




# Validation of mobile phone use recall in the multinational MOBI-kids study

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## Abstract

Potential differential and non-differential recall error in mobile phone use (MPU) in the multinational MOBI-Kids case-control study were evaluated. We compared self-reported MPU with network operator billing record data

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up to 3 months, 1 year, and 2 years before the interview date from 702 subjects aged between 10 and 24 years in eight countries. Spearman rank correlations, Kappa coefficients and geometric mean ratios (GMRs) were used. No material differences in MPU recall estimates between cases and controls were observed. The Spearman rank correlation coefficients between self-reported and recorded MPU in the most recent 3 months were 0.57 and 0.59 for call number and for call duration, respectively. The number of calls was on average underestimated by the participants (GMR = 0.69), while the duration of calls was overestimated (GMR = 1.59). Country, years since start of using a mobile phone, age at time of interview, and sex did not appear to influence recall accuracy for either call number or call duration. A trend in recall error was seen with level of self-reported MPU, with underestimation of use at lower levels and overestimation of use at higher levels for both number and duration of calls. Although both systematic and random errors in self-reported MPU among participants were observed, there was no evidence of differential recall error between cases and controls. Nonetheless, these sources of exposure measurement error warrant consideration in interpretation of the MOBI-Kids case-control study results on the association between children's use of mobile phones and potential brain cancer risk.

### KEYWORDS

brain tumor, children, mobile phone use, recall bias, validation study

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2011, radiofrequency (RF) fields were classified as possibly carcinogenic to humans (IARC classification 2B) by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (International Agency for Research on Cancer IARC, 2013). In 2015, the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCE-NIHR) published their final opinion on potential health effects of exposure to electromagnetic fields, concluding that studies do not show an increased risk of brain tumors, while noting the gaps in terms of objective exposure monitoring for longer term exposures (SCE-NIHR, 2015). The classification was based on findings in adults, who were the main focus of studies involving RF fields and health outcomes at the time. Concern regarding potential health effects of RF fields exposure in children and adolescents pertains to the rapid increase in mobile phone use in younger age groups, who have longer lifetime exposure, potentially increased sensitivity due to a developing neurological system, and higher specific absorption rate (SAR) in the most highly exposed parts of the brain compared to adults due to their thinner skull and ears (Wiat et al.,

### Highlights

- Self-reported and operator-registered phone calls were compared among MobiKids participants.
- On average, number of calls was underestimated, and duration overestimated.
- No differential recall error was found between brain tumor cases and controls in MobiKids.

2011). Both national and international research bodies have recommended RF exposure from mobile phones in children and adolescents as a high priority research area (Kheifets, 2005; World Health Organization, 2010). The MOBI-Kids study was designed to address concerns about a possible association between the carcinogenic effect of mobile phone use among children and young adults and brain cancer risk (Sadetzki et al., 2014). The MOBI-Kids study builds upon the methodology of the INTERPHONE study, a multinational collaboration which investigated

associations between mobile phone use and multiple types of brain tumors in adults (Cardis et al., 2007).

The main results from the MOBI-Kids study provided no evidence of a relationship between wireless phone use and the risk of brain tumors in young people (Castaño-Vinyals et al., 2022). Reliability and accuracy of risk estimation in studies on mobile phones depends on the quality of the exposure ascertainment, which is most often based on self-reported mobile phone use. It is therefore important to understand and characterize the ability of participants to validly and precisely recall their mobile phone use (MPU). Errors in a participants' MPU recall may be non-differential (i.e., the same for both cases and controls), leading to increased uncertainty and under- or overestimation of risk estimates. There can also be differential recall errors, where cases may recall mobile phone use patterns differently from controls for various reasons, possibly because either they have more trouble remembering details or they may over-report past exposures in an effort to explain their disease. The effect of differential error on risk estimates are often difficult to predict (Vrijheid et al., 2009).

The MOBI-Kids study included two MPU validation efforts. The first was the prospective MOBI-Expo validation study, which compared MPU information gathered using software-modified smartphones to self-reported MPU at several time points, and found that young people can recall MPU moderately well, with recall depending on the amount of phone use (Goedhart et al., 2018). As this study only included healthy subjects, it could not provide information on potential differential recall errors between brain tumor cases and controls. The second validation study, a retrospective effort comparing self-reported MPU of consenting subjects to their phone records obtained from mobile network operators, is described here. The aim of this study was to compare the accuracy of MPU reporting of cases having a primary brain tumor with that of controls who underwent an appendectomy, with recall for three time periods: up to 3 months, 1 year, and 2 years preceding the MPU interview, providing insight into patterns of non-differential or differential recall error. The effects of various demographic variables and of the amount of phone usage on MPU recall are also investigated.

## 2 | METHODS

The multinational MOBI-Kids study, in which this retrospective validation study is nested, recruited participants from May 2010 to March 2016 within 14 participating countries. All males and females from 10 to 24 years of age within the study regions with a confirmed diagnosis of an eligible first primary brain tumor during the study period were included in the

target population (Sadetzki et al., 2014). Both benign and malignant tumors originating in those parts of the brain likely to experience the highest RF-EMF exposure from mobile phones were included, with midline tumors excluded. Cases not speaking the study language within their country/region or having a known genetic syndrome related to brain tumors were excluded (Sadetzki et al., 2014). Cases were identified from appropriate hospital departments. For each case, two hospital-based controls (receiving an appendectomy for suspected appendicitis) were selected, matched on age, sex, date of surgery/interview, and geographic area of residence. Included subjects were interviewed to ascertain their lifetime self-reported MPU and were asked to provide informed consent to obtain MPU information from their mobile phone network operator. Case interviews took place within 12 months of their date of diagnosis; control interviews were scheduled within 12 months of the matched case's interview. The study design was approved by the Institutional Review Boards in each country and all participants provided their informed consent. Further details of the MOBI-Kids study recruitment procedures can be found elsewhere (Sadetzki et al., 2014).

