Chapter XVI
Mobile Phone Use Across Cultures:
A Comparison Between the United Kingdom and Sudan

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the ubiquitous use of mobile phones by people from different cultures has grown enormously. For example, mobile phones are used to perform both private and business conversations. In many cases, mobile phone conversations take place in public places. In this article, we attempt to understand if cultural differences influence the way people use their mobile phones in public places. The material considered here draws on the existing literature of mobile phones, and quantitative and qualitative work carried out in the UK (as a mature mobile phone market) and the Sudan (that is part of Africa and the Middle East culture with its emerging mobile phone market). Results indicate that people in the Sudan are less likely to use their mobile phones on public transport or whilst walking down the street, in comparison to their UK counterparts. In addition, the Sudanese are more willing to switch off their mobile phones in places of worship, classes, and meetings. Implications are drawn from the study for the design of mobile phones for different cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Economic globalization and the widespread use of mobile phones have changed the way people live and manage their lives, and cut down the virtual distance between countries, regions, and time zones. New ways of using mobile phones are constantly emerging (e.g., downloading music to listen to on the train), and the pervasive use of mobile phones in public places for private talk

(both business- and socially-oriented) is a clear example of how mobile phones are changing our economic and social lives. As a result of this, there is an emergent body of research on the use of mobile phones in social spaces. For example, Ling (2004) highlights how their use in public places has raised questions of what the appropriate or inappropriate behaviour is in public places. In this study, he found that people perceived mobile phone use in places such as restaurants as unacceptable, partly because mobile phone users tend to talk louder than usual so that people nearby feel intruded upon, embarrassed, and have a sense of being coerced into the role of eavesdropper on a private conversation.

Research has also shown that mobile phones can occupy concurrent social spaces, spaces with behavioural norms that sometimes conflict, such as the space of the mobile phone user, and the virtual space where the conversation takes place (Palen, Salzman, & Youngs, 2000). This feeling of conflict has led researchers in this area to propose that the use of mobile technology in public places is creating a new mixture of public and private space that has yet to be accommodated by for users of mobile technology and bystanders in terms of what is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour.

This phenomenon has been analysed predominately using concepts drawn from Goffman's analysis of social interaction in public places (Goffman, 1963). In this work, Goffman suggested that people have specific "public faces" and personas for different public social locations. The idea behind this is that individuals have rules that determine their behaviour in public places, or what Burns (1992) refers to as the "observance of social propriety." For example, Murtagh (2001) presented findings from an observational study of the nonverbal aspects of mobile phone use in a train carriage. Murtagh found that changing the direction of one's gaze—turning one's head and upper body away from the other people sitting next to you in the carriage—was a common feature of mobile phone behaviour on trains. These behavioural responses were seen as being indicative of the subtle complexities involved when using mobile phones in public locations. This study suggests that mobile phone users are actively engaged in trying to distance themselves from their current physical location in order to enter a virtual environment with the person they are having a mobile phone conversation. In relation to this, Love and Perry (2004) used role-play experiments to investigate the behaviour and attitudes of bystanders to a mobile phone conversation. They found that participants had strong views on embarrassment, discomfort, and rudeness. They also report that the actions of those who were put in the position of overhearers followed a pattern: they acted as though they were demonstrably not attending, even though they were all able to report accurately on the content of the conversation.

However, to date, most of the research reported in this area has tended to focus on what is termed the developed world. Mobile phones are also transforming people's lives in the developing world. In Africa, the unreliable and inefficient landline telecommunication infrastructure has made the mobile phone the solitary available communication tool for many people (BBC, 2003). However, as mobile phone use in Africa continues to grow, there is a need for mobile phone companies who are entering this market to consider the possible impact of cross-cultural differences in people's attitude towards mobile phone and service applications.

This article first briefly reviews relevant literature about the use of mobile phones in public places. The concept of culture and cultural models are explored in th second section. In the third section, the methods of this study are presented. Techniques of collecting the data and the procedure of this study are presented in the fourth and fifth sections, respectively. Some key findings from the study are presented and discussed in the

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