

Attachment to Mobile Phones across Social Contexts

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INTRODUCTION

The mobile phone has become widely popular and one of the most attached technologies of users in the last two decades. People around the world use this technology on daily bases, carry it close to their bodies wherever they go and feel connected to the social life when the device is around functioning properly, and isolated when it is unavailable to use. Containing a range of technological repertoires within the machine, such as the telephonic interaction, SMS, video game, alarm clock, Internet connection, MP3 Player, video recorder etc., the mobile is today certainly the most pervasive communicative technology that billions of people are attached to.

Since this area of research is a very new and growing field; the scholars who made the earliest publications can also be considered as pioneering academics who have the most cited academic works in related and strong journals. Below are those prominent figures who have contributed to the expanding mobile phone literature on the basis of its instrumental use and meaning across social contexts the leading scholars are Richard Ling at IT University of Copenhagen, James Katz at Boston University College of Communications, Mark Aakhus at Rutgers University, Leopoldina Fortunati at University of Udine, Nicola Green at the University of Surrey, Gerard Goggin at the University of Sydney, Leslie Haddon at London School of Economics. Richard Harper at Microsoft

Research in Cambridge, Mizuko Ito at University of Southern California, Heather Horst at RMIT University, Daniel Miller at UCL.

OVERVIEW

Many studies have shown that the mobile is popular worldwide, and that users in different socio-technical contexts have similar sort of attachments to this technology in spite of the varieties in the domain of use and meanings of mobile phone across different social contexts. The individual and collective forms of attachment to this technology have been defined in different terms, such as obsession of carrying the mobile everywhere (Wikle, 2001), as heavy dependence on the use of mobiles on a daily basis for social relations and self-presentation (Licoppe & Heurtin, 2001; Fortunati, 2003) or as addiction where the lack of mobile phone communication may leave the user depressive, lonely, and isolated (Park, 2005; Vincent, 2006). Although the collective attachment to this communication and media technology is a worldwide phenomenon, studies have shown that mobile phone was adopted more quickly and passionately by marginalized individuals, groups and countries (Schwartz, 1996; Agar, 2003; Katz & Aakhus, 2002). Not only has this technology moved throughout the world, but it has also spread more quickly to places whose relations to globality are characterized by economic, political,

and cultural asymmetries. Recent ethnographic research has revealed how different collectives find their own use for mobile phone (Donner, 2005; Horst & Miller, 2005). As a global technology, the mobile phone has different meanings, tasks, performances, and uses and it produces different practices in different parts of the world. These empirical studies all indicate that mobile phone technology is highly flexible, that it can be used for a variety of purposes which change across social contexts (Plant, 2000; Chesher, 2007). Sadie Plant (2000), whose study investigates mobile telephony on a global scale suggests that this device is capable of satisfying diverse aims and can be used in a variety of cultural and social contexts. The mobile phone traverses localities, and differs depending on where it is used, produced and domesticated. When we speak of the mobile phone as an invention, we speak of a particular technological device that enables both personal and mass communication between bodies that are mobile and distant from each other, but as a social practice we speak of multiplicities, varieties and differences. The distinctive characteristics of mobile phone technology was initially defined as “pedestrian, portable and personal” (Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2006) communication technology that enabled point-to-point and mass communication. Yet as many features have incorporated into its machinery, mobile phones have become truly mobile media whose values, domains of use and the meanings attributed to it have been diversified even more extensively (Arceneaux & Kavoori, 2012; May & Hearn 2005).

Although there are few studies that specifically focus on why and how people become attached to this technology, the rapidly expanding literature on mobile telephony and media offers explanations by analyzing the motives for its wide popularity in changing contexts by showing how, where, when, by whom and for what purpose the mobile phone is used. The majority of this research is based upon uses-gratifications and audience-reception theories whose methodologies elaborate the mo-

bile phone as a device that provides higher utility, better problem solving than other contemporary technologies in fulfilling the needs and desires of its users. While the majority of these works adopts a sociological perspective, there are also studies that incorporate perspectives of (social) psychology such as media-dependency theory - which argues that the individual does not depend on all media equally (see Vincent, 2006 for overview) and deprivation studies - “which show what needs are most frustrated when media are unavailable” (Park, 2005 p. 258). The instrumentality or functionality of mobile telephony has largely been posited as a reason for its wide popularity in all around the world.

Instrumental Value of Mobile Phones

Early empirical studies whose findings are based on fieldwork demonstrate the mobile phone’s use and instrumental value for people who are physically mobile and who need instantaneous and spontaneous connections with others. In this vein of research, the mobile phone is basically considered a telephone that can be carried anywhere the body goes, making the body available anytime and almost anywhere. Its most instrumental function is point-to-point communication, although it can also be used as a broadcasting medium. Ling and Yttri (2002), prominent mobile telephony scholars, state that mobile telephony is characterized by three types of activities: security, coordination and social interaction (Ling & Yttri, 2002; see also Ling & Yttri, 1999; Katz, 2003; Cooper, Green, Murtagh, & Harper, 2002). Illustrating how mobile telephony is generally interpreted as an amalgamation of its visible functions, this body of literature argues that the mobile phone is used for coordination and social interaction, and point to its role in practical matters like organizing daily routines or changing plans, emphasizing its growing embeddedness in the patterns of daily life. The mobile phone has also been thought of as a medium, one which increases the user’s

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