### 2.1 | Validation study population

Participants from the main MOBI-kids study were included in the validation study population based on their billing record data availability. In detail, a total of 844 subjects (30% of total subjects in MOBI-Kids) consented to obtain their billing record data for validation of self-reported mobile phone utilization. Billing record data was available for 806 subjects, of which 781 also had self-reported MPU data. As an overlap between available operator data and interview data of at least one of 3 months preceding the interview was required, subjects who did not have operator data available in any of the 3 months preceding the interview were excluded. This resulted in a total of 702 subjects remaining for inclusion in this validation study (24.8% of all MOBI-Kids subjects) (Supporting Information: Figure SF1). In addition to the main analysis with subjects who had data in the 3 months preceding the interview, subsets of subjects with operator data available for the entire year preceding the interview ( $N=357$ ) and 2 years of operator data available preceding the interview ( $N=104$ ) were investigated.

### 2.2 | Self-reported mobile phone use

Subjects were administered a detailed questionnaire by trained interviewers. This included questions regarding the type of mobile phone, the network operator, and their MPU including both voice and data. Subjects were

asked about the number and duration of calls for multiple time periods: at the beginning of using a mobile phone, current use (i.e., last 3 months preceding the interview), and changes in between. Subjects (or their legal guardian, as appropriate) were asked whether they agreed to take part in the operator data validation study. Those who agreed signed an informed consent form authorizing the operators to provide their phone use data for the purpose of the study and listed the time periods in which they used different phone numbers and network operators. In addition, interviewers reported how they perceived the responsiveness of subjects during the interview, with a score ranging from “not at all (uninterested, reticent),” “fairly co-operative and responsive,” to “very co-operative, responsive and interested.”

## 2.3 | Recorded mobile phone use (operator data)

Study centers contacted mobile phone operators in participating countries, informed them of the study and asked for their collaboration. The data that could be obtained from records of consenting study participants and the length of time covered by records varied by operator and country for legal and logistic reasons. Phone calls in operator records were recorded in both number and duration of calls (in minutes) per month. This information was either separated into incoming calls and outgoing calls or presented as a sum of both incoming and outgoing calls, depending on the network operator involved.

## 2.4 | Statistical analysis

Two MPU indicators were included in the analyses: the number and the duration (in minutes) of calls per month. The comparison of self-reported and recorded MPU was conducted separately for the number and duration (in minutes) of calls in the 3 months preceding the date of interview. In addition, a subset of subjects who had data available for 1 year, and a subset for 2 years preceding the date of interview were assessed. Incoming and outgoing calls were summed to represent all calls per month of available data.

For 67 subjects (9.6%), at least one month of operator data had partial missing information on either incoming or outgoing calls (e.g., only incoming number of calls was recorded, with missing information on the outgoing number of calls that month). For these months, missing information was imputed (100 times), drawing values from the expected value with corresponding variance, based on a mixed model that modelled the number of calls or duration of calls per month as the dependent variable and modelled type of

call (i.e., incoming or outgoing), age and gender (both as interaction term with type of call) as independent variables. The model included random nested intercepts for individuals and country and used a heterogeneous compound symmetry structure for covariance to consider the similarity in measures within the same person over time. Months where information on incoming and outgoing calls was entirely missing for number of and/or duration of calls, were excluded.

For some subjects, information on number and duration of calls for one ( $N = 122$ ; 17.5%) or two ( $N = 30$ ; 4.3%) months of operator data in the 3 months preceding the interview was missing. In these cases, the average of the available month(s) in the 3-month time window was taken as the MPU in the missing month(s). The distributions of the number and duration of calls were skewed and therefore Spearman rank-order correlation coefficients on the natural scale and a kappa-statistic on categorized variables (i.e., quintiles of MPU in control group) were used to assess the agreement between the self-reported and the operator-recorded MPU.

As both the Spearman and kappa-statistic do not provide information on the amount of over- or under-reporting the geometric mean ratio (GMR) of self-reported and recorded MPU values was used for this purpose. The GMR was calculated by taking the exponent of the mean of the logarithms of all self-reported MPU to recorded MPU ratios. A corresponding standard error of the mean was calculated by non-parametric bootstrapping, which in turn was used to calculate a 95% confidence interval for the GMR. The ratio represents the level of underestimation ( $GMR < 1$ ) or overestimation ( $GMR > 1$ ) of MPU, while the variance provides information on the random error in recall. Bland-Altman plots showing the ratio of self-reported to recorded MPU (log-transformed) against mean self-reported and recorded MPU (log-transformed) were used to further illustrate the relationship of recalled to recorded MPU, with the limits of agreement providing a graphical representation of the random error.

Two sensitivity analyses were performed by (1) excluding all participants who scored 1 or 2 (not at all interested; fairly co-operative and responsive) on the interview responsiveness score, and (2) excluding all participants with any missing data (either on questionnaire or operator data). All analyses were performed using SAS software version 13.2 (SAS Institute Inc) and R version 3.4.1 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing).

