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Shirley Chan

City University of Hong Kong, shirley.chan@lycos.com

Douglas Vogel

City University of Hong Kong, isdoug@cityu.edu.hk

Louis Ma

City University of Hong Kong, islma@cityu.edu.hk

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Recommended Citation

Chan, Shirley; Vogel, Douglas; and Ma, Louis, "Mobile Phone Communication Innovation in Multiple Time and Space Zones: The Case of Hong Kong Culture" (2006). *PACIS 2006 Proceedings*. 102.

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

Shirley Chan
City University of Hong
Kong
shirley.chan@lycos.com

Douglas Vogel
City University of Hong
Kong
isdoug@cityu.edu.hk

Louis Ma Department of
City University of Hong
Kong
islma@cityu.edu.hk

Abstract

Hong Kong is probably one of the very few places in the world where it is generally acceptable to answer incoming mobile phone calls in public places or even in the middle of a business or social meeting. In many other parts of the world, this kind of behaviour would be considered impolite or even rude because it interrupts conversations or activities. There has been considerable research carried out on mobile phones and interruption, as well as mobile phones and culture. However, there is little evidence of research on the impact of culture on the specific notion of interruption caused by mobile phones. To fill this knowledge gap, this paper presents an ethnographic study about how the Hong Kong cultural features of fast pace, deal-making and sense of urgency result in a positive perception towards mobile phone interruption. The findings indicate that Hong Kong people have innovative mobile phone communication strategies, characteristically juggling multiple identities in their stressful work pace, virtually racing with time. Comparison with other contexts is made.

Keywords: Communication, Mobile Phones, Interruption, Culture

1. 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 paper 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 (Zimmerman & West 1975; Ferguson 1977; Tannen 1981, Murata 1994; Li 2001), as well as on how mobile phones cause interruption (Nagata 2003; Van den Bluck 2003; Monk et al 2004a; Monk et al 2004b). 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.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section is a literature review on research concerning interruption, mobile phone interruption, as well as culture and mobile phone/internet usage. The second section deals with the ethnographic research methodology. The third section provides the data analysis. The fourth section presents the discussion on our research implications to be followed by concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review – Interruption, Mobile Phones and Culture

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 much 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). It follows then that all interruptions are considered power displays (Zimmerman & West, 1975 as cited in Li, 2001). Other researchers have called for a more balanced view of looking at interruptions (Beattie, 1981; Coon & Schwanenflugel, 1996 as cited in Li 2001). 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 (Murata, 1994).

Interruption and Mobile/ICT Devices. Two 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.

Other studies deal with the relationship between interruption/annoyance and mobile phones or other forms of information and communication technologies (ICT). These situations include the mobile/ICT devices being the source of interruption or a non-ICT source of interruption affecting the use of mobile or other ICT devices. Nagata (2003) explores the effect of anticipation and origin of an interruption on user web performance on a mobile device or desktop computer. Van den Bluck (2003) examines the situation where mobile text messages interrupt adolescents’ quality of sleep.

Social Identity and Mobile Phone. The popularity of mobile phone usage has also attracted the attention of sociologists. Geser (2003) regards the expansion of the mobile phone usage as a multi-dimensional challenge for sociological research and theory. Sheller & Urry (2003) have come up with sociology of mobilities?? that may potentially offer a better explanation for the dynamics of the apparently eroding boundaries of public and private lives.

Truch & Hulme (2004) opined that the 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. Srivastava (2005) claims that the mobile phone has become such an important aspect of our daily life that it has moved from being a mere technological to a key social object.

Culture, Social Behaviour and Mobile Phone/Internet. Several studies concern the impact of culture on the social behavioural aspects of mobile phone 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. Urbaczewski et al. (2002) examine how different cultures utilise mobile electronic commerce applications and collaborative mobile technologies and then they deploy the cognitive fit and technology acceptance models in addressing the related questions. 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. In spite of the considerable 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.

3. Research Methodology – Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative research approach setting out to understand the circumstances in which some sets of activities occur – the circumstances which give those activities meaning (Harper, 2000) or studying people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means that capture their social meanings and ordinary activities (Brewer, 2000).

Some researchers have employed ethnography in studying phenomena related to mobile phones. Esbjornsson & Juhlin (2003) carried out an ethnographical study on how different drivers of vehicles combined and adapted driving and mobile phone talk to ensure smooth mobile conversation so as to lower the possibility of having traffic accidents. Larsen (2003) reported on an ethnographic comparison of the mobile users' behaviour in public places in London, Madrid and Paris. The literature review shows that there is little or no ethnographic research on the specific notion of "interruption" with respect to mobile phone users' behaviour.

