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Attachment to mobile phones across social contexts

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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

sense of security by enabling connection almost anywhere and at any time (see Katz & Aakhus, 2002; García-Montes, Caballero-Munoz, & Perez-Alvarez, 2006; Ito, 2005).

Apart from telephonic interaction, research shows that short messaging services are highly instrumental and useful for people who prefer cheaper communication services and/or are more comfortable texting than speaking on the phone (Elwood-Clayton, 2005; Pertierra, 2005; Strom, 2002; Taylor & Harper, 2003). Other research illustrates how texting can work as a mass medium to gather a crowd for public demonstrations against the state or any other authority (Hill, 2003; Lallana, 2004; Elwood-Clayton, 2005; Sheller, 2004; Plant, 2001). Different collectives can be increasingly innovative in the ways in which they use different functions of the mobile telephony, such as the use of beeping, intentional missed calls in the south by the resource-restricted individuals (Donner, 2007) or the SIM card swapping in developing regions of the world (Pearce, 2013). In addition to texting and telephonic interaction, cellphones are used for a variety of entertainment purposes such as online games, using apps, recording life, broadcasting what is recorded, and sharing music/video/pictures with others (Rivière, 2005; Chesher, 2005; Richardson, 2007; Goggin, 2006). The mobile phone has proven to be highly instrumental to everyday life, especially in relation to elements of security, coordination and social interaction.

The material, physical conditions of places where people live also govern the ways in which they approach technologies, including the mobile phone. The availability of use of mobiles at any time and any place makes it a device highly instrumental to urban lifestyle in which mobility and time-efficiency are considered everyday and organizing principles. As James Katz has written, people use mobile telephony in traffic to “kill the waiting time” by doing something else and also as some other authors have suggested the mobile phone resurrects mobile time that would have previously been considered economically unproductive or dead time (Perry, O’Hara, Sellen,

Brown, & Harper, 2001; Green, 2002; Townsend, 2001). Ling and Yttri (2002) discuss how people use mobile phone to ensure easy coordination: when punctuality becomes an issue due to the complications of city-life (such as traffic jams), people are more likely to perceive a need or find a use for a mobile device to coordinate. Mobile phones have also proved to be useful for fishermen or peasants living in rural areas that are relatively far from markets in facilitating the flow of information between city and rural areas (Tall, 2004; Samuel, Shah, & Hadingham, 2005).

More recent research dwell on the ways in which the modes of mobile communications are changing due to the fact that mobile phones evolve into smart phones equipped with more operating systems -such as Instant messengers, social network sites and applications. Incorporating all these facilities of virtual connection, the mobile has become the primary communication tool that enables ever more dynamic and diverse information flow, and enhances the participatory capacity of its users. Campbell and Kwak (2010) suggested that the intense use of mobile devices has the potential to stimulate people’s public engagement. Particularly for young people, the use of the mobile for information-seeking purposes plays a constructive role in terms of connecting the users to civic affairs, by providing information that matters in their lives (Park, 2014). The increased means of connectivity and interactivity with the introduction of smart phones open up new modes of expression and distribution of news especially for those who live under authoritarian political regimes. For instance, the majority of breaking-news are first reported in China on the Twitter-like microblogs supported by smartphones (see Yu, 2011, and also Wallis, 2011; He, 2008; Wei, 2013). Furthermore, the possibilities to enhance communication flows and coordination among different agents help to constitute a virtual community of unprivileged ones, such as disabled or diseased people in “developing countries” (see Chib, 2013 for an overview) On the other hand, the newly expanded social geography that makes

every digital device and their users connectable and visible to each other also generates various social risks. Especially for those whose relations to power are characterized by negative asymmetries, the risks and challenges such as surveillance, loss and violation of privacy, being subject to bullying and stalking practices, withdrawal from social environments and a loss of spatio-temporal orientation (context collapse as named by Welsh, 2008) emerge (Marvin, 2013; Cincotta, Ashford, & Michael, 2011; Lee, 2011; de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2010; Welsh, 2008; Goggin & Crawford, 2011).

