

Chapter 12

Social Trust as Seed: Cases of Early Mobile Phone Domestication Among Poor Urban Youth in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the role the mobile phone plays in the poor urban youth's social life. This chapter argues that one can better grasp their social life by looking through the new technology lens. It seeks to examine the collective-mediated learning, sharing, and experimenting with the emergent patterns of trust in the social context. The emergence of three types of social trust genres that correspond respectively to the stage of domestication by the poor urban youth are described: social trust as a seed for peer-to-peer learning, social trust as a seed for group underground sharing, and social trust as a seed for fueling the experimental spirit. It concludes that social trust functions as a seed for increasing positive interdependent towards others play an important role in nurturing trust among the poor urban youth as they domesticate new media technology, such as the mobile phone, into their everyday lives.

INTRODUCTION

A group of youth forms a circle, focusing intently on a small device that excites them. It acts as a small radio station, blaring out catchy tunes. A gang of three youths keeps snapping pictures from a portable device as they take turns posing with different backgrounds and animated faces. What kind of object are they all examining? That central object is the omnipresent mobile phone. What the youth are

doing have almost identical patterns in other parts of Bangladesh; they form a group and then use the mobile phone as one of their everyday central life focus points. The mobile phone is quickly becoming a fixture in everyday life in Bangladesh, and there is a growing sense of it as a familiar presence.

For the past two years, reflecting on several trips for fieldwork taken to Bangladesh, this author's questions about the mobile phone simply as a communication and coordination tool had changed to: How is mobile communication integrated into youth life as part of their emancipation towards adult-

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hood? Can society learn something about why the youth are more willing to share a mobile phone collectively, and how this collective behavior influences the group dynamics and trust among them? For the past two years, while studying the poor urban youth and mobile communication, this author has learned to direct attention at such moments. The stories told usually revolved around the mobile phone and its influences on their collective-mediated learning, sharing, and experimenting.

“When we group together, we are like a family, although we are not. That I think is something special about us” Dhaka Youth, Female, around 18 years old.

“We learn together and sometimes fall out together. Never mind the fall out between us. That’s ok. It is part of the learning.” Chittagong Youth, Male, 21 years old.

“We learn, share and learn, and grow together by using different ways to learn.” Sylhet Youth, Male, 25 years old.

These three voices, all from the fieldwork, have much in common. They refer to the process of exploring the use and the domestication of mobile phones into everyday life. The process that braids all these together is a path of collective-mediated learning, then the sharing of collective practices, and finally, having the courage to experiment imaginatively. As a consequence, this path sparks a new way of domesticating the mobile phone. To further explore these ideas, these chapters seek to answer several key questions: How and what are the mobile use particularities of the poor urban youth? How does social trust play a role in mobile use and domestication? What are the different genres of social trust that emerge from their interaction with the mobile phone?

This chapter starts with a literature review about the domestication of new media, and describes the constructionism perspective in a domestication context. It also connects the characterization of social trust in the new media context. Then, a general logic of social trust based on the economic and sociology perspective is outlined. Next, this chapter describes the ethnography work of the mobile phone domestication, and its related subjects. In the findings and discussion section, this chapter discusses collective-mediated learning, sharing, and experimenting through the social trust lens. Then this chapter focuses on three case studies of social trust as the most promising – social trust as seed – explanations relevant to collective-mediated learning, sharing, and experimenting: peer-to-peer learning, underground sharing practices, and experimenting to connect. Finally, it concludes by showing that the existing evidence points toward the fact that groups who succeed in cultivating social trust are most likely to domesticate new media technology with sustained confidence.

BACKGROUND: CHARACTERIZATION OF SOCIAL TRUST IN THE NEW MEDIA DOMESTICATION AND EMERGING COUNTRY CONTEXT

In order to grasp the mobile use domestication, a theoretical framework is needed to capture the complexity of the matter at hand. The first two subsections postulate that new media domestication, such as the mobile phone, can be studied based on consumption-, sociology- and anthropology-wide perspectives. By delving deeper to examine the inner workings of mobile use and domestication, it is important to understand not only the system (way of workings), but also the structure (the frame that a process follows). This will allow a grasp of the phenomenon in an orderly manner. Based on the empirical findings from different

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