Emotional attachment and mobile phones

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Introduction

This chapter examines and explores the topic of emotional attachment and mobile phones. It discusses the way the mobile phone is used as a means of achieving continuous connectivity and how it acts as the conduit for emotional attachment by keeping friends and family in touch and enabling the need to maintain social and business networks. Indeed, it will be asserted that the mobile phone engenders intimacy and a feeling of being permanently tethered to loved ones as well as to less welcome callers. The chapter discusses evidence that has emerged from a variety of studies conducted over the last two years by the author, most particularly two studies for the global industry body the UMTS Forum (UMTS: Universal Mobile Telecommunications System) that explored the social shaping of 3G (third generation mobile communications), the new technology for mobile communications that is being introduced (see Vincent et al. 2003; 2004a). This technology augments the capabilities of a mobile phone device enabling voice and text, as well as access to the WWW (World Wide Web), with camera and video, music, radio, games and more. In the course of the discussion the chapter poses questions, offers ideas and opens doors for further study.

Examining the social practices of mobile phone users

People in the UK and Germany were asked about their relationship with their mobile phone and what they felt about it (Vincent et al. 2003; 2004a).[1] It was found that many of them felt emotional about the information contained on and delivered via their mobile phone and had

1. Questionnaires, diaries, interviews and focus groups were used to explore the use of mobile phones by families, young people and businesses for personal and business use in London, UK and Erfurt, Germany during 2002 and 2003.

come to depend on the device—at times too much. Some respondents talked about how they kept in touch with spouses and friends during the day. "My wife likes to call me on the mobile—she'd be lost if I didn't have it and she uses hers all the time", and mothers found they were talking more to friends "I love it because we are not restricted". However for some the attachment to the device was so great it made the mobile phone too precious to let go; "We'd agreed she'd give her old phones to her younger brother; I found out later that she hadn't been doing this but had been keeping them under her pillow—the text messages and the calls to boyfriends on these phones were so precious to her that she couldn't bear to think of her brother using the phones", and for another sustaining a distant relationship interfered with sleep, "I text my boyfriend to tell him to stop texting me so I can go to sleep". These examples demonstrate the role that mobile phones perform in people's everyday lives and in particular their effect on relationships with loved ones.

Although few people think about their mobile phone in emotional terms they do appear to be using it to achieve emotional goals and most use emotional language categories to explain their mobile usage. As can be seen from the research extracts above people do respond differently to their own and others' use of mobile phones. The research identified a range of emotions and concerns expressed about the use of mobile phones and these are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of concerns about emotion and mobile phones (Vincent & Harper 2003).

Emotions	Concerns Expressed
Panic	Absence from the device; being separated from it
Strangeness	Between those who do and those who don't have mobile phones
'Being Cool'	Chilled out, tuned in to the mobile phone culture
Irrational Behaviour	Can't control heart over mind e.g. driving and talking
Thrill	Novelty, multi-tasking, intimacy of the text received in public
Anxiety	Fear and desire: e.g. not knowing and wanting to know about others versus too much knowledge

As the range of new 3G services become available, particularly those that offer location based data, it seems probable that people's emotional responses will be intensified, and not always for the better. The reassurance that the mobile phone affords is becoming tempered by the increasing intrusion of less welcome interventions such as the recording of private behaviours in public places and of the intrusion into the intimate space that exists between mobile phone buddies (Vincent 2005).

This 'buddy space' is one of many terms being used to describe the intimate private world of the community that each mobile phone user inhabits. Each time the use of the mobile is initiated it invokes the absent presence of the other buddies who can be accessed via the device, whether or not they are actively engaged in mutual communications at that time.

The thrill of using communications devices, the feeling of 'being cool' and the desire not to be left out of one's social group continue to dominate people's response to mobile phones. They are increasingly used for seemingly meaningless chatter such as this observation by one respondent, "I'm coming; I'm on my way… Sometimes calls are a complete waste of time really… I'm coming, you know, that's not important". There are some, though, for whom a mobile phone is not part of their life and they continue to resist their presence. "I don't own a mobile, never have and never will. I don't have children; my wife doesn't own a mobile phone. I am a sales manager—I make appointments to see people, I call them—they don't need to call me."

These emotions that people used to express their relationship with all that the mobile phone engendered were not consistent for all types of communication. Indeed a key finding of the research was that person-to-person connectivity services in particular engendered emotion but that person to WWW data does not achieve the same emotional value. The mass adoption of SMS text messaging that has resulted in a new person-to-person argot set against the mass rejection of WAP (Wireless application protocol), a person to information service, exemplifies this point. The price of these services has some bearing on the adoption, although even with free WAP services they did not capture many people's interest (Vincent 2004b). It would seem that people would be prepared to pay almost anything to talk and text each other. This desire for constant connectivity and reassurance afforded by the mobile phone can however result in a situation where a value paradox arises. Some people find their mobile phone has become too valuable to lose and they will leave it at home in some situations, "I don't take it to the club 'cause it would be terrible if I lost it."

