



Mobile phones as cultural tools for identity construction among college students in Oman, Ukraine, and the U.S.



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 July 2016

Received in revised form 30 January 2017

Accepted 31 January 2017

Available online 11 February 2017

Keywords:

Mobile phones

Cultural tools

Identity

Gendered practices

Cultural practices

ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between mobile phones and users' identities in three cultures that differ geographically, historically, and culturally: Oman, an Islamic social monarchy in the Arabian Gulf; Ukraine, a post-Soviet Eastern European country; and the United States of America. A Likert-style questionnaire that also included open-ended questions was distributed to 393 college students to elicit answers on how they relate to their mobile phones. Findings indicate that mobile phone users of different nationalities and genders perceive and use their mobile phones differently for self-expression and identity display, with Omani women most likely to orient to their phones as identity-relevant, and Ukrainian men least likely to do so. Americans showed more mixed results, with American women more prone to treat their mobile phones as objects that relate to identity expression. Further, while Ukrainians and Americans tended to view their mobile phones primarily through the lens of utility, Omanis tended to take a more affective/romantic perspective. To explain these findings, we demonstrate, following Al Zidjaly and Gordon (2012), that mobile phones are productively understood as what Scollon (2001) calls cultural tools, or the material and symbolic means people use in culturally- and historically-enabled and -constrained ways to accomplish actions such as identity display.

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1. Introduction

Various scholars have suggested that the mobile phone should be examined not only in terms of its uses as an electronic communication device, but also as an object imbued with social, cultural, and individual meanings that relate to users' identities (e.g., Haverila, 2013; Hjorth, 2006; Ling, 2004). Whether a phone is understood by users as a "miniature aesthetic statement about its owner" (Katz and Sugiyama, 2005: 64), as a "fashion statement" (e.g., Katz, 2006), or as part of the body – "an extension of the hand" (Oksman and Rautiainen, 2003) – mobile phones are situated in users' social, political, linguistic, and cultural contexts, and are best investigated as such (as has been argued by, e.g., Androutsopoulos and Juffermans, 2014; Velghe, 2012). Existing studies have used a range of methods – including small- and large-scale surveys, ethnographic observations, interviews, and focus-group discussions – to demonstrate that there are links between mobile phones and identities; that individuals across cul-

tures and of different genders value their phones in various identity-relevant ways; and that because of this, users make different phone-related consumer, customization, and personalization choices (e.g., Baron and Campbell, 2012 in Sweden, the U.S., Korea, and Japan; Hjorth, 2006 in Japan; Katz and Sugiyama, 2005 in the U.S.; among many others). Yet, there is still much to learn about the nature of the link between one's mobile phone and one's identity, how it differs across various (especially understudied) groups, and how to most productively theorize the mobile phone-identity relationship.

To bridge this gap, we present findings drawn from a questionnaire-based mobile phone study involving 393 male and female college students in three countries: the Arabian Gulf country of Oman, the post-Soviet country of Ukraine, and the U.S. Specifically, we focus on eight questions that are identity-related; these address how participants use their phones for self-expression and how they perceive their mobile phones as objects related to their identities. To explicate these findings and situate them culturally, we follow Al Zidjaly and Gordon (2012) in suggesting that a mobile phone is productively conceptualized as what Scollon (2001) calls a cultural tool. Cultural tools are the symbolic (e.g., language) or material (e.g., objects) means by which people

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achieve social actions (see also [Vygotsky, 1978](#); [Wertsch, 1998, 2005](#)). We thus suggest that uses and perceptions of mobile phones, regarding identity in particular, are influenced by their histories and contexts of use. As a result, the same cultural tool (i.e., mobile phone in the context of this paper) will have different uses, meanings, and functions in each of the studied cultures.

In this theoretical context, our findings indicate that more so than any of the other groups, Omani women perceive and use their mobile phones for identity display; that Ukrainians, and especially Ukrainian men, are least likely to suggest that they view their mobile phones in this way; and that American women more so than American men understand mobile phones as identity-related (though much less so than do Omani women). These findings are partially explained by a questionnaire item that revealed that Americans and Ukrainians tend to view their phones through the lens of utility, whereas Omanis take a more affective/romantic perspective. In other words, the mobile phone is not “the same” cultural tool across all groups, as it is linked differently to identity, and to different aspects of identity, in each.

Our study, while exploratory, contributes to what is known about the relationship between mobile phones and identities in three ways. First, the completion of a single (translated) questionnaire by college students in three diverse cultures allows for points of direct comparison. Additionally, each of us (the authors) is a native member of one of the nationalities under study and conducted ethnographic observations. Second, our study uncovers users’ reported identity-related perceptions of, and practices regarding, mobile phones in two understudied countries – Oman and Ukraine – along with a third (the U.S.) for comparison. Third, in interpreting our findings, we demonstrate the utility of the concept of cultural tools for future mobile phone studies.

In what follows, we first give an overview of the studies in which mobile phones have been found to be connected to users’ identities and self-expression cross-culturally and explain how these findings help establish them as cultural tools. Then, we introduce our data collection and analysis procedures; this is followed by the presentation of our findings. Next, we explicate the patterns using the cultural tools perspective, in particular pertaining to users’ identities, and discuss the implications of our study. We also address some limitations. In the conclusion, we summarize our analysis and identify directions for future research.

2. Mobile phones: from objects for identity display to cultural tools

Many scholars have found that mobile phone users, especially younger users, orient to their mobile phones not only as communicative tools (for texting and other activities), but also as objects that portray or constitute some aspect(s) of their identities. As [Ling \(2004: 103\)](#) points out, across numerous cultures, the mobile phone is often “a particularly powerful symbol for adolescents” that, like select other consumer goods, has become “an icon for contemporary teens.” Mobile media advertisements reinforce the idea that mobile phones should be viewed as fashion items, emblems of personality, and even extensions of users’ bodies (e.g., [Gorlacheva, 2012](#); [Lim, 2010](#); [Salmi and Sharafutdinova, 2008](#)). While the relationship between mobile phone marketing strategies and user beliefs and practices is still under exploration (and beyond the scope of our study), it is clear that, as [Bell \(2006: 51\)](#) explains, mobile phones “are embedded into our daily lives, become an extension of ourselves and our personalities, our social relationships, and larger cultural contexts.”

Numerous studies that draw on a variety of methods reveal that some mobile phone users customize or personalize their phones not only for functionality, but also for identity display, such as

for demonstrating one’s personality or status; this is often especially the case for young women. Customization and personalization of phones have been observed and studied in Singapore ([Lim, 2010](#)), China ([Chu, 2008](#); [Yu and Tng, 2003](#)), South Korea ([Hjorth and Kim, 2005](#)), India ([Pathak-Shelat and DeShano, 2014](#)), Australia ([Lloyd and Gillard, 2010](#)), the U.K. ([Green, 2003](#)), Denmark ([Stald, 2008](#)), Norway ([Skog, 2002](#)), Finland ([Haverila, 2013](#); [Oksman and Rautiainen, 2003](#)), Bulgaria ([Varbanov, 2002](#)), