How are mobile phones changing the way people maintain relationships

Technology, Mobile Phone

CULTURAL AWARENESS How are mobile phones changing the way people maintain relationships? INTRODUCTION Mobile phones are increasingly taking a major role in thecommunicationrevolution and the use of the mobile phone is an immensely significant social and cultural phenomenon, hence over the years, the telephone has dramatically changed how people live their lives, see their world and communicate. As we read in Ferraro (2002: 29) " all cultures experience continual change", however nowadays the process of a change is even more intensified, more dynamic and much quicker.

A lot of that has to do with the development of mobile telephonetechnology. In referring to the drivers of change, we cannot forget about phenomenon ofglobalizationwhich affects our modern lifestyle. In today's world we live in a fast-pace, where maintaining relationships is made difficult by the fact we have less time for social bonding, and communication is often very limited. Here comes into importance the technology of the mobile phone, as it gives the opportunity to talk to anyone, anywhere at any time.

Since mobile phones have become an increasingly important tool in social interaction, the purpose of this research project is to gain insight into the mobile technology phenomenon and to understand better how it affects the way people maintain relationships by linking it to the theoretical background of social construction and selective perception. The report consists of four major sections. Firstly, theoretical background will be presented, followed up by the explanation of methodology used.

Then the findings of the primary research will be presented, followed up by an overall analysis of information gathered. Finally, a conclusion will be

given. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND Before investigating the influence that mobile phones have had on the way the relationships are maintained, it is crucial to understand the connection between communication andculture. According to Hall (1977) " Culture is communication and communication is culture", from which we can deduce that the way we communicate expresses our culture.

Therefore, any shift in the way we communicate has an influence on our culture, our perception , our behavior and the social construction. Let us take a look at the social construction. Why does this concept need to be mentioned? The answers is that we, as members of the society, are assembling ways of seeing things, while at the same time shaping our expectations and behavior. As culture is maintained by social construction, we learn culture every day. We learned to use mobile phones on a daily basis, letting them become inseparable part of our daily routine.

Here another concept comes into importance, namely perception. Culture, and at the same time communication, performs an important role in how we perceive and understand reality. According to Gamble and Gamble (1996), (in Samovar et al, 2007: 128-130), we select, interpret and organize data in order to make sense of our world. And being exposed to similar experiences, culture creates similar meaning and behavior, which is called selective perception. It is truly incredible how fast mobile phones have caused a change in social construction and the way people perceive communication and social bonding.

Sections below intend to explain how exactly mobile phones are changing the way people maintain relationships. METHODOLOGY In order to find out how the mobile technology is influencing the way the relationships are maintained in Britain , several methods were used to study the behavior of mobile phone users. Firstly, during a period of 4 weeks, in a variety of settings, using anobservation, I observed the behavior of mobile phone users, by listening to their conversations and observing their approach to phone conversations, texting and using their mobile for various purposes.

This was followed up by 2 individual and 2 focus group discussions. I found the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions most appropriate for my research, as they gave a lot of qualitative information and let the people who were being interviewed express themselves and their opinions fully, which would not be the case if I decided to use questionnaires . FINDINGS As indicated before, for the research methods I have used an observation, two in-depth interviews and also two focus group discussions.

During the period of observation I have noticed many different behaviors regarding mobile phone usage, however for the purpose of this report, only the ones which apply to the topic have been listed below: * On the bus: 10 out of 25 people were using their phone in some way * On the bus: 7 out of 25 people received or made a phone call within 45 min time frame * At the university: at least 1/3 of people gathered in a mutual area were talking or texting on their mobiles * In the cafe: All individuals sitting alone had a mobile phone either on the table or in usage

It can be argued that mobile phones are increasingly used by people, for they are new communication tools. Since mobile communication is an uprising issue, the above observations conducted me to bring forth questions for further investigation on how mobile phones are influencing the way people maintain relationships. The sample for the qualitative research method included 10 people [male and female] (for both interviews and focus group discussions). The answers were mostly collected from the age group 20-30 years old.

All participants were believed to be in a peaceful state, important in concluding the honesty and quality of the answers given as they were unaffected by an unnatural sate of nervousness. To better understand how relationships are maintained in today's society and to get a better view of the issue discussed, first the respondents were asked to describe how they communicate with theirfamilyand friends. Their instant response was via phone calls, text messages, facebook, skype, and instant messengers like WhatsApp .

Only one person said that they maintain face to face contact with family. Since the respondents indicated mobile phones as means through which they often communicate with their contacts, this initiated a series of questions. Asked how the phones changed/are changing the way people maintain relationships, the respondents said that nowadays people maintain more contact, call more, send messages, and claim that it has made the communication very easy.