Explaining emotional attachment to mobile phones

Some possible explanations for emotional attachment to mobile phones can be found by examining two particular aspects of the spatial interface or relationship that exists between the user and the mobile phone. Firstly is the assertion that the mobile phone is an icon for the user—an articulation of who they are. Each mobile phone is uniquely reflecting the users life at that point in time; so the device 'holds' the memories, the sentiments that are associated with the text messages and numbers

stored on the phone, the appointments, the ringtones chosen and the pictures held on the phone and not in the wallet and so on. The mobile phone as an icon is about 'me, my mobile and my identity'. However, arguably none of this would be happening were it not for the second point, that people's attachment to their mobile phone is not the result of a solitary pre-occupation with the device but rather it is relationships with others that provide the stimuli for people's attachment to their mobile phone. Considering people's attachment to their mobile phones in these terms of the phone as an icon and of the social groups with whom the user communicates goes some way to establishing the focus for the emotional attachment but further explanation is still required. The common strand for this explanation is the assertion that the relationship between people and their mobile phones is a sentient one. We are sentient beings, constantly being changed and affected by our surroundings. Our mobile phones reflect who we are in any particular moment in time. We interact with a mobile phone in a way that we do not with other computational devices—we fondle it, we clutch it in times of crisis ready to turn to it and dial for help or solace, and we know that our loved ones are doing the same, probably at the same time. As living and ever changing sentient beings our lives are thus constantly affected by our own and others' mobile phones.

Maturana and Varela's (1974) work on self organising systems and 'autopoiesis' offers up a way of describing how people might be affected by mobile phones. The perturbations of everyday life that are manifested via the mobile phone affect the user and the emotional attachment associated with these events is thus enfolded in every individual's autopoietic state. Social practices surrounding the use of the mobile phone would appear to result in more intensive relationships. Examples of these are of friends constantly calling each other when they have nothing particular to say and of relationships being enhanced by constant texting when two people cannot be together.

The aforementioned research showed that people talk to people they already know and, as explained earlier, that they talk about their mobile in emotional terms, 'We often have a panic situation when the battery runs down' or 'I'd feel really, really lost without my phone now'. People are also using them to make changes to arrangements or simply set up meetings, business or social, at the last minute. 'Ring me to say where you are and I'll meet you there'. The mobile phone is thus an important part of our emotional cache in that it is a repository for storing links to things that engender emotional response, as well as performing a functional role in the management of day-to-day life. This use of the mobile phone on a day-to-day basis highlights a unique aspect of the relationship people have with the device itself. The very act of using a mobile phone involves the simultaneous engagement with more senses than we use for other computational devices as we simul-

taneously touch, hear and see via the mobile phone in order to keep connected with our buddies. Table 2 offers an interpretation of the manifestation of some of the social practices that were identified in the research. By associating them with particular senses one can consider the sentient aspects of our being that may be affected by our relationship with the mobile phone.

Table 2: Sentient relationships between people and mobile phones.
The manifestation of social practices in the senses of the users
(Vincent 2005: 226).

Sense	Manifestation of social practices in relation to mobile phone use
Touch	Carrying in pocket or about the person, holding or fondling the device, having it with you all the time Knowing that the people with whom you are communicating are also touching or close to their mobile phone, often at the same time as you speak or send a message
Hearing	Listening to others through the device in real time conversation or voice mail, or listening to the radio or music Creating ring tones and personalising other 'noises' made by the device—sharing the creative process with others
Sight	Looking at the address book and other personal data stored on the device, or looking at the phone to see who is calling, that you have dialled correctly, selecting the people who will receive a group text Looking at messages sent and received Showing and sharing images and text messages with others Creating screen savers and personalising colours and images
Smell and Taste	By association only, perhaps conveyed in words or image, that give a sense of place or occasion to the communication

It could be further argued that the senses are being invaded as a result of the use of mobile phones in ways that are completely new. Thus rather than our bodies being physically pierced by mechanical technology that might be developed to heighten the senses the mobile phone is actually piercing the senses themselves in a more metaphysical way. Maldonado (2003: 20) discusses the body and how technology is developing ways to emulate it, but, as he says 'One very important point is usually overlooked. A person's natural sense of touch does not consist only of contact, touching is not just touching. Our sense of touch perceives multiple factors even without true direct contact with our skin'. Thus it is for all the senses, each reaches much further than the simple function they would at first appear to perform. The sentient relationship between the mobile phone and the user invokes so much more than the physical contact achieved through the making or receiving of a call.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided, through reference to recent research, insights into the ways that people are using their mobile phones in their everyday lives and in particular it has explored and examined the concept of emotional attachment to the mobile phone. In offering some explanations for this seemingly unique behaviour it has highlighted the role of the social groups or buddy groups as the focus for the emotional attachment. The constant changes that occur in people's everyday lives frequently involve the use of mobile phones—even if the people do not have one of their own. The rearranging of appointments, the casual setting up of new ones, the relationships between lovers conducted by text and the reassuring contact between families all have some effect on the individual's autopoiesis. The multiple roles of the mobile phone in everyday life adds to the complexity of the debate but underlying the functional purposes is this constant and increasing emotional attachment. The assertion that this is in part due to the senses being pierced by all that the device engenders offers some explanation for this emotional attachment and is certainly an area for further study within the mobile communications social sciences and engineering communities.

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