

Mobile Phone Beeping

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INTRODUCTION

In most parts of the developing world, beeping or “flashing” is an established behavior in which a mobile phone user makes a call but hangs the phone after one, two or three rings, before the call is answered, mostly because they do not have enough pre-paid credit to pay for a call. Beeping is a common practice among people who have probably run out of credit as it enables the person who has missed a call to see who called and rings the person back. The central aim of beeping is to elicit a call back from the person beeped as well as to communicate for free. Hence, it often comes with “fast,” “sudden” or “instant” covert message, which could be ‘I’ve arrived’, ‘Hi, I’m thinking of you’, or a request to call back immediately such as ‘please call me back’, *etc.* The mobile’s call log and address book functions signal who called, and when. That is, when one sees a number on the missed call log, one uses his/her knowledge of the relational context and the meaning of past beeps to determine which beeps “mean” what. In most cases, senders and receivers distinguish among beeps using their knowledge of the situation and the people involved in the exchange. Hence, the meaning of missed call is sometimes negotiated by the group and is indicative of social practices developed by people around the use of mobile phone’s technology (Donner, 2007)

In some countries, especially in Asia and Africa, the person who beeps is technically called a “beeper” or “flasher” while the person that received the beeping has been “beeped” or “flashed.”

People sometimes exchange beeps with relatives. This practice of calling a number and hanging up before the mobile’s owner can pick up the call is old, with roots in landline behaviors, but it has grown tremendously, particularly in the developing world. Jonathan Donner, an India-based researcher for Microsoft, observes that the goal of a beeper is to save money. To Donner (2005), the practice of beeping is simply a means of taking the fullest advantage of the technological features of mobile phones (call logs and address books) and payment systems (‘calling party pays’).

This practice is common in the general population in Africa, South Asia and South America as it is free for both the caller and the receiver. It has different names in different countries, including “beeping,” “missed calling,” “flashing,” “pranking,” “lost calling,” “buzzing,” and “fishing” (Donner, 2008). Beeping allows people to communicate in various ways without having to speak or use any airtime, as network service providers do not charge for missed calls. It is a totally established mode of communication in places where airtime is still precious, most notably Africa and Asia. According to Donner (2007), two important factors which may have contributed to the wide and extensive use of beeping/missed calling are changes in the user-base of mobile phones and changes in billing structures and technology.

The objectives of this chapter are to describe the nature of beeping; identify the characteristics and reasons why people beep. In addition, the chapter examines the implications of this behavior for mobile phone culture, especially in the parts

of the world where it is prevalent. Finally, the chapter will suggest future research directions in the research on mobile phone beeping specifically and mobile phone behaviors in general.

OVERVIEW

Dr. Jonathan Donner, a researcher in the Technology for Emerging Markets Group at Microsoft Research in Bangalore, India, was among the earliest scholars to examine the concept of mobile phone beeping. Beeping generally means a tone or sound from an electronic device meant to notify someone about an activity on the device. However, in the context of mobile telephony, it could be a sound that indicates a call waiting. Phone beeping is an established and common mobile phone human behavior/practice which has not received adequate attention from scholars as some other behaviors associated with digital technologies, such as cyberbullying mobile phone addiction, sexting, phone sharing and the use of mobile phone while driving. Existing studies on beeping, flashing, and missed calls identifies the behavior as a strategy to keep mobile expenditures as low as possible (Donner, 2005, 2007; Donner *et al.*, 2008).

In his study of the widespread practice of beeping between mobile phone users in sub-Saharan Africa, Donner (2007), whose primary research interests focus on the economic and social implications of the spread of mobile telephony in the developing world, is a leading expert scholar in the study of mobile phone beeping. He distinguishes three categories of beeping/missed calls: 'Pre-Negotiated Instrumental Beeps', 'Relational Beeps' and 'Call back Beeps'. Call back beep is the most common beep. Here, the beeper implicitly signals and asks the recipient to answer the missed call with a voice call, and therefore pay for the call. The pre-negotiated instrumental beep is used to practical purposes as a means of sending prearranged messages. It takes into account that the interacting parties mapped a certain code of

beeps with a particular meaning. For instance, one beep could mean e.g. "call me back" or "I'm home," as two beeps for example might mean "Just arrived at home safely; I'm at work," three beeps could mean "pick me up now." The relational beep is especially popular amongst teenagers, good friends and family members. Here, the beep reminds a friend or a loved one that "I'm thinking of you" or "You are important to me" "I miss you," "I love you," and so on. While 'Pre-Negotiated Instrumental Beeps' are mutually negotiated and agreed grammar of use, 'Call back Beeps' are missed calls which simply request for a callback (Donner, 2007). Examples: callback beeps ('call back, because I'm out of airtime), pre-negotiated instrumental beeps ('come and collect me now', 'I'm done with my work, pick me up') and relational beeps (to say 'hello' 'goodnight', 'get ready' etc). The practice has its roots in landlines, he argues, but has evolved considerably with the spread of mobile phones in the developing world. Beeping both reflects (relies on) and reinforces (creates) shared understandings of economic and power hierarchies, social exchange, and gender roles, as well as the particular circumstances of relationships between two people (Donner, 2009).

Donner's (2005) paper "The rules of beeping: exchanging messages using missed calls on mobile phones in sub-Saharan Africa" is a major pioneer empirical study on the widespread practice of beeping. In the paper, Donner identifies the rules of beeping such as "do not beep too frequently, or at the wrong time"; "women don't like to receive beeps from suitors"; "if a recipient does not reply, beep again," *etc.* In the study, Donner assesses the significance of the practice using socio-linguistic and socio-technical approaches to communication behavior. The paper contrasts beeping with SMS/text messaging, and observes that a beep is free and has no content. Hence, it rarely stands on its own, without some contextual or relational cues to back it up. It also requires multiple beeps from an unknown number before mobile owners may return the call. In addition, he explains the characteristics of beeps as being constrained to

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