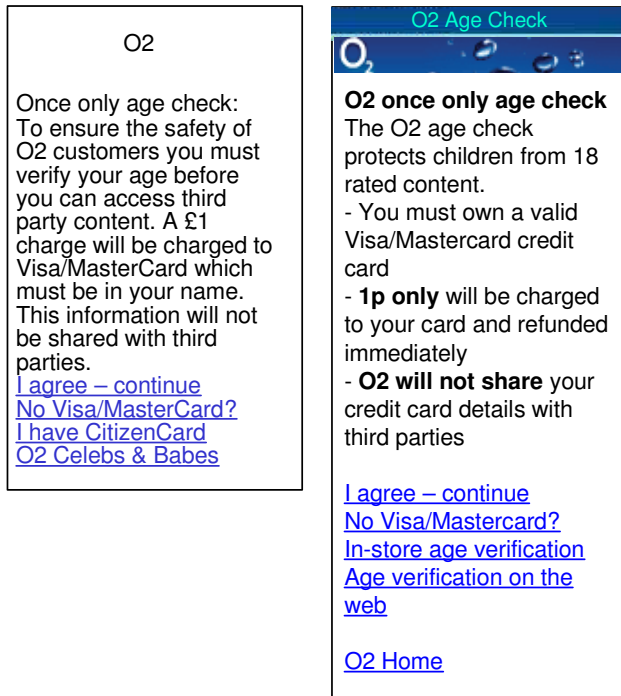


Figure 1 Original (left) and Post Study (right) Landing Pages

6.3 The WAP Age Verification Process

Completing the data entry pages following the initial landing page (name, postcode, and credit card details) seems to be reasonably clear to participants. However, this is probably subject to the specific user group, which is young and familiar with text entry and the use of WAP.

The interface did not allow users that had previously failed the Age Verification process (at any time) to retry going through it. It also did not provide a clear confirmation of success. When customers successfully completed the Age Verification process they were immediately redirected to the adult content site they wished to access originally, leaving them confused regarding the security of their credit card details.

When failing, they were instructed to access directory on the O2 Web portal (using their PC).

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance readability, it was recommended to use bullets and a bold font face to highlight key words on the landing page. It was determined that instead of mentioning ‘safety’, customers should rather be reminded of the social responsibility to protect young people from certain types of content. To increase trust and willingness to provide credit card information, it was recommended to clearly brand the landing page and state that O2 will guard these details.

It was also recommended to add some messages to the flow to assure that feedback is provided upon successful completion or failure of the process. It was recommended to allow customers that had failed the process to verify their age on the Web.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Although the consumption of adult content is a sensitive issue in the UK, revenues suggest that this is a growing business. Therefore, there is need for further research in this domain.

As social acceptance is in the bases of this research, the process should be extremely sensitive as well as exploratory so that conclusions may be drawn regarding the context and motivation for adult content consumption on mobile phones. Further research and methodologies should use these findings as a starting point and delve deeper into the techno-social aspects and possible benefits of the use of mobile phones in this context. However, the social acceptance of discussing pornography with a stranger will be a factor in any future research.

9. REFERENCES

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