Given that the ethnographical approach seeks to understand the circumstances

surrounding certain activities that give meanings to those activities, our research question poses “How does Hong Kong culture impact on Hong Kong people’s positive perception or receptive attitude towards mobile phone interruption?” This study explores how Hong Kong cultural circumstances attribute certain meanings to mobile phone interruption as perceived by Hong Kong people.

Participant Observation – Hong Kong Cultural Context

Ethnographers have different techniques in gathering data, the most common of which include participant observation and interviewing (Brewer, 2000) which is used in this study. Participant observation involves data gathering by means of participation in the daily life of informants in their natural setting: watching, observing and talking to them in order to discover their interpretations, social meanings and activities. The researcher’s own feelings and attitudes, as well as social meanings when engaging in and living with the people in the field, form part of the data (Brewer, 2000).

The first author was responsible for gathering data in Hong Kong through participant observation. Participant observation allowed the author to have first-hand experience with Hong Kong culture. Culture consists of patterned ways of thinking that are shared across people in a society and these patterns are based on values which influence individuals’ cognitions, attitudes and behaviours (Straub et al., 2002; Hofstede, 1980). As a participant-observer, she was able to observe and interpret the mosaic of cultural values that Hong Kong people share which could possibly impact the acceptance of mobile phone interruption.

From April to August 2005, the first author observed how Hong Kong people were using mobile phones in public areas such as the subway, buses, restaurants and theatres, as well as at social and business meetings. She paid particular attention to the situations, if any, where people picked up an incoming mobile phone call in the middle of an activity – which meant that the mobile phone call had the effect of interrupting the activity. She listened to what they had to say on their mobile phones, participating in an activity in the same physical space as those being observed.

Interviews

While participant observation might give some inside views into how Hong Kong people behave in terms of using their mobile phones to interrupt their on-going activities in public places or during a meeting, it does not provide detailed information as to how Hong Kong people perceive such interruption. Interviews with some of these people overcame the limitations of participant observation in this regard. This is because the informants’ responses during the interviews generated data that shed light on their behaviour, meanings, attitudes and feelings as conveyed through their individual voices.

The data as collected from both participant observation and interviews thus complemented each other in addressing the research question.

The first author carried out unstructured interviews from July to August 2005 with ten individuals that resided or were residing in Hong Kong for a continuous period of at least fifteen years. Five of them were aged between 25 to 39, and the rest between 40 and 65. They were five males and five females. She started off the interview with a “casual chat” tone: “In many parts of the world, people may look at you if you pick up an incoming mobile phone call and talk while you are in a public place or are in the middle of a social or business meeting. But we do this quite often here in Hong Kong, don’t you think so? Do you think that might have something to do with our culture?”

4. Data Analysis and Findings

Ethnographic data analysis could be said to consist of various stages: data management, coding, content analysis, qualitative description, establishing patterns in the data, looking for classification schema to explain the data (Brewer, 2000).

Data management means organising the data into manageable units so that they do not appear as an amorphous mass (Brewer, 2000). The research question itself could help determine the basis on which the data are to be coded. Hammersley & Atkinson (1995) believe that in many ways, ethnographic data analysis begins in the pre-fieldwork stage – in the formulation and clarification of research problems and continues through to the process of writing reports, articles and books.

The data collected from participant observation and interviews were read and organised into suitable units on the basis of the research question. Finding the relevant concepts shed light on the data documented (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; O’Reilly, 2005). Data were organised according to the three major elements or concepts making up this research question: Hong Kong culture, impact, and positive perception towards mobile phone interruption.

Content analysis of the data was followed by qualitative description – identifying the key events, people and behaviour and providing vignettes (Brewer, 2000). Content analysis took the form of drawing together segments of data for sub-coding. For instance, data relating to the major code of “Hong Kong culture” was further divided into the sub-codes of “fast pace”, “deal-making” and “sense of urgency”. Data concerning the major code of “how the impact works” was split into the sub-codes of “pick up the call fast”, “catching up with various things simultaneously” and “not miss a call”. Data related to “positive perception towards mobile phone interruption” was broken up into the sub-categories of “instant attendance”, “multiple role juggling” and “seize every opportunity”. The qualitative description was noted in the field work journal during participant observation and during or soon after the interviews. The following is a list of some of the major scenarios or vignettes as noted:

There was a long queue at the cashier of a major supermarket. The cashier ladies were

busy checking out the clients. One of these ladies was helping a client in checking out while talking on a hands-free mobile phone with her friend.

