

# Chapter XXIV

## Mobile Phone Communication Innovation in Multiple Time and Space Zones: The Case of Hong Kong Culture

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### ABSTRACT

*In most parts of the world, it is generally considered impolite or even rude to pick up an incoming mobile phone call and to have a longer (and loud) conversation in public places. Yet this type of interruption is generally acceptable in Hong Kong. This inspired the authors to ask: How does Hong Kong culture impact the perception of mobile phone interruption? This research note is about an ethnographical study on the culture in Hong Kong indicating a more positive perception towards mobile phone interruption. Their research results show that the cultural characteristics of fast pace, deal-making and sense of urgency explain why Hong Kong people are receptive towards such interruption and have the habit of participating in both the physical and mobile spaces at the same time. Their findings also challenge the engaging-disengaging paradox theory - that is, mobile phone users find it difficult to simultaneously engage in parallel activities*

### INTRODUCTION

In most parts of the world it is considered impolite or even rude to pick up an incoming mobile phone call and to have a longer (sometimes rather loud)

conversation in public places such as restaurants or subways, but it is especially inappropriate during business meetings. However, this type of interruption is generally acceptable in Hong Kong, a phenomenon which has prompted the

authors to ask the question: How does the Hong Kong culture impact the perception of mobile phone interruption?

This research note is an ethnographic study of the culture in Hong Kong, which indicates a more positive perception towards mobile phone interruption. There has been much research carried out on interruption in general as well as on how mobile phones cause interruption. Research has also been done on the role of culture in the usage of mobile phones and the Internet. Nevertheless, there appears to be little research on the relationship between all three elements: interruption, mobile phones, and culture. It is the intention of this study to fill this gap.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Given the attention of past research on the relationship between interruption and mobiles or other technology devices, as well as the role of culture in the usage of mobile phones or the Internet, the social aspect of mobile phone or device usage has generated attention from sociologists and other researchers.

### **Interruption**

“Interruption” has long been a subject of study by communication or sociology specialists. Interruption has been said to be a power device (Ferguson, 1977). In some situations, interruptions create high involvement among the partners involved and help promote feelings of mutual interest, enthusiasm, and solidarity (Tannen, 1981 as cited in Li, 2001). Murata (1994) has identified two broad types of interruptions: intrusive and cooperative.

### **Interruption and Mobile/ICT Devices**

Two relatively recent studies look at why and how mobile phone usage could be considered as unwelcome interruptions in public places. Monk,

et al. (2004a) examine the reasons why mobile phones are annoying. Monk, et al. (2004b) find that hearing just one side of the conversation results in a publicly-conducted mobile phone conversation becoming more noticeable and intrusive.

## **Social Identity and Mobile Phone**

Truch and Hulme (2004) opined that mobile phones have the effect of challenging the traditional definition of an individual’s social identity in terms of location (the old location-based paradigm) and replacing this paradigm with the new social network-based paradigm. Under this new paradigm, individuals talking on mobile phones have a “second space” or “second identity” while simultaneously still having their “first identity” in the location where they are physically present. McGuigan (2005) considers the strengths and weaknesses of the methods of studying the sociality of the mobile phone as employed in a number of research papers.

## **Culture, Social Behaviour, and Mobile Phone/Internet**

Several studies concern the impact of culture on the social behavioural aspects of mobile phone usage and the Internet. Lee, et al. (2002) conducted online surveys in Korea and Japan and reports cross-cultural differences in the usage patterns of mobile Internet. Hofvenschiold (2003) reports on a study looking at the possible differences in the use of and attitude to mobile phones of British and German university students and young professionals.

The literature review above reflects a definite knowledge gap and begs critique. In spite of the research done on interruption and mobile phones, culture and mobile phone and Internet usage, few studies have examined the relationship between the three elements of interruption, mobile phone, and culture.

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