

Using Mobile Phones to Control Social Interactions

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INTRODUCTION

Mobile phone communication is a class of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and is an exchange of information between two or more people using electronic devices. “Control” is our key concept in this chapter: control is the power to influence and direct. We consider control in relation to mobile phone communication by suggesting that people use the features of mobile phone technology to manage and manipulate their social interactions, creating a new social developmental niche. Social interactions are defined as any act of communication between two or more individuals.

OVERVIEW

First we consider how, historically, the lack of non-verbal and non-textual cues transmitted by CMC was viewed as having a somewhat negative impact on relationship formation. We then discuss more recent theories which suggest that this lack of transmitted cues is not necessarily detrimental to relationship development, as people accommodate with adapted communication styles. We further argue that mobile phone use can actually contribute positively to relationship formation, and that existing social contexts are unlikely to be completely disrupted by the infiltration of a new communication medium. Next, we consider how people use the synchronous and asynchronous

features of mobile phones to meet the specific needs of their interactions, and highlight that people may be biologically predisposed to prefer synchronous communications where these are possible. We further suggest that the asynchronous features of mobile phones allow people to manage and maintain other relationships that are a necessary part of modern life. We go on to describe how mobile phones facilitate observations of the social interactions of others through ‘warranting’ and argue that the social behaviour associated with mobile phone use evolves and impacts on the social cognition and norms of users. Finally, we introduce cognitive niche construction theory and suggest that in controlling how we communicate and represent ourselves through mobile phone use, we are building a new niche of social interactions that may impact on the development of subsequent generations. Pioneering scholars in this field of study included Culnan and Markus (1987), Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, and McGuire (1986), Daft and Lengel (1986), Lea and Spears (1991), and Walther (1992). Current leading researchers include: Professor Joseph B Walther at Michigan State University (Walther, 2011), Professor Naomi Baron at American University in Washington (Baron, 2008), Alex S Taylor at Microsoft Research in Cambridge (Taylor & Harper, 2003), Mizuko Ito at the University of California (Ito, 2003), and Yoram Kalman at the University of Haifa (Kalman & Rafaeli, 2007).

CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Implications of Limited Social Cues: A Historical Perspective

Walther (2011) provides a detailed description of ‘cues-filtered-out’ models of CMC and their research background. Historically, this group of theories suggested that communication media that have a low capacity for transmitting non-verbal or non-textual cues (or ‘low bandwidth’) inhibit social relationship formation (Culnan & Markus, 1987). Such cues may include facial expression, gestures or body language, and provide an indication of people’s intentions in a face-to-face conversation. For example, social presence theory suggests that CMC allows less of a sense of ‘awareness’ or ‘presence’ of the other person in an interaction (Short et al., 1976). Meanwhile, the lack of social context cues hypothesis (Siegel et al., 1986) suggests that a lack of nonverbal cues encourages users to become disinhibited and aggressive. Media richness theory suggests that ambiguous messages require richer media (that is, media that can transmit multiple verbal and nonverbal cues) than unambiguous messages if they are to be communicated efficiently (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Finally, signalling theory suggests that people are wary about trusting self-descriptions via CMC as they can easily be fabricated (Donath, 1999).

Another cues-filtered out theory, the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) (Lea & Spears, 1991) is slightly different to other cues-filtered out models in its predictions about interpersonal communication. SIDE argues that the visual anonymity afforded by CMC can lead to a reduction in self-awareness and sense of individuality. Anonymity obscures individual features and interpersonal differences which means that individual attitudes become more easily influenced by perceptions of stereotypic group features, which encourages decision-making to align with group norms. Identification with a group or social category then becomes emphasised

with users becoming attracted to others who seem to belong to this group, which then contributes to behavioural effects such as disinhibition and flaming (exhibiting hostility towards others). The impersonalizing aspects of SIDE are why it is classified as a ‘cues-filtered out’ model.

Cues-filtered out models of CMC would suggest that when mobile phones are used for non-verbal forms of communication such as text messaging or instant messaging, this would impact negatively on social relationship formation. However, social information processing (SIP) theory is a non-‘cues filtered out’ theory that is more positive in its perspective of how the filtering of non-verbal cues impacts on communication practices (Walther, 1992). SIP suggests that people adapt their communication styles when using media with reduced bandwidth, through the use of language, style, timing of messages and even emoticons. Further, it suggests that if messages are accumulated over longer time periods, relationships formed by CMC can become as rich and well established as those formed face-to-face. More recent literature tends to view CMC through this more positive lens, and we support this perspective. This point of view is also consistent with the ‘rational actor’ theory of CMC which suggests that people use technology strategically to meet their communication needs rather than the technology itself determining how people behave (Markus, 1994).

Mobile Phones as Part of an Existing Social Context

Technology itself does not entirely determine how people interact with one another. Taylor and Harper (2003) argued that when mobile phones were first adopted they became part of existing social contexts, and this was what shaped how they were used rather than the technology itself dictating people’s behaviour. For example, they found that text messages have symbolic meaning for recipients and can demonstrate commitment to relationships; there is also often an expectation of

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