## 3 | RESULTS

A total of 702 subjects from eight different countries (Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Korea, and Spain) had data on both self-reported and recorded MPU in the 3 months preceding the interview date (Table 1). There were 250 (35.6%) cases and 452 (64.4%)

**TABLE 1** Self-reported and recorded number and duration of calls, shown by case-control status per country.

Country	N	Median (min-max)	
		Self-reported	Recorded
<b>Number of calls (number in 3 months)</b>			
<i>Cases</i>	250	196 (0-4566)	260 (0-7128)
Canada	3	183 (65-502)	482 (57-924)
France	59	130 (13-2055)	258 (18-1617)
Germany	21	91 (0-913)	137 (22-639)
Greece	1	137 (137-137)	276 (276-276)
Israel	28	502 (28-4566)	913 (73-7128)
Italy	99	228 (3-2739)	221 (0-2411)
Korea	4	685 (320-1598)	654 (99-1308)
Spain	35	137 (9-2055)	213 (11-943)
<i>Controls</i>	452	224 (0-6392)	308 (0-10,496)
Canada	2	176 (33-320)	82 (24-141)
France	97	224 (12-6392)	356 (23-6570)
Germany	19	91 (26-2496)	204 (6-809)
Greece	1	75 (75-75)	106 (106-106)
Israel	46	639 (26-3652)	858 (0-10,496)
Italy	211	228 (9-2739)	255 (0-2772)
Korea	8	616 (120-2739)	370 (81-878)
Spain	68	91 (0-3652)	334 (6-1608)
<b>Duration of calls (minutes in 3 months)</b>			
<i>Cases</i>	250	861 (0-37,474)	388 (0-12,269)
Canada	3	360 (196-4109)	1131 (73-5559)
France	59	489 (13-9723)	350 (17-5774)
Germany	21	457 (0-5479)	175 (19-2731)
Greece	1	411 (411-411)	273 (273-273)
Israel	28	1517 (99-16,436)	1396 (3-12,269)
Italy	99	913 (21-16,436)	355 (0-8634)
Korea	4	1027 (548-2283)	682 (79-1002)
Spain	35	326 (13-37,474)	322 (15-7998)
<i>Controls</i>	452	666 (0-32,240)	424 (0-28,645)
Canada	2	502 (91-913)	307 (26-588)
France	97	679 (20-21,862)	428 (18-8141)
Germany	19	1175 (30-10,958)	217 (0-2068)
Greece	1	75 (75-75)	197 (197-197)
Israel	46	1373 (26-32,240)	1128 (0-13,383)
Italy	211	639 (13-18,784)	349 (0-28,645)
Korea	8	845 (135-4109)	792 (162-2634)
Spain	68	228 (0-24,654)	367 (3-3756)

controls, reflecting the matching of two controls to each case in the MOBI-Kids study population. 45.4% of the subjects were female, and the mean age was 17.5 years old (standard deviation 4.0). These numbers are similar to the main MOBI-Kids study population (Supporting Information: Table ST1).

### 3.1 | Mobile phone use

The absolute number of calls and duration of calls (in minutes) in the 3 months preceding the interview are shown in Table 1. For both self-reported and recorded data, subjects from Israel had considerably higher MPU compared to subjects from other countries. Minimum and maximum mobile phone use varied considerably for both cases and controls in all countries. The distribution of the number and duration of calls in the most recent 3 months given by case-control status in each of the countries are shown in Supporting Information: Figures SF2 and SF3, and percentage difference is shown in Supporting Information: Table ST2.

### 3.2 | Correlation and agreement of self-reported and recorded MPU

The Spearman rank correlation coefficients comparing self-reported and recorded MPU in the most recent 3 months were 0.57 for call number and 0.59 for call duration. Correlations remained similar when stratified by case-control status. For cases, the correlation coefficients were 0.59 and 0.63 for number and duration of calls, respectively; for controls they were 0.56 and 0.57, respectively. When increasing the time period to 2 years, correlation for call number was 0.42 in cases and 0.66 in controls. Correlation coefficients for duration of calls was 0.63 for cases and 0.66 for controls (Table 2).

**TABLE 2** Spearman rank correlation coefficients for self-reported versus recorded MPU.

Time period	Overall		Cases		Controls	
	N	$\rho$	N	$\rho$	N	$\rho$
Number of calls						
Up to 3 months	702	0.57	250	0.59	452	0.56
Up to 1 year	357	0.64	131	0.67	226	0.62
Up to 2 years	104	0.58	41	0.42	63	0.66
Duration of calls (minutes)						
Up to 3 months	702	0.59	250	0.63	452	0.57
Up to 1 year	357	0.65	131	0.69	226	0.64
Up to 2 years	104	0.64	41	0.63	63	0.66

**TABLE 3** Categorical comparison (quintiles of control group) of self-reported and recorded number and duration of calls in the most recent 3 months. Numbers shown are number of subjects.

