



## Site-specific mobility and connection in Korea: *bangs* (rooms) between public and private spaces

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Although social and cultural research on mobile communication is exploding, many studies take a technical view of the mobile phone as a personal networking device that connects people 'anywhere, anytime.' There has been little cultural research that has examined the uptake of mobile applications that are anchored to specific sites, especially outside European and American localities. To address this, we analyse media experiences in the living spaces of the Korean *bang* (room) culture. There are specific social spaces, such as DVD *bangs*, sauna (*jjimjil*) *bangs*, karaoke (*norae*) *bangs*, and PC *bangs*. We position mobile technology along an increasingly blurred border between work and leisure, and we conceptualise the use of mobile phones for the symbolic creation, demarcation, and integration of public and private spaces in a digitally connected urban environment. This analysis provides an understanding of the socio-culturally specific rationales and desires behind technology design and adoption in the South Korean context.

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### 1. Introduction

The increasing ubiquity of mobile phones and wireless devices in developed and developing countries affects the communicative ecologies of personal social networks, with broader repercussions on employment, business operations, education, and health services (among others). Mobile phone applications and services such as 3G (third generation), MMS (multimedia messaging service), mobile e-mail, and the Internet are far more multifunctional than other basic conventional services such as SMS (short messaging service). The growing social, cultural, and economic impact of mobile digital content and services is evident in North American, European, and Southeast Asian nations in particular as major telecommunication carriers commit to 3G, next-G (next generation), and other enhanced services in the coming years [1–8].

Many mobile phone users now have the means to "synchronise everyday life" [6] with home, school, and work through SMS, mobile e-mail, and photo and video messaging. These innovative mobile phone applications do not fully portend evolving and undetermined cultural and social reappropriations and implications. One example is what Fujimoto [52] calls "the girls' pager revolution" which refers to the wide take-up of pagers by teenage girls in Japan in the early 90s, shifting the paradigm of mobile media from business to social. Documented examples of mobile phone applications beyond voice call functions include: the use of mobile technology to electronically transfer tracheal breathing sounds in order to remotely monitor asthma patients [9]; research showing adolescents using mobile phones as a complementary behaviour to smoking as a way to demonstrate maturity [10]; stress-related atopic eczema caused by mobile phone ringing [11]; and the use of SMS as a form of contact tracing in a hospital [12]. In 2004, medical workers sent data about trauma injuries to other clinicians via a mobile network from remote locations in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, after the December 2004 tsunami [13]. After Hurricane

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Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, the lack of communication capacity, especially among medical team members, was one of the main obstacles to effective and efficient recuperation [14].

The variety of uses of mobile and wireless technologies extends far beyond voice and SMS. A Japanese company already offers the possibility of embedding artificial fingernails with small LEDs. Powered remotely by the phone, they glow when the phone is in use [8]. It may be possible to insert micro devices into the teeth to provide a direct and discrete conduit between mobile signals and the body [15] via Bluetooth technology advances like the Wireless Body Area Network (WBAN). A wide variety of technologies, such as RFID (Radio Frequency ID) tags, GPS (Global Positioning System) tracking, PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants), digital cameras, and MP3 music players are being embedded in mobile and wireless devices in combinations with local and global network connections.

Research situating new media use found that the Internet and other forms of global networks enable the exchange of business information and real-time communication between corporate players across nations. There is also a noticeable trend toward using the global network for local, place-based, and social interactions [16–18]. New web services such as Google Maps and [upmystreet.com](http://upmystreet.com) attest to this trend by providing location-based directories, services, and discussion boards, in addition to a large volume of phone calls and e-mails that connect people within a close geographical proximity [19]: the same city, company, and community.

In this respect, Davies' report on 'proxicomunication' [20] provides an overview of the various roles and impacts that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can have in the local public realm. In the report's summary, he rightly argues:

New technologies tend to be met with a hail of predictions about their social 'impact'. Over the past decade, digital technologies have often been presented as forces for globalisation and the 'death of distance', yet the vast majority of people's day-to-day activities remain fairly local. So does this mean that these technologies do not have a role to play in such activities? Not at all.

In a similar vein, Couldry and McCarthy discuss 'mediaspace', a concept they define as "a dialectical concept encompassing both the kinds of spaces created by media and the effects that existing spatial arrangements have on media forms as they materialise in everyday life" [21, p. 1–2]. A good example case of this concept is Silverstone and Sujon's *Urban Tapestries* project [22], which explores the inter-relations between people, technology, and space. They suggest that the human–technology relationship is both liberating and constraining, and argue that technologies as extensions of the self are crucial parts of one's identity. *Urban Tapestries* allows participants to re-create cultural 'meanings' by playfully yet productively creating mutual relationships between people, technologies, and places. In Japan, Okabe et al. [23] present the photo-taking and mod culture of Japanese youths, at the centre of which is *purikura*, the sticker photo booth. The Silverstone and Sujon studies, and Okabe et al. examine playful interactions connecting humans, technology, and space in relation to (or contrary to) mobility, while highlighting the important role that sociability and pleasure play in user-led cultural productions.

In this article, we expand on these findings with the fundamental understanding that social meanings are re-created in lived spaces as much as they are encoded and transformed in media. More specifically, we ask the following questions:

- How can mobile technology be conceptualised in a wider techno-social ecology?
- How does the place of engagement interact with the use of mobile technologies?

We observe that mobile technology can be both pervasive and persuasive. At the same time, access to wireless technology is affected by the user's socio-geographical environment, which is also pervasive and persuasive. That leads to more questions:

- How is the boundary between *work* and *play* negotiated?
- How are cultural meanings negotiated?
- How does the technology/place/person mix evolve?
- How can we make sense of different stages in the development of mobile culture, especially when variations in such stages are evident even in the same society?

Appropriate answers to these questions require a large and longitudinal study. Within the scope of this article, we respond to the questions by examining how mobility and connection are established and integrated into work and leisure at a specific site—the *bang*—in one of the most connected and urbanized societies in the world: South Korea.

## 2. A city in flux

South Korea is home to more than 49 million people [24]; it is also home to some of the world's largest electronic corporations, including Samsung and LG. The country boasts one of the highest broadband penetration rates and the fastest adoption rates of new network technologies [25]. Not surprisingly, South Korea has been ranked at the top of ITU's Digital Opportunity Index for the past two years [26]. Before it reached this status, however, South Korea went through a series of major metamorphoses: from a hermetic oriental kingdom, to a Japanese annex, then to a war zone that ended with the

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