A gentleman was travelling to work on a bus. He was reading the newspapers. Someone called him on his mobile. He picked it up immediately and talked for about five minutes while continuing with his newspaper reading.

Two teenagers were in a theatre about ten minutes before the movie was due to begin. Before the stage curtain came up, one of them had a mobile call coming in. He talked on the phone and laughed (presumably because of the interesting conversation) while making bodily gesture to his friend with his hands – (seemingly) signally the identity of the caller.

It appeared from participant observation of these scenarios that there was the tendency in Hong Kong to engage in multiple tasks simultaneously with the aid of a mobile phone. Individuals as featured in the above vignettes were engaged in concurrent activities in both their physical space (where they were physically present) and cyber or mobile space (where they talked on their mobile).

Findings – Fast Pace, Deal Making and Sense of Urgency

Establishing patterns in the data involves looking for recurring themes as well as relationships between the data and then developing the classification schema for explaining the data (Brewer, 2000). It was found that there were close relationships between these (sub-) codes identified during the earlier content analysis stages from which we derived findings that help answer the research question.

All ten informants said that the Hong Kong cultural hallmarks of “fast pace” and “sense of urgency” were the main reasons for picking up the incoming call fast. They did not want to miss a call in order to attain their goal of instantly attending to their business. All ten interviewees used the phrases “fast pace” or “urgent” as the very first words to describe or identify Hong Kong culture. Being “fast” or “urgent” seemed to be a major element of their social identity composition.

One informant commented:

“... because Hong Kong is such a fast-moving city, things change so fast! Hong Kong people don't mind picking up phone calls in the middle of meetings because they don't see that it is rude.”

Another informant responded:

“ ... in Hong Kong, it feels that the call has to be answered (i.e. it might be really, really important and I cannot miss it) ... because everyone does it all the time, people don't mind if others answer their phones during meetings – such interruptions.”

In addition, seven out of the ten informants opined that there was also the relationship between the Hong Kong cultural characteristics of deal-making and sense of urgency with the wish of catching up with various things simultaneously – and the mobile phone was a useful tool in reaching the related goals of seizing every opportunity and multiple role juggling. One informant mentioned:

“... people in Hong Kong like to pick up their phones as soon as possible because they don't want to miss out on any opportunities ... opportunities as in the stock markets, jobs, contacts ...”

Another informant said:

“The business of Hong Kong lifestyle and “don't miss deal” equals Hong Kong culture. Therefore this type of Hong Kong culture impacts on the immediate reaction to pick up all phone calls anywhere anytime.”

Five other informants made similar comments as follows:

“... in foreign countries like Canada or Australia, they have good social welfare systems and you don't have to worry if you lose a job or are sick ... people there can afford to be relaxed ... but not in Hong Kong! We don't have a comprehensive social welfare scheme. We have to make many deals in life ... if we don't work hard, we can't survive ... of course, we have to get things done to make a living and we pick up our mobile phone calls as soon as possible ...”

The combined effect of deal-making mentality and sense of urgency might account for the informants' positive perception towards mobile phone interruption because the mobile phone facilitated their multiple role juggling and seizure of opportunity both in the physical space where they were physically present as well as in the cyber space where they talked on their mobile phones. These informants' responses appeared to coincide with what was observed during the participant observation as mentioned above – that people were engaged in one activity in their physical space (like a supermarket cashier checking out her client) and in another activity in their cyber space (talking to a friend on the mobile phone). The three other respondents' replies are elaborated upon in the next section.

Exceptional Cases

In ethnographic data analysis, examining the negative cases entails explaining the

exceptions because these cases sometimes result in the modification of the original formulation (Brewer, 2000). Three out of the ten informants qualified their acceptance of mobile phone interruption. While they were receptive towards picking up an incoming mobile call most of the time, they would not choose to do so under certain circumstances. One of them, an academic researcher with a relatively more introverted personality, said:

“ ... Our personal spaces do change from time to time depending on whom we’re with and what we’re doing mobile calls sometimes could be another form of intrusion into our personal space ... ”

The second informant, a lawyer, mentioned:

“ ... it also depends on your relationship with that person – such interruption seems to be acceptable if people involved are friends, but not if they do not know each other well or in some business contexts. For instance, I think a client would be quite annoyed if his/her lawyer keeps on attending calls on the latter’s mobile phone during a meeting or meal ... ”

The third informant, a fresh graduate looking for a job, responded:

“... I would get a bit offended, depends on the situation, if my associate and I were discussing something serious, I would definitely be offended if he picked up the phone ... ”

These negative cases appear to suggest that the general acceptance and positive perception towards mobile phone interruption by Hong Kong people is because of the cultural features of fast pace, deal-making and sense of urgency. This would be qualified in such circumstances as serious discussion, e.g., some business contexts like a lawyer-client meeting or intrusion into the personal space as defined by the mobile phone user.