Recorded number of calls (number/3 months)	Self-reported number of calls (number/3 months)				
	0–80.3	80.4–182.9	193–355.9	356–616.9	617+
<i>Cases</i>					
0–80.3	<b>24</b>	9	9	1	1
80.4–182.9	22	<b>6</b>	16	6	3
193–355.9	14	17	<b>11</b>	5	5
356–616.9	2	8	13	<b>6</b>	9
617+	1	4	14	17	<b>27</b>
Kappa-statistic	0.37				
Absolute agreement	0.30				
<i>Controls</i>					
0–95.1	<b>42</b>	12	4	5	2
95.2–212.9	36	<b>24</b>	14	6	5
213–370.9	17	21	<b>32</b>	20	9
371–635.9	12	18	28	<b>29</b>	19
636+	9	9	15	15	<b>49</b>
Kappa-statistic	0.41				
Absolute agreement	0.39				
Recorded duration of calls (minutes/3 months)	Self-reported duration of calls (minutes/3 months)				
	0–131.9	132–353.9	354–749.9	750–1929.9	1930+
<i>Cases</i>					
0–131.9	<b>26</b>	16	8	6	5
132–353.9	16	<b>11</b>	11	17	5
354–749.9	2	6	<b>11</b>	17	14
750–1929.9	1	2	5	<b>18</b>	22
1930+	1	1	4	6	<b>19</b>
Kappa-statistic	0.38				
Absolute agreement	0.34				
<i>Controls</i>					
0–131.9	<b>49</b>	17	7	13	5
132–353.9	25	<b>30</b>	20	25	10
354–749.9	9	12	<b>27</b>	34	22
750–1929.9	3	9	16	<b>17</b>	37
1930+	3	4	6	10	<b>42</b>
Kappa-statistic	0.39				
Absolute agreement	0.37				

When MPU was categorized using cut-off values based on quintiles from the combined recorded and reported number of calls of the control group, kappa values at 3 months were similar for cases and controls (Table 3). When increasing the time period for the number of calls, the weighted (equal spacing) kappa statistic for controls was similar to the cases at the 1-year time period (0.46 vs. 0.45) but higher at the 2-year time period (0.50 vs. 0.31). Similar results were seen for the duration of calls: at 1 year 0.48 versus 0.44, and at 2 years 0.46 versus 0.36 (not shown).

### 3.3 | Recall error

There were no differences in GMRs for the duration of calls between cases and controls (Table 5), suggesting an absence of differential recall error between cases and controls. For call number, there was a significant difference in recall between cases and controls in the middle quintile (40th–60th percentile) of self-reported MPU, but not in the other categories of self-reported MPU (Table 4).

The overall GMRs of self-reported versus recorded MPU in the most recent 3 months were 1.59 for call duration and 0.69 for call number, indicating systematic errors in the form of overreporting of call duration of calls and underreporting of the number of calls. Looking at recall over time for subjects with 2 years of data available, there appears to be a lower level of overreporting of duration of calls for both cases (initial GMR 1.62, 1.44 at 1 year) and controls (initial GMR 1.37, 1.08 at 1 year) between recent and 1 year recall. There is however little difference in recall in call duration over time between the 1 and 2 year time points for either cases or controls (1.44 vs. 1.41 and 1.08 vs. 1.07, respectively) (Table 5). Although this same initial decrease can be seen in controls for recall of number of calls, it is less clear for cases (Table 4).

Further analyses stratifying by country, reported years since start of mobile phone use, sex, and age at time of the interview showed differences in GMRs in all groups, but little statistical evidence of heterogeneity (while some statistically significant differences were noted, the magnitude of such differences was small). Comparison of recall of both duration and number of calls by age within cases revealed some evidence of heterogeneity, with the 15–19 years age group having a GMR of 2.25 for call duration compared to 1.11 and 1.62 in the other age groups (Table 5): differences were less pronounced for call number (0.87 for 15–19 years old vs. 0.59 and 0.67 in the other age groups) (Table 4).

When categorizing subjects by self-reported levels of MPU, a trend was seen with underreporting of MPU in the lower categories and overreporting of MPU in the higher categories. This was seen for both call duration and call number in both cases and controls. A graphical

illustration of these results is given in Figure 1 (duration of calls) and Figure 2 (number of calls). In addition to systematic error, the limits of agreement shown in these figures indicate a substantial amount of random error. As underreporting in the lowest category indicates that the actual value lies closer to the overall mean (i.e., the MPU would be higher than reported), and overreporting in the highest category indicates a lower actual MPU than reported, the actual contrast between lowest and highest groups may be smaller than these results suggest.

### 3.4 | Sensitivity analyses

Two sensitivity analyses were performed. No differences in recall of duration and number of calls were found when only looking at subjects who were very cooperative, responsive and interested during the interview ( $N = 527$ ). The overall GMRs for call duration (1.61 vs. 1.59 in the main analysis) and call number (0.71 vs. 0.69 in the main analysis) were similar. Similarly, we observed no material differences in results when restricting to subjects without missing data ( $N = 497$ ), with GMRs of 1.56 (1.59 in main analysis) and 0.67 (0.69 in main analysis) for call duration and call number, respectively.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

In this validation study, we evaluated differential and non-differential recall error in MPU between cases with a first primary brain tumor and controls. Self-reported MPU obtained from interviews was compared with network operator records in the 3 months, 1 year, and 2 years preceding the interview date. No significant differences were observed in recall estimates between cases and controls based on Spearman rank correlations, kappa-statistics, and geometric mean ratios, and these metrics suggested only a subtle effect of a differential recall error. Non-differential recall errors, both systematic and random, were observed with a systematic underestimation of the number of calls and an overestimation of the call duration. A trend was observed between varying levels of self-reported mobile phone use, with underestimation at lower levels and overestimation at higher levels for both number and duration of calls.