Expressive Value of Mobile Telephony

When casting about causes of collective attachment to mobile telephone that are not rooted in functionality or instrumental value of the device, current literature on mobile technologies generally adopts a view that considers technologies as representations, meanings or symbols. Positing that mobile telephony is invested with a social promise, the majority of this research adopts a sociological perspective, mainly drawing relevant arguments from Erving Goffmann's (1959) view of the social. Goffman develops a dramaturgical model of social interaction where the social beings manage the tension between back-stage (me-the real self) and front-stage (I) performances in their daily social lives. The works that dwell on the expressive value of mobile telephony examine this technology as a social medium that manages how individual bodies appear to others and how they negotiate between the "I" and the "me" aspect of their performances via the use of mobile devices. According to Fortunati (2003), one of the leading theorists in the field who argued for the expressive perspective rather than functionalist one to understand the role of mobile telephony in users' social life, the mobile phone takes out the "back stage" areas of the home to the "front stage" of public life and become a means of self-expression to others. In edited volumes such as

Machines that Become Us: The Social Context of Personal Communication (Katz, 2003), *The Cell Phone Culture* (Kavoori & Arceneaux, 2006), the social promise of mobile phones as representatives of the self was interrogated. The mobile device that incorporates the associations of "me, my identity" (Vincent, 2006) also contributes to the social status, lifestyles, aesthetic preferences and the taste of the user (like fashion statement, as in Fortunati, 2013). The mobile phone is treated as a commodity, whose purchase brings a sense of upward social mobility to its users. For instance, mobile phone's early connotation of being a "rich men's toy" (Katz & Sugiyama, 2005) or an "esoteric device" (Lemish & Cohen, 2005) is argued as the source of its attraction for the "poor" and "minorities" (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Sheller, 2004) who are invested in the notion of social mobility. Authors have dwelled on the aesthetic value of the cellphone, as a cool and fashionable object symbolically representing a desirable modern and mobile lifestyle (see the articles in Katz & Aakhus, 2002).

The mobile phone's social meanings also contribute to its popularity in many different countries. Studies have proposed that "developing" or "marginalized" countries associate the mobile phone with western and modern values. Pajnik and Lesjak-Tusek (2002) explore how images of "modernity" and "western values" are referenced interchangeably in Slovenia's ads for mobile phones. Zhang and Harwood (2004) show that in China ads for communication technologies draw heavily on the notion of "modern" (see also Vershinskaya, 2002 (Russia); Chakraborty, 2004 (Bangladesh) and "freedom of western capitalism" by Keller, 2005 (post-socialist Estonia)). In addition to these findings, some scholars see the popularity of mobile phone use in the "developing world" as a process of "globalization from below" driven by mobile phone users (see Eickelman, 2004; Alhassan, 2004; Nyiri, 2005). The motivation that moves people toward participation in the virtual community is also a shared fear of being late, remaining too local

and being like these others that are left behind, left outside of history or of the civilized present. The marginalized demand a place in the mobile technoscape and access to the affectations that it promises (such as subjectivity and agency, as conditions for social recognition) (see Çelik, 2011; Rafael, 2003). Local engagements with the global technoscape become an important part of how nations, regions and communities negotiate larger cultural forces in contemporary world (Goggin, 2006). The domesticated technoscape unfolds as a hybrid of global and local spaces in which the “local” use of technologies functions as a process of participation in and resistance to globalization (Perterra, 2005; Yoon, 2006). All of these studies have considered the mobile phone as an object that gives meaning on behalf of and for its user, as a presentation of one’s self, identity and/or social face (Katz, 2003; Lobet-Maris, 2003; Ling & Yttri, 1999; Fortunati, 2001; Donner 2005).