However on the other hand the contact is possibly superficial as you may keep in touch with people you do not care for as much. A female respondent argued that " It has made people lazy in certain aspects, because all you have to do is pick up a phone and call someone instead of making an effort and meet that person. So it has made us lazy, but on the other hand it's very efficient, especially if you have something to do, when you are in a rush. As for the time when people tend to call their contacts, many respondents indicated afternoon or evening, saying that they make phone calls or send texts when travelling (primarily walking or when on a bus), because that is when they have some free time between other activities. As one female respondent said " it's all about time". The majority of respondents argued that speaking on the phone influences the way we speak to one another and they also admitted they do it themselves. Primarily because when on the phone one can get interrupted easily, especially when multi-tasking.

Also they argued that you usually make everything briefer on the phone, because when you talk you can be distracted by many things that are happening around you. In the case of new relationships, people tend to be more comfortable and open over the phone, especially considering text messages. Two female respondents said that it is easier to speak to another person differently if you do not really know her/him and also said that phones give means to hide certain things that you do not wish to reveal " because the other person cannot see my face so they do not know what I am feeling".

The change in non-verbal communication must also be mentioned here, as the majority of respondents admitted that they use their phone as an excuse to avoid speaking to someone. The statement of the male respondent confirmed that : " I have pretended I was on the phone when I did not want to talk to someone, you just want to pretend that you are doing something, it shuts you off, because it is not very socially acceptable to interrupt somebody who is having a conversation".

Furthermore, some respondents claimed they used their phone as a form of security and protection. One male respondent said : " My friend is always on the phone when she feels nervous". A female respondent said that she feels safer knowing she can always call somebody to get help, or when in the bar waiting for some friends, she claimed she takes phone out to make people think she is busy, using phone as a bodyguard. Respondents were also asked to indicate positive and negative aspects of mobile phone usage in terms of aintaining relationships. As a positive they pointed out the fact that communication has become very efficient, easy, cheap, and also allows one to keep in touch more readily with family and friends, to arrange meetings and to develop new relationships. On the other hand respondents indicated that it has been made too easy, " because we do not even have to go out anymore to meet our friends". They said the contact is not as real and might be taking away some value of a realfriendship.

As a male respondent said " You may have a long conversation over the phone with someone, then you meet up in real life and it is like you do not really know each other, you can find awkwardness sometimes. " Ultimately,

the respondents mutually agreed on the statement that mobile phones help maintain relationships. As a female respondent said " it's a constant reminder that you are thinking of someone and they are thinking of you, and that you want to stay in their lives, and that is maintaining relationships".

At the end the respondents were asked to express their view on how the social interaction looked like before the mobile phones became so popular. They said that people were sending more letters and cards, than nowadays. Also people used to interact with each other more, however they would meet with less people, only close family and friends that lived nearby. Now, as they confirmed, it is possible to keep in touch with friends that are on the other side of the world, because you are constantly available on the mobile.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The importance of this research is that it explains behavior noticed during the observation and analyses the information gathered during the individual interviews and the focus group discussions . After investigating the subject area, I have found that mobile phones are influencing change of some of the underlying cultural values in Britain, for instance, bonds within close social circles, the meaning of time and communication patterns, which then influences the way people see their reality and perceive certain things and behaviors.

As culture is maintained by social construction, we learn culture every day. We learned to use mobile phones on a daily basis, letting them become inseparable part of our daily routine, which created patterns and made them become something which we perceive as normal. Nowadays, we claim

mobiles necessary to socialize, they became a tool for developing new contacts, maintaining a friendship network and arranging meetings. In the last 10-15 years we have been exposed to similar experiences of communication. Mobile phone communication has become as natural as going to the shop and buying bread each morning.

Our behavior has been shaped by the regular use of mobile phone, so that many people nowadays cannot imagine to spend a day without it, they even claim they would feel lost without it (Fox, 2001). As we read in " Towards asociologyof the mobile phone"(McGuigan, 2005), we perceive the mobile phone as an extension to the body, sometimes even feel naked without it. We tend to keep our phones nearby, in our pocket, in our hand, making us always contactable and available, for someone from our social network.

We feel like there is always something to be said and when we get the message we tend to write or call back as soon as possible We did not even noticed that we are increasingly dependent on the mobile phone technology in terms of social interaction. Mobile phones, as proven by this research project and many others, have gained protection and security status. We increasingly depend on our phones in situations of distress, they give us reassurance and sensation of being secure, for instance walking late at night.

Why do we feel secure? Well, we can always call somebody, let them know where we are, gain a feeling of unreliable reassurance, as the person you have contacted may be miles away, not really being able to help us in certain situation. On the other hand, phones are used for protection in the

situation when we want to avoid contact with someone, for instance in a bar or in acoffee shop. When one does not wish to be approached, it is enough to put a phone on the table and look it up from time to time.

With the British " obsession" about privacy, it would be simply considered rude and socially unacceptable to interrupt someone who is busy. That lead me to consider one of the Hall's dimensions (Hall, 1976). It may be that communication in Britain is becoming more high-context oriented. Mobiles can not only be used as mean of protection, but perhaps also as a barrier. When we do not want to talk to someone we know on the bus, it is enough to pretend we are busy with our mobile. We may acknowledge the other person's presence but we would immediately go back to looking at the phone.