### 4.1 | Strengths and weaknesses

This is one of the few validation studies thus far comparing differences in recall of MPU between brain tumor cases and controls amongst children and adolescents, using both detailed self-reported data

**TABLE 4** Ratio of self-reported versus recorded mobile phone use in number of calls, shown by case-control status.

Number of calls	Cases			Controls			<i>p</i> For difference <sup>b</sup>
	<i>N</i>	GMR <sup>a</sup>	95% CI	<i>N</i>	GMR <sup>a</sup>	95% CI	
Overall (at 3 months)	250	0.72	0.63, 0.83	452	0.69	0.61, 0.76	0.48
Subset: 1 year of data							
Up to 3 months	131	0.80	0.66, 0.98	226	0.69	0.6, 0.79	0.20
Up to 1 year	131	0.69	0.58, 0.81	226	0.65	0.57, 0.74	0.52
Subset: 2 years of data							
Up to 3 months	41	0.74	0.55, 1.01	63	0.68	0.53, 0.87	0.66
Up to 1 year	41	0.65	0.49, 0.86	63	0.59	0.47, 0.76	0.64
Up to 2 years	41	0.68	0.5, 0.92	63	0.59	0.46, 0.76	0.50
Subset: 2 years of data							
Months 1–3	41	0.74	0.55, 1	63	0.68	0.46, 0.76	0.83
Months 4–12	41	0.64	0.47, 0.87	63	0.59	0.46, 0.76	0.73
Months 13–24	41	0.73	0.51, 1.03	63	0.58	0.45, 0.76	0.30
<i>By country</i>							
Canada	3	0.62	0.37, 1.04	2	1.76	1.23, 2.5	0.06
France	59	0.53	0.4, 0.69	97	0.56	0.45, 0.69	0.96
Germany	21	0.58	0.35, 0.95	19	0.88	0.53, 1.47	0.24
Greece	1	0.50	0.50, 0.50	1	0.71	0.71, 0.71	–
Israel	28	0.62	0.46, 0.83	46	0.76	0.53, 1.09	0.39
Italy	99	1.02	0.8, 1.3	211	0.83	0.73, 0.95	0.15
Korea	4	2.48	0.57, 10.72	8	1.48	0.48, 4.55	0.59
Spain	35	0.54	0.38, 0.76	68	0.39	0.27, 0.57	0.23
<i>p</i> For heterogeneity	0.23			0.23			
<i>By reported years since start of mobile phone use</i>							
1–2.9	35	0.42	0.27, 0.67	72	0.58	0.4, 0.83	0.31
3–4.9	43	0.69	0.5, 0.95	90	0.60	0.49, 0.72	0.52
5–6.9	51	1.04	0.77, 1.41	86	0.72	0.56, 0.93	0.07
7–8.9	50	0.77	0.56, 1.08	68	0.81	0.63, 1.06	0.91
9+	65	0.73	0.57, 0.93	119	0.76	0.63, 0.92	0.87
<i>p</i> For heterogeneity	0.38			0.29			
<i>By sex</i>							
Male	138	0.71	0.58, 0.87	246	0.65	0.56, 0.75	0.38
Female	112	0.73	0.6, 0.91	206	0.73	0.62, 0.86	0.94
<i>p</i> For heterogeneity	0.62			0.18			
<i>By age</i>							
10–14 years	53	0.59	0.41, 0.85	114	0.64	0.5, 0.82	0.73
15–19 years	98	0.87	0.67, 1.12	180	0.69	0.58, 0.81	0.12
20–24 years	99	0.67	0.56, 0.8	158	0.72	0.6, 0.85	0.68



**TABLE 4** (Continued)

Number of calls	Cases			Controls			<i>p</i> For difference <sup>b</sup>
	<i>N</i>	GMR <sup>a</sup>	95% CI	<i>N</i>	GMR <sup>a</sup>	95% CI	
<i>p</i> For heterogeneity	0.04			0.32			
<i>By self-reported level of mobile phone use</i>							
<20th percentile	42	0.22	0.16, 0.3	81	0.26	0.19, 0.34	0.44
20th–40th percentile	48	0.47	0.38, 0.59	86	0.50	0.39, 0.63	0.76
40th–60th percentile	56	0.93	0.69, 1.25	90	0.64	0.54, 0.75	0.02
60th–0th percentile	51	0.94	0.74, 1.19	99	1.01	0.86, 1.19	0.66
>80th percentile	53	1.59	1.23, 2.04	96	1.51	1.22, 1.85	0.75
<i>p</i> For heterogeneity	0.004			0.02			

<sup>a</sup>Geometric mean of ratio self-reported versus recorded mobile phone use.

<sup>b</sup>Log ratios were compared using a *t* test with unequal variances.

and objective network operator records. A major strength is the inclusion of a large number of adolescents and children from various countries both within and outside Europe. While not all subjects from the main MOBI-Kids study provided informed consent to obtain their network operator data and not all operators provided data, we managed to include a large proportion of subjects (24.8%) from the MOBI-Kids case–control study in this validation study. The proportion of subjects where longer-term data was available (at 1- and 2-year time periods) was smaller, with no subjects from some of the participating countries. The gender distribution in the validation study was the same as in the main MOBI-Kids study and the mean age differed by just 1 year (17.5 vs. 16.6 years in the main study).

