

Domestication of the Cell Phone on a College Campus: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This research project explores how cell phones are domesticated on a college campus in India. Students of Stella Maris College for Women (SMC), Chennai, are faced with highly limiting rules and regulations regarding how, when and where they can use their cell phone while on campus. While domestication studies have often focused on *implicit* restrictions that influence adoption of a technology (cultural norms, relationships, social expectations), this project investigates how formal rules in an institution can heavily impact the ways in which a technology is adopted, used and incorporated into daily life.

The study revealed how domestication process creates rituals and practices that allow students to subvert the institutional rules and carry on using their cell phone regardless. In fact, although the

1. INTRODUCTION

This research project is a small contribution to the ongoing debate of the role technology plays in our lives. Is the path of our lives inevitably directed by the trajectory of technological development, or do we as societies and as individuals stop, start and shape this momentum, moulding technological devices and even scientific ideas to fit into the contours of our everyday lives? It is the ongoing debate between Technological Determinism and the Social Shaping of Technology (Doyle, 1997; Williams & Edge, 1996).

This case study concerns the peculiar use of cell phones by students of SMC- a mid-size women's college in Chennai, India. The nature of the use is directly linked to the special nature of the environment and the users themselves, at least from the perspective of Western anthropological studies on cell phone usage so far. The restrictions of this environment- formal, physical and symbolic

The starting point of this project changed from how Indian women are using cell phones as a tool of securing a sense of emancipation from both physical and symbolic boundaries, to how cell phones are domesticated, in and of themselves, in socially restricted circumstances. This change in direction better fits the scale and scope of this dissertation, while still hinting at the incredible changes that urban, educated Indian women are undergoing at the beginning of the new millennium.

This study also shifted from an examination of the Social Shaping of Technology and Technological Determinism to a focus on the process of Domestication in and of itself. Domestication allows for a deeper look into the conscious decisions that go into shaping the way a device is used and thought of. The case study of SMC allows for an enquiry into what happens when a device is domesticated under formal institutional rules that aim at strongly restricting its use.

It would not be a stretch to say the cell phone is revolutionizing India- technologically and socially. India is leading the world in cell phone growth along with China (InStat, 2008) and lowered prices of handsets means that the cell phone as a device is levelling Indian society in unprecedented ways. Not only are they allowing the working class to catch up in some

2. THEORETHICAL REVIEW

I will briefly overview the history and literature on Domestication studies, and the mobile phone in soc

One key work on how use of technological devices are shaped by their culture, and in turn influence the behaviour of the consumer(s) is Chavan's particular model of 'counter-culture', which he defines as a 'compensatory model'. "A compensatory model looks at a given culture and its characteristics. It posits that these characteristics can cause people to behave in certain predictable ways but at the same time the characteristics can put pressure on people. This causes people to behave in accordance with their culture but also seek release to the consequences of the constraints of the culture, at least in subtle ways. This behaviour would be classified counter culture." (Chavan, 2007, p. 25)

This concept is highly relevant to this case, where students behave according to the rules of the college, and do not overtly challenge them, yet 'release the consequences of the constraints' in covert ways.

SETTING THE STAGE-YOUNG WOMEN, ICTS AND INDIA

Prior Research: Several studies have been done on Women and ICTs, focusing on the gendered use of technology and the differences in use and appropriation by women as compared to men. See for instance studies on women and the telephone (Rakow, 1992), women and the internet (Bakardjieva, 2005) and women and ICTs (Marcelle, 2004; Geser, 2006; Lin & Tong, 2007). Much research has been done on ICTs and Development- the use and growth of ICTs in developing countries and economies, and how ICTs can be used to galvanise and 'leap frog' individuals and communities in areas of information distribution and entrepreneurship. (For an excellent overview on different case studies relating to gender, development and ICTs, see Valk, Cummings, & Dam, 2005.)

When ICTs are used in developing economies, and by underprivileged and marginalized groups such as the women and the poor, the trajectory of research will naturally gravitate towards ICTs and Empowerment. Studies have been done on ICTs as a tool for women's empowerment (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003) as well as critiques of the notion that access to ICTs is an automatic guarantee towards a better life for women (Mitter, 2004).

These areas of research will not be directly pursued in this project, as the main focus will remain and be limited to the process of domestication in a college campus. Nevertheless, issues such as these are tangential to the case study, and provide the broader context behind this particular environment under observation.

