Chapter V
Understanding the Impact of Culture on Mobile Phone Usage on Public Places: A Comparison between the UK and Sudan

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ABSTRACT

Over the last several years, 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 chapter, the authors 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). The results presented in the chapter 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.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the unlimited benefits of the Internet in its ability to facilitate social interaction, learning environment and business opportunities, people in the developing countries do not have the same access to the Internet in comparison to the developed world. In turn, people in the developing world are eliminated from the chance of forming and participating on online communities. The Internet penetration rates vary vastly from one continent or even country to the other. For example, in Europe, 312,722,892 users have Internet access (38.7% of the population), whereas in Africa, only 3.6% of the population have Internet access (ITU, 2004). According to Internetworldstats (2006) the total number of 32,765,700 African Internet users is smaller than those who use the Internet in the UK (37,600,000). Most African Internet users are centred in the capitals and urban areas, as in rural areas, the existence of PCs and Internet connection is scarce (Donner, 2005).

There are many reasons for the lack of access to the Internet in Africa. For example, the affordability of computer equipment. Oyeyinka and Adeya (2004) conducted a cross-country examination in Nigeria and Kenya and found that Internet use was constrained by structural as well as cost factors. In their study, they found that the cost of owning a PC compels users (especially academics) to access the Internet in cyber cafes and other public places.

Therefore, the poor connectivity of the Internet, the high cost entailed to afford the required equipment, and the cost of maintaining a monthly Internet connection have unintentionally excluded some users from communicating through the Internet. However, on the other hand, people in these parts of the developing world have made use of another available medium of communication that is the mobile phone. According to Donner (2005) the mobile phone plays an important role in Africa to manoeuvre social interaction, facilitate learning as well as creating business opportunities. Mobile phones in the developing world especially in Africa, in addition to its expected uses, enabled its users to communicate in an analogous way as communication on online communities. For example, Agar (2003) observed how people used the mobile phone to offer support for each other during the volcanic eruption in Eastern Congo. Donner (2005) reported that in Rwanda the mobile phone is used to link rural health clinics involved with the treatment of HIV patients. The support provided through the mobile phone can be similar to that received in online communities.

Interestingly, similar to online ‘community of practice’, Idowu, Ogunbode & Idowu (2003) found that Nigerian doctors use mobile phones to communicate with each other across different parts of a large hospital to share knowledge, and to respond to emergencies when offsite. The mobile phone has also been used for e-learning in Africa (Masters, 2005; Mutula, 2002; Stone, Lynch & Poole, 2003). These researchers found that the mobile’s portability, simplicity, and affordability make it a natural fit for education programmes in places where PCs and Internet connectivity may be limited.

Some (Bray, 2005; Sesay, 2005) noted that mobile providers can have a positive impact on calming conflict situations in post-conflict nations like Rwanda, Afghanistan and East Timor. Others look to the everyday, arguing that mobile phones contribute to stronger social capital in Africa (Goodman, 2005). Donner (2005) found that the mobile phone is used to facilitate new business connections for small businesses. The New York Times (2005) reported on an illiterate woman living on the Congo River, who asked her customers to call her on her mobile phone if they wanted to buy fresh fish. “She does not have electricity, she can not put the fish in the freezer”, Mr. Nkuli of Vodacom said, “So she keeps them in the river, tethered live on a string, until she is called on her mobile phone. Then she retrieves them and prepares them for sale”.

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