Affectivity, Imaginations, and Fantasies

Although the studies concerning the instrumental and expressive values of mobile telephony provide valuable but limited understanding of the ways in which the mobile phone has become an object of collective attachment in any particular context. Attachment and addiction define processes through which mobile telephony transforms from a technology that is used and becomes popular to an object whose lack makes bodies feel depressed, anxious, or lonely. The meanings that the mobile phone acquires in social space are crucial, playing a significant role in making the artifact appealing and attractive for possession and use. Likewise, the instrumental value of any technological object is highly important for it to become a ubiquitous tool. Yet, a technology takes on more than just visible or functional tasks (see for instance, Ronell, 1989; Verbeek, 2005). As Verbeek writes, the bond that arises between people and artifacts is based on how the concrete object affects and produce sensations, and “not only the meanings or sym-

bols it carries or the functions it fulfills” (2005, p. 225). The literature on mobile telephony rarely takes this aspect of the artifact into consideration and yet there are still some exceptional studies which emphasize the role of sensing, affecting and affected, and fantasies of the body and the collective in contemplating the bond between body and mobile phone.

The bodily habit of using a cell phone refers to the ongoing adjustment of mobility: “we take the motor space of our interaction to our hands, to the space of our bodies and come to know its model-specific characteristics in the same way that we know the placement of our own limbs and fingers” (Richardson, 2007, p. 209). One develops a haptic familiarity with the switchboard or touch-tone keys on the screen and gains the ability to use the phone with one hand, whether texting, speaking, recording or playing. The cellular is perfectly incorporated by the hand, entering into an intimate and habitual relationship with the body (see also Oksman & Rautuaninen, 2003). Amparo Lasen argues that it is “the way mobile phones are held and touched that makes this relationship different than other ICT devices. The attachment to mobile phones is revealed by the transformations from being an object always at hand to being almost always in the hand and close to the body” (2004). As Adrian de Souza e Silva (2006) comments, among all mobile technologies, mobile phones are the closest to the body. The mobile phone offers visual, haptic and acoustic experiences and “demands variable and oscillating modes of somatic involvement” (Richardson, 2007, p. 209). As Verbeek suggests, “attachment with the product can arise only when the machinery of the product makes involvement possible” (2005, p. 227). Mobile phones are containing technologies (Sofia, 2000), including a space for users to input and store personal information, thereby customizing their machines. The mobile phone enables its users to modify and remodify continuously what is contained and hence produces a new way of experimenting their self-image, self-narrative through using functions such as

“save,” “delete” or “edit.” The visual and sonic containment of the mobile phones, such as the video recorder, camera, the MP3 sound sharing files, ringtones and ring-back tones serve users for the personalization and customization of mobile telephony. The transformation of device into an agent that contains and communicates what the users put inside also gives rise to the expressions of gendered practices (women use camera phones to implement mobile intimacy, see Hjorth, 2013) and ethno-national practices with mobile phones (Uimonen, 2004; Gopinath, 2005).

The containing space of mobile phone is also immersive, taking the body in, holding it during its connection and containment, and opening up an exteriority or an exit from where the body is. Norman Klein (1997) suggests that when people talk on their cellular while walking, they move through the space are not actually there. They are just immersed in mobile; a body with a mobile, dealing with it actively is no more in the place where her body is, thus the spatial differences have very little influence on her movement –immersion, imaginal movement. As demonstrated by Haddon and Vincent’s (2009) study, the use of deliberate over-involvement with mobile media can be used by youngsters as a strategy to isolate themselves from their environments. The mobile device generates a hybrid space that merges physical and digital spaces, and immersing the body by excluding its surroundings. Adriana de Souza e Silva writes, “most of all immersion depends on imagination” (2006, p. 30). When someone talks to another via her mobile phone, she plunges into the hybrid space of mobile telephony where imaginal movement, exit, and exteriority are possible. The mobile phone is the toy-like vehicle which instigates affective and imaginative movement; it takes us into its hybrid space, which corresponds to the potential for our very individual and social articulation (see also de Souza e Silva, 2013).