The message is clear to both sides – " I do not really want to talk right now". Also , another example of high context approach is: when a person is not responding to our messages or phone calls, it may mean that he or she does not wish to speak to us, on the other hand, subtle signal, known as " giving the buzz" often means " I am thinking of you". As we can see there are many examples of high-context communication within mobile phone influence on the way people maintain relationships, however it does not necessarily mean all communication in Britain is becoming high-context.

Another change in terms of social construction is that via technology we are now able to keep in touch with more people than before, it is deemed normal to have a large net of social connections. Why is that? Perhaps, the distance seems shorter, because another person is just a phone call away. Before, we

used to have more face-to- face interactions, but they were restricted to the close circle of friends and family that lived in the same geographic area. Therefore we maintain more contact, but it is possible it has become much more superficial.

Considering the lack of openness in social interaction, mobile phones seem to facilitate interpersonal contacts and act like an ice-breaker. It is easy to send a message and it is nice to receive one in return, but the issue to consider is whether we can really count on that person. Mobile phones therefore might be depriving values of real friendship and in fact people may feel very alone, even though they have 300 contacts in their mobile device. There has been a behavioral shift in terms of social construction, for as a society, we have become more lazy and comfortable.

As the other person is reachable on their mobile at all times, we have adapted the pattern of calling and not necessarily meeting with friends and family, which can sometimes be dangerous, because it deprives us of developing social skills. It has also been proven that we speak to each other differently on the phone than when talking face to face. Considering there is no visible contact, we cannot see expressions on our interlocutor's face and his/her body language. People may be making faces and rolling their eyes and we would not know!

Also if we do not want to say something, we can easily avoid doing that, because since there are no facial expressions, the interlocutor would not notice the difference. And nowadays, especially with text messages, you can almost pretend to be someone you are not! Speaking on the phone or

texting gives some people the confidence they do not have in face-to-face interactions, especially in the reserved British culture. How did the use of the mobile change the way we perceive communication? We communicate when we have free time, as the respondents said, we are using " time in between", when we are walking, when on the bus.

Is it not all about time nowadays? As time is limited, which suggest monochromic orientation (Hall, 1983: 42), and with the lack of time we have these days , we use every free moment we have to get in touch with people. But since these conversations are being conducted when we are on the go, it may deprive of the focus and dedication we would give this other person if we were talking to him/her face-to-face. Also, in terms of contact, we have a chance to keep in touch more often, but it is more about exchanging information than having real in-depth conversation with another person.

People tend to divide time into little blocks in order to use it as efficiently as possible, tending to multi-task and combine many activities at a time. For instance, talking on the phone, checking emails, responding to messages, on the way to/from work, school, walking, sipping coffee – which again suggests a slight shift towards polychronic orientation. Time is considered limited, however nowadays we are trying to make the most of it, some would wish to even " save it" via multi-tasking.

To conclude this section, we communicate more easily, more efficiently and more cheaply, but also we have created some needs and new obligations. Specialists claim that we are becoming addicted to technology, but the answer may be different. We are not as much addicted to technology, as to

communicating with people. We are addicted to interacting with our social circle, and mobile phones facilitate the process of communication. CONCLUSION In conclusion, there is no doubt that the spread of mobile communication is affecting our lives and the way we maintain relationships.

Since technologically advanced information systems tend to encourage and facilitate communication and at the same time cultural interaction, it is understandable that they play an important part in influencing the way the communication is conducted and change the way people are perceiving certain situations, at the same time creating new ways of seeing reality and different behavior patterns. In the modern world we live in, the patterns of communication in Britain are rapidly changing. Mobile phones are increasingly used to help us establish, develop and maintain relationships.

We see it as means to help us to bond and interact with our colleagues, friends and family. We perceive this new technology as a new approach to build social networks, and as a tool that makes our busy life easier. Word count: 3220 REFERENCES * FERRARO, G. P. (2002). The cultural dimension of international business 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, pp. 29 * FOX, K. (2001) Evolution, alienation and gossip: the role of mobile telecommunications in the 21st century. Social Issues Research Centre. Available from http://www. sirc. org/publik/gossip. shtml [Accessed on 15/11/2011] * GAMBLE, T.

K. , GAMBLE, M. (1996). Communication works 5th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, pp. 77 * HALL, E. T. (1977) Beyond culture. Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday, pp. 14 * HALL, E. T. (1983) The Dance of Life: Other Dimensions

of Time. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, pp. 42 * McGUIGAN, J. (2005) Towards a sociology of the mobile phone. An Interdisciplinary Journal on Humans in ICT Environments. Vol. 1 , pp. 45-57. Available from : www. humantechnology. jyu. fi [Accessed on 17/11/2011] * SAMOVAR, L. A. , et al (2007). Communication between cultures 6th ed. Belmont, Calif: Thomson/Wadsworth, pp. 128-130