5. Discussion

The findings from our ethnographic study show that with few exceptions, the Hong Kong cultural characteristics of fast pace, deal-making and sense of urgency impact on the positive perception or receptive attitude towards mobile phone interruption by Hong Kong people. Mobile phones’ capability in reaching people immediately or allowing one to attend to something instantly is very much compatible with such Hong Kong cultural features of being fast or urgent.

Our findings also have the potential of challenging some of the current theories in respect of mobile technology users’ behaviour. We noted that Hong Kong people cherish multiple role-playing or -juggling simultaneously with the intention of maximising the time and

space resources they can get from both the physical and mobile spaces to survive in a highly competitive economy. We saw individuals in Hong Kong talking on their mobiles while concluding financial transactions, communicating with friends through their body language, working on a bike in the gym and reading newspapers in the bus. They are racing with time and space by “multi-engagement”, making the best use of time by engaging in various roles in the different physical and mobile spaces. Such phenomena suggest that Hong Kong people have innovative mobile phone communication because their simultaneous engagement in both the physical and social spaces is a relatively new mode of mobile communication that challenges the conventional mobile communication theory that mobile phone users are engaged in either the physical or mobile space but not in both spaces at the same time. There have been claims that mobile technology users are facing an “engaging-disengaging paradox” where they find it difficult to simultaneously engage in parallel activities, to engage in something new without disengaging from something else – when calls interrupt a conversation in the physical space, the person receiving the call will abruptly disengage from the current conversation and engage in a new one (Jarvenpaa et al., 2005). Palen et al. (2001) as cited in Truch & Hulme (2004) has similar views – When a call comes in, the mobile phone user has to decide what face takes precedence: the face that is consonant with one’s physical environment or that of the conversational (mobile) space.

At the moment, Hong Kong is possibly one of the very few places in the world where mobile phone interruption in public places or even in the middle of a business or social meeting is generally acceptable. Our study looks into the role of culture in this phenomenon. Culture is not static but dynamic (Tung, 1998) and has certain contextual ramifications. As stated above, one of the informants commented, “ ... in Hong Kong, it feels that the call has to be answered ... because everyone does it all the time, people don’t mind if others answer their phones during meetings ...”. How would these Hong Kong people behave with their mobiles if they were in an environment or context where most people were not happy with such interruption? Even though their Hong Kong upbringing might have nurtured in them the importance of being fast and urgent and coming up with innovative ways of communicating on their mobiles to maximise the time and space resources available, would they still interrupt others’ activities with mobile phone calls when they are outside of Hong Kong? The ease of mobile devices to take the user across contexts and cultures makes mobility research particularly challenging and interesting (Blom et al., 2005).

Our society has been going through a revolution because of the twin forces of globalisation and technology developments. Will Hong Kong lead the way and influence people in other parts of the world to accept mobile phone interruption? There are considerable numbers of Hong Kong immigrants living in major metropolitan cities like Vancouver, Toronto, Sydney, Melbourne and Singapore. Will they make an impact on the public mobile phone behaviour in their respective locale? Hong Kong has an international reputation of attaining high efficiency and world-class service standards. If such mobile phone interruption is not only acceptable in Hong Kong but being considered as part of its culture and possibly explaining its success as a major international financial centre, will people in other countries gradually accept it too if they proceed towards the goal of

economic advancement in conjunction with an innovative economy? These are just some of the many questions that we can consider for potential future research.

6. Conclusion

Hong Kong's cultural features of fast pace, deal-making and sense of urgency impact on Hong Kong people's positive perception towards mobile phone interruption. They have an innovative way of communicating on their mobiles and race with time and space – functioning simultaneously in both the physical and mobile spaces. Such “multi-engagement” findings challenge Jarvenpaa et al.'s (2005) theory of “engaging-disengaging paradox” relating to mobile technology users' behaviour. Mobile technology allows users to interact across contexts and cultures. Whether Hong Kong people will lead the world in mobile user behaviour or change their mobile usage patterns when they are in other countries or cultural contexts are some of the issues that are yet to be explored.

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