Duality of experience: Young Indian Women in Higher Education:

academic year (when this project was undertaken) are not to use cell phones anywhere on campus during college hours (8.00 am to 5.20 pm) *except* for the following time periods- 10.50 am to 11.10 am, 1.00 pm to 1.25 pm, 4.15 pm to 4.25 pm, and only in the Canteen Area, an open-air eating area in the centre of campus. If a student was caught using the cell phone outside the allotted times/place, the cell phone was liable to be confiscated by the management.

4. RESEARCH AIMS

My basic research question for this project is "How do the students of SMC domesticate their cell phones while on campus?" This question takes into account the rules that severely curtail cell phone use on campus, and seeks to explore the proc

domestication. Quantifying the overall trends of cell phone usage would give us little insight into the conscious decisions that precede these styles of adoption, and the social, cultural, institutional and economic factors that lead to such decisi

Self-completion Diaries

Interviews could not be sufficient as the only method to collect data for this project, especially as a comprehensive ethnographic approach was not possible. I required a method that could supplement the flexibility of an interview with a more concrete recording of the times and means of cell phone usage on campus. The ideal method was therefore the use of self-completion diaries.

As Corti has stated, "diaries can provide a reliable alternative to the traditional interview method for events that are difficult to recall accurately or that are easily forgotten." (Ibid) Although one may have a general understanding of the frequency/nature of one's cell phone use throughout the day, such notions may be exaggerated or under-represented, intentionally or unintentionally, during the process of an interview.

Completion of a diary prior to the interview would entail two key advantages:

- I would personally acquire a written, concrete record of actual cell phone use on campus, with information including the time, place, duration, function and content of the communication.
- Keeping a diary would require the participant to be self-reflective on their own habits of cell phone use. Going over the diary with the participant before the interview would help them understand their habits of cell phone use in more specific terms, and their responses during the interview may therefore be more accurate and less vague.

I asked the participants to keep a log of their cell phone use on campus for two days. I supplied them with pre-formatted diaries and let them know that I would require a follow-up interview as soon as possible after the two days were over.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are among the most popular tools of qualitative research. (ten Have, 2004, p. 5) As mentioned previously, domestication studies have used interviews to great effect. Interviews allow the researcher to gain insight no -1 () -183 (C)8-385 (t -1 (a)h -1(e) -1 (Tfh) -1 (a)

Aside from the practical convenience of recruiting using my personal network and consequent snowball sampling, there were definite advantages to interviewing people I knew personally. The participants who were my friends knew that they could trust me completely to keep their responses and diaries confidential. They were aware of the nature of my graduate studies and my personal views on both college life in India and on the cell phone rules on campus. Snowball sampling ensured that the participants I did not know personally were assured that I was trustworthy, as I had been vouched for by someone *they* trusted.

Since I was close to the participants in age, and had only recently graduated from their college, they looked upon me more as a peer and confidante rather than as a reseer

sight depending on location, time and proximity of F/M. As a result, the participants were extremely comfortable with the physical handling of their cell phones. It was here that a marked difference could be seen between the low-frequency users and the high-frequency users. High-frequency users routinely used the cell phone hidden out of sight not only from the F/M, but from themselves. Using the cell phone while it's in their bag, or under the chair or table, and using it while taking notes/making eye-contact with the teacher requires a high level of mastery over the functions of the cell phone and assorted buttons. High-frequency users were very comfortable using a cell phone while not actually looking at it, while low-frequency users often needed to look at the cell phone while using it, and could not read messages as rapidly as some of their friends.

Miya: *I need to see [the phone], because I am not 'savvy', as to message*

Indeed, one memorable feature about Bhavna's interview was the she not only fiddled with her phone throughout the interview, but even messaged *while* responding promptly and lucidly to my questions.

THE DAILY RHYTHM

Incorporation refers to the process by which a technology is integrated into the temporal and spatial patterns and rituals of everyday life. The interviews shed much light on how the students fit the cell phones into the temporal 'gaps' contained within and between their classes, and how they exploited the physical features and locales of the campus to reconfigure them as cell phone 'zones'.

'Colonization' of public spaces

The other locations that usually were mentioned tended to be secluded areas of campus that were rarely frequented by either the faculty or the management. The means by which the

Geser has formulated the ability of the cell phone to symbolically extrapolate us from our

that they are unaware of the student body's continued use of cell phones. What has developed instead is a don't-ask don't-tell policy by the F/M, which allows the student to use their cell phone as long as it's done covertly. Each teacher, depending on their own point of view regarding the situation, chooses either to ignore cell phone use, or to reprimand the student in question, or to confiscate the cell phone, either temporarily or permanently. Therefore the domestication process varies drastically depending on *which* teacher the student has to deal with, and the student then uses their cell phone accordingly, or does not use it at all.