Compared to the previous MOBI-Expo validation study using software-modified phones to record MPU for a month (Goedhart et al., 2018), we obtained information on brain tumor cases (and matched controls) as opposed to healthy volunteers. Given MOBI-Expo's approach, subjects were aware of their inclusion in the study and knew they would be asked about their phone use after using the software-modified phones, possibly influencing their MPU and/or responses, while this is not the case in the current retrospective approach. A drawback of using operator data is the fact that these data are often incomplete and not always available for the desired etiological period, particularly if this period is in the past, as is the case in our study. Additionally, it may not always be clear from billing records who the actual user of the phone was when making calls. Therefore, while billing records provide insight into validity and possible calibration of self-reports, they may not represent the gold standard for studies, especially due to the low number of retained study participants, and also because internet-based calling (VoIP) is not included in the records.

Additionally, although the period of recall in this study was shorter than the previous MOBI-Expo validation study (3 months vs. 6 months), we assume that it is still an informative time period to measure error, especially in the context of case–control studies on brain tumor risk where the recall of the cases may be worse and worse as they may suffer from physical or/and psychological impairments. In addition, sensitivity analyses covering 1 or 2 years of recall did not provide materially different results.

In all likelihood, mobile phones were also used for example browsing the internet, messenger services or other services, which would also contribute to overall exposure to radiofrequency electromagnetic fields. However, calling has been shown to contribute the lion's share to brain exposure (van Wel et al., 2021) and was therefore selected as the relevant metric to compare with operator data. Also, brain dose received from calling can be calculated as such, but in the absence of information of true output power of the mobile phone during calling, any dose calculation essentially provides the same result as using duration, although expressed in a different metric.

## 4.2 | Case–control differences

Our data do not provide evidence of differential recall error of MPU between cases and controls. This is in line with findings from the INTERPHONE study, where recall error in MPU amongst adult cases and controls was investigated and where only very small differences between cases and controls were observed. For example, the ratio of number of self-reported calls compared to operator-recorded calls was 0.81 for both cases and controls, and the ratio for duration of calls was 1.40 for cases and 1.39 for controls (Vrijheid et al., 2009). The CEFALO validation study also assessed

**TABLE 5** Ratio of self-reported versus recorded mobile phone use in duration of calls (in minutes), shown by case-control status.

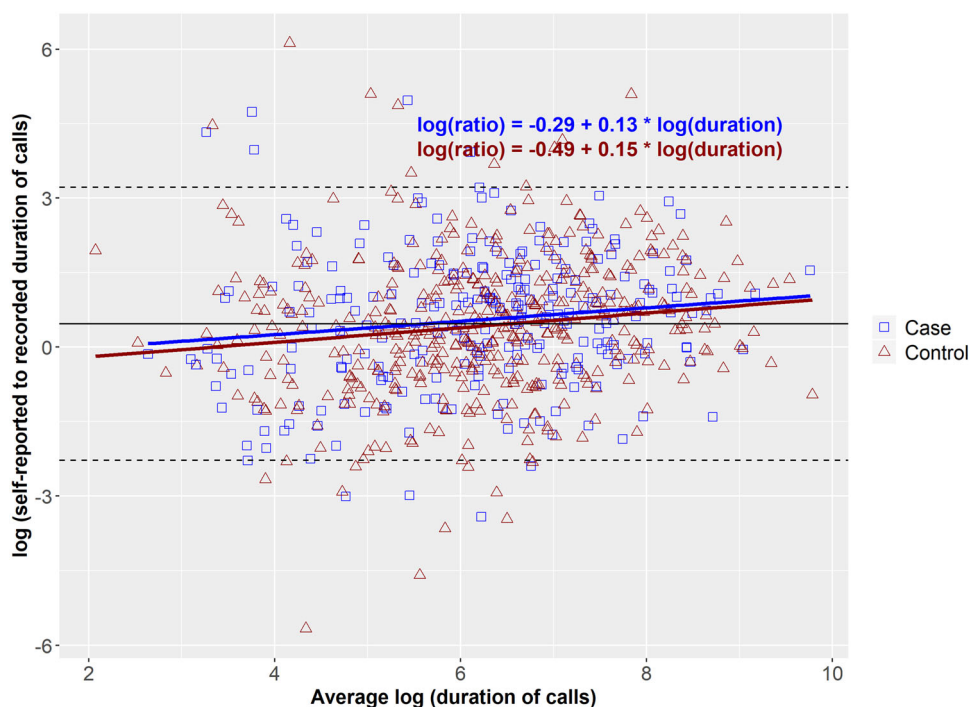
Duration of calls	Cases			Controls			<i>p</i> For difference <sup>b</sup>
	<i>N</i>	GMR <sup>a</sup>	95% CI	<i>N</i>	GMR <sup>a</sup>	95% CI	
Overall (at 3 months)	250	1.70	1.43, 2.03	452	1.53	1.34, 1.75	0.26
Subset: 1 year of data							
Up to 3 months	131	1.92	1.51, 2.45	226	1.52	1.28, 1.81	0.10
Up to 1 year	131	1.63	1.33, 2	226	1.37	1.16, 1.6	0.14
Subset: 2 years of data							
Up to 3 months	41	1.90	1.23, 2.96	63	1.41	1.01, 1.98	0.29
Up to 1 year	41	1.47	1.01, 2.13	63	1.08	0.8, 1.47	0.22
Up to 2 years	41	1.44	0.99, 2.09	63	1.07	0.78, 1.46	0.25
Subset: 2 years of data							
Months 1–3	41	1.90	1.22, 2.96	63	1.40	1, 1.97	0.62
Months 4–12	41	1.50	1.02, 2.19	63	1.09	0.8, 1.49	0.32
Months 13–24	41	1.52	0.98, 2.35	63	1.12	0.79, 1.58	0.35
<i>By country</i>							
Canada	3	0.86	0.32, 2.33	2	2.36	1.32, 4.21	0.19
France	59	1.10	0.82, 1.49	97	1.52	1.21, 1.9	0.21
Germany	21	2.60	1.21, 5.55	19	3.35	1.55, 7.2	0.66
Greece	1	1.51	1.51, 1.51	1	0.38	0.38, 0.38	-
Israel	28	1.52	0.9, 2.57	46	1.55	1.06, 2.27	0.96
Italy	99	2.36	1.78, 3.13	211	1.70	1.43, 2.01	0.06
Korea	4	2.62	0.99, 6.89	8	1.08	0.39, 3.01	0.24
Spain	35	1.27	0.81, 1.98	68	0.96	0.6, 1.53	0.40
<i>p</i> For heterogeneity	0.21			0.46			
<i>By reported years since start of mobile phone use</i>							
1–2.9	35	0.96	0.56, 1.63	72	1.19	0.79, 1.78	0.58
3–4.9	43	2.12	1.37, 3.3	90	1.70	1.29, 2.24	0.40
5–6.9	51	2.01	1.38, 2.93	86	1.94	1.43, 2.64	0.82
7–8.9	50	1.95	1.33, 2.86	68	1.71	1.29, 2.26	0.57
9+	65	1.72	1.27, 2.33	119	1.39	1.09, 1.76	0.21
<i>p</i> For heterogeneity	0.29			0.86			
<i>By sex</i>							
Male	138	1.73	1.36, 2.19	246	1.40	1.18, 1.67	0.17
Female	112	1.68	1.29, 2.18	206	1.71	1.40, 2.08	0.92
<i>p</i> For heterogeneity	0.30			0.16			
<i>By age</i>							
10–14 years	53	1.11	0.73, 1.68	114	1.39	1.03, 1.88	0.35
15–19 years	98	2.25	1.66, 3.04	180	1.78	1.45, 2.19	0.13
20–24 years	99	1.62	1.29, 2.04	158	1.39	1.15, 1.68	0.18