By providing the means of virtual movement, digital technologies have transformed what we think of as closeness, creating a feeling of co-

presence while bodies remain physically distant (Licoppe, 2004; Urry, 2002). The mobile phone can bring those at a distance into closer range, just as it can also distance others while not breaking relations with them. Ronell (1989) insightfully writes, “Being on the telephone will come to mean that contact is never constant nor is the break clean” (20). Thus being with a mobile phone functions like a surrogate for being with other people by protecting the very distance that is necessary for the sense of individuality (which becomes especially important for young users who like to establish some distance from their parents, see Ling, 2007). Rainie and Wellman (2012) argue that the mobile propagates “networked individualism” where users enter the social networks and thereby stay connected while protecting the individual personal space. The attachment to mobile phone as the most dominant personal media also manifests itself as an attachment to the mediated communication and presence (also tele-presence), entanglement (Ingold, 2008) where the social media tools have been integrated into various aspects of communication (see also Luders, 2008). Harper (2011) suggests that one of the key themes in communication research has become the communications overload that contemporary citizens/users/consumers suffer from. With the added means of connection, containment, entertainment and self-expression, the mobiles have become not only extensions of the body but also extended its role in human’s life as to make them both vulnerable to the risks of routinized surveillance and communication overload, and more skilled to master the power of connectivity and interactivity.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As mobile phone has become mobile media in the age of smart-phones, mobile media scholarship seems to be focusing on the research that attempts to understand its various dimensions and effects both at the individual and the societal level. Although mobile media scholarship has grown

extensively and diversified in terms of the use of theories and methodologies in the last decade, there are still many areas in need of elaboration and further research. One of these is related to the question of intensification of the attachment to the mobile as it becomes more and more embedded in our everyday practices and imaginations. The mobile media performs in ways that transcend mere instrumentality in terms of practical uses and meanings, such as representations of social status, lifestyles or the expression of selves. The mobile phone impresses, affects, moves and gathers bodies in particular ways that incur constant use and collective attachment. In this respect, the bond between the sensing and affective body and the machine, as well as the socio-technical conditions that give rise to the intense relations between the humans and the high-tech nonhumans need to be investigated.

Discussions on interactivity, heightened means of connectivity and containment of smart phones seem to be one of the other areas that are still in need of further elaboration. As mobile media become more and more essential tools of daily life practices, they also become more integrated into individual and collective existences, and social, cultural and political struggles. While the role of mobile phones in the particular organizations of political demonstrations, smart mobs, or broader crowd forming practices and its effectiveness for enhancing social cohesion have been well covered both empirically and theoretically, the ritualized practices of mobile phone as a political and cultural medium on the everyday life requires further research. Studies on mobile technologies in various spaces, including those on or about marginalized ones that pay sustained attention to the socio-technical contexts which alter class structures and identity formation tools, as well as to the fluid performance of technologies, will produce a nuanced understanding of why and how billions of people around the world become attached to these technologies. In this vein, a particularly

interesting yet underexplored terrain is that of the potential shifts in the nature of these attachments, as mobile technologies become closer and closer to users' bodies, thanks to the developments in the wearable technologies domain, which, we believe, will be among the pillars of the main problematic of the next generation of mobile media studies.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

C

Affectivity: Relating to, arising from, or influencing feelings or emotions.

Connectivity: The state of and/or capacity for establishing links and creating relationships.

Containing Technologies: Technologies that include a space for users to input and store personal information, thereby customize their machines. Containing technologies are conceptualized by Lewis Mumford and Zoe Sofia (by following Mumford) to discuss the female aspect of technologies that contain and give birth to the new outcomes.

Expressive Value: Expressive value can be understood as every dimension (in the realm of ideas) which, in its broadest sense, enlarges cultural meaning and understanding.

Instrumentality: The factor quality of serving as an instrument or means to an end.

Interactivity: Responding to and modified in accordance with inputs generated through a user's actions or commands.