Q: But don't you think the teacher realizes-

Priya: Well yeah of course, she'll know, but she can't do anything no, without proof. Unless we're openly using it in front of her.

As a whole, the student body is bound together by an unspoken code, a pretence of

text. Finally, the keypad would be soft and make a minimum of noise. Tanusha suggested small and inconspicuous ear phones/headsets for the phone, so that students could easily make calls while on campus without the tell-

the participant sample. Any assessment of this project as a whole must take these limitations into consideration.

REVISITING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

Domestication

Domestication can be problematic. Much akin to the breaking in of a wild animal, some devices just cannot be tamed to fit into one's personal life context (Berker et al., 2005, p. 3). The process is also not linear, orderly or easily observable- it can be chaotic and unpredictable. The results of the study did not fit into the categorise posited by Silverstone and his colleagues (1992), and better fitted into themes that originated from the situation of the campus and the nuances of mobile telephony. This case study revealed the interesting forms domestication undertakes when it encounters explicit hurdles, as opposed to the implicit limitations imposed by familial norms, values and expectations. Students went over and around the rules, and at times charged right through them, revealing that often implicit feelings of respect and boredom proved more consistent predictors of use than the official deterrents. The process also revealed the importance that students placed on the cell phone as a device as they risked a confrontation with their teachers and confiscation of the device itself every time they used it.

The cell phone as a device

The cell phone's impact on social life has been enumerated at length, from its impact on communication at different levels of interaction (Geser, 2005), to the formation of 'virtual walled communities' (Ling, 2004), to the phenomenon of 'hyper-coordination' among teenagers (Ling & Yttri, 2002). One aspect that however has not been focused on is its potential as a highly subtle and inconspicuous mechanism for communication. It is possible to embed the cell phone so deeply into everyday life that it almost "disappears as a

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Can this potential of the cell phone translate into marketability? The participants in this study all had ideas towards making the cell phone more 'campus friendly', in their particular case. Their suggested designs could definitely enhance the cell phone's ability to be domesticated in a restricted environment. However, in terms of marketability, aside from the questions of whether the consumer market is large enough or possesses sufficient capital to justify a new line of 'campus' phones, there is also the question of ethics. Although I have clearly remained sympathetic towards the students in this case study, the bottom line is that they are regularly breaking the rules of their institution. The unobtrusiveness of the cell phone has proven to be problematic, particularly in the case of camera phones (Srivastava, 2005, p. 117). The questions of *should* this behaviour and domestication process be encouraged and exploited commercially must therefore be addressed.

The cell phone as a cultural commodity.

The discreet domestication – the ritual of pretences- is not only seen in cell phone use, but in how young Indian women conduct their lives. They may be unhappy or frustrated with the rules imposed on them, but their frustrations are rarely actively expressed. Instead they are accepted as a part of life, as part of an exchange for something else they're getting (Chetna: "SMC is okay... see, at least it's better than most"), and instead they work *around* the rules to achieve their desired objective. It is a tricky balancing act, indicative of the changing times these women in particular are facing. They are undergoing college education, something less than 6% of Indian women enjoy. They have achieved legal adulthood, and yet are not provided with the freedoms and responsibilities that higher education and maturity might naturally indicate. Their means of resolving this dichotomy is to satisfy the authority figures in their lives by not openly rebelling, but by taking the effort and time to find loopholes and develop techniques that will allow them to express themselves in alternative ways.

The 'compensatory model' posited by Chavan (2007) – speaks of how cell phones- a primarily individual device- give rise to conflicts and issues of negotiated use within a collective culture such as that of India. The method of domestication on campus – the way cell phones are both used unofficially, and *not* used officially – can speak to how young Indian women both conform to their culture while challenging it implicitly.

Looking to the future

Not only has literature on use of ICTs in formally regulated environments been relatively scarce, but so has research work on young Indians and their use of ICTs. Research into this particular demographic would make an excellent starting point for exploring an entire generation poised between conservatism and modernity, negotiating their way out of the past – marked by poverty and stagnation- into the future of mobility and wealth, promised by India's fast growing economy and the influx of western liberal values. The cell phone- a tool that allows for anytime/anywhere communication, which is still yet affordable to the majority of the middle class- plays a crucial role in both this material and symbolic

Ling, R. (1997). "One can talk about Common Manners!" The Use of Mobile Telephones in Inappropriate Situations. In L. Haddon (Ed.), Themes in mobile telephony: Final Report of the COST 248 Home and Work group.
http://www.richardling.com/papers/1997_One_can_talk_about_common_manners.pdf.

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