TABLE 5 (Continued)

Duration of calls	Cases			Controls			<i>p</i> For difference <sup>b</sup>
	<i>N</i>	GMR <sup>a</sup>	95% CI	<i>N</i>	GMR <sup>a</sup>	95% CI	
<i>p</i> For heterogeneity	0.04			0.79			
<i>By self-reported level of mobile phone use</i>							
<20th percentile	43	0.37	0.27, 0.52	74	0.46	0.33, 0.64	0.37
20th–40th percentile	46	1.39	0.92, 2.11	99	0.95	0.75, 1.21	0.12
40th–60th percentile	38	1.83	1.24, 2.69	85	1.26	1.03, 1.55	0.05
60th–80th percentile	73	2.32	1.83, 2.95	95	2.82	2.18, 3.63	0.32
>80th percentile	50	4.36	3.18, 5.97	99	3.96	3.18, 4.93	0.64
<i>p</i> For heterogeneity	0.06			0.02			

<sup>a</sup>Geometric mean of ratio self-reported versus recorded mobile phone use.

<sup>b</sup>Log ratios were compared using a t-test with unequal variances.



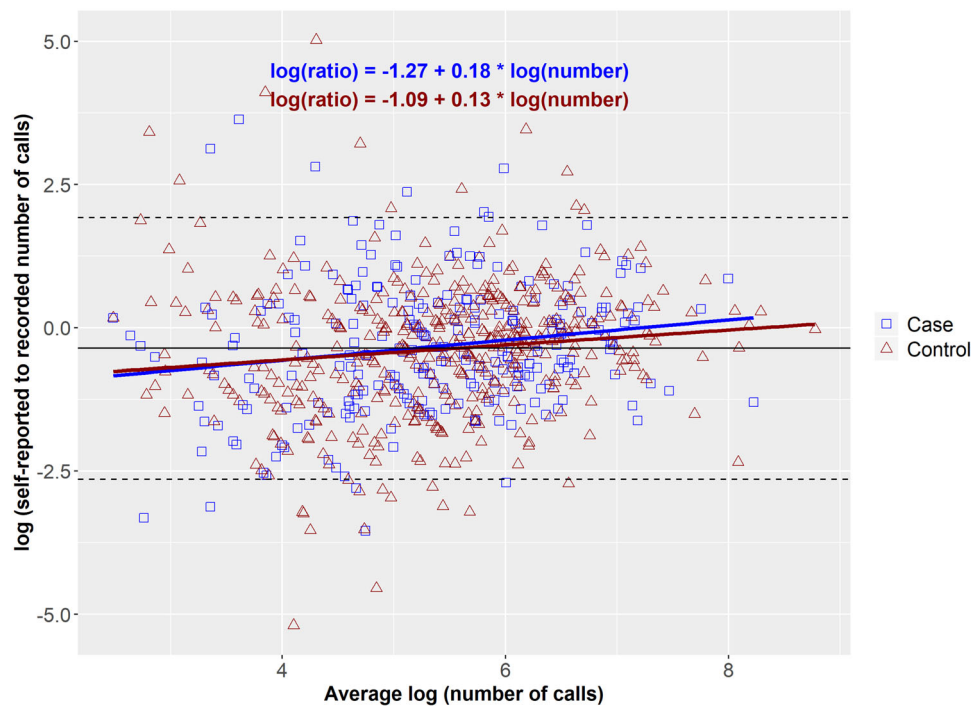
**FIGURE 1** Ratio of self-reported to recorded duration of calls against mean phone use (log-transformed data) with dashed lines indicating the 95% limits of agreement and the red (control) and blue (case) lines indicating the corresponding regression line. Average is the average of self-reported and recorded duration of calls. *p* for interaction term, 0.78.

differences between number and duration of calls in 7–19-year-old brain tumor cases and their controls (Tynes et al., 2011). While they found some evidence for more pronounced overestimation in number (9% for cases and 34% for controls) and duration of calls (52% for cases and 163% for controls) in controls compared to cases, this finding was not reproduced here. A potential explanation could be the larger number of subjects we included (135 in the CEFALO study vs. 702 in our study) and the shorter time period between

diagnosis and time of interview, which was 844 (for cases) or 886 (for controls) days for the CEFALO subjects, and 365 days for our study.

### 4.3 | Sensitivity analyses

The effect of responsiveness of subjects during the self-reported MPU interview, and the use of imputed data were investigated in sensitivity analyses. No



**FIGURE 2** Ratio of self-reported to recorded number of calls against mean phone use (log-transformed data) with dashed lines indicating the 95% limits of agreement and the red (control) and blue (case) lines indicating the corresponding regression line. Average log is the average of self-reported and recorded number of calls.  $p$  For interaction term, 0.56.

differences in recall statistics were noted, neither non-differential nor differential, suggesting that these factors had little effect on our results. For interview quality, only 15 participants were judged to be poor responders (category “not at all responsive”) while the other 160 subjects excluded in the sensitivity analysis were considered “fairly responsive,” limiting the ability to draw informative conclusions from this.

#### 4.4 | Over- and underestimation

The overestimation of the duration of calls that we found is in line with previous validation studies among young people, although the degree of overestimation differed (Aydin et al., 2011; Mireku et al., 2018). The comparison is less consistent for number of calls, where overestimation was found in the CEFALO (Tynes et al., 2011) and SCAMP (Mireku et al., 2018) studies. In MOBI-Expo the same direction of systematic error was found as in the current study (number of calls: GMR 0.52 (MOBI-Expo) versus 0.69 (MOBI-Kids, duration of calls: GMR 1.32 (MOBI-Expo) versus 1.59 (MOBI-Kids). The INTERPHONE validation study, performed among adults rather than adolescents and children, showed results in line with our current findings (overall GMR INTERPHONE 0.81 for number and 1.39 for duration of calls) (Vrijheid et al., 2009).

Both the COSMOS (Reedijk et al., 2024) as well as the INTERPHONE validation (Vrijheid et al., 2009) studies found significantly differing ratios between countries. In the present study we did see some differences in GMRs among the eight participating countries, but the differences did not achieve statistical significance. In contrast, the MOBI-Expo validation study by Goedhart et al. (2018) did find significant differences among countries with participants from Greece, Israel, and Korea underestimating the duration of calls while in other countries duration was overestimated. We observed differences in recall among age groups, with the 15–19-year-old group demonstrating the largest degree of overestimation for call duration in both cases and controls, and for call number in cases. These differences in recall of call duration and call number were statistically significant only in cases. The CEFALO validation study used two age groups (10–14 vs. 15–19 years old) and found greater overestimation in the 15–19-year group for both call number and duration (Aydin et al., 2011), while Kiyohara et al. (2016), using the same age groups as our study, found that the youngest age group (Aydin et al., 2011; Kiyohara et al., 2016; Tynes et al., 2011; Vrijheid et al., 2009) had the highest overestimation in call duration. Although patterns in MPU recall are inconsistent between studies it remains important to consider the potential biases that may occur through imperfect MPU recall in studies on the health effects of mobile phones

and health. Our results may allow to use operator-recorded data for imputation of self-reported data as a sensitivity analysis of MOBI-Kids. In addition, simulation studies may help to explore the effect of the observed patterns means for bias in risk estimates, in line with Aydin et al. (2011).

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

We compared self-reported MPU with operator data at 3 months, 1 year, and 2 years preceding the interview date. No indication of differential recall error between cases and controls was found. Both non-differential systematic and random errors were observed, with number of calls being underreported and duration of calls being over-reported on average in both cases and controls. If there are true underlying risks, then the observed non-differential random errors may bias risk estimates towards their null values and decrease study power.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Canada (Ottawa) received financial support from the Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association (CWTA) under the federal university-industry research partnerships programs noted below, and provided access subscriber billing records with informed consent of Canadian study participants. The CWTA had no involvement in the design, conduct, analysis, or results interpretation. Michael Kundi serves as an expert witness for brain tumor epidemiology in a court case in Washington DC. The rest of the authors declare no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### ETHICS STATEMENT

We have verified consent from subjects participating in the study was received prior to conducting the study. The study has been reviewed and approved by an accredited committee.

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**Dr. Chelsea E. Langer** was the scientific project manager of the MobiKids study at ISGlobal.

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**Dr. Nuria Aragonés** works at the Cancer Registration and Surveillance Unit, General Directorate of Public Health, Community of Madrid. She has conducted research on cancer epidemiology, including descriptive and etiologic studies, with a focus on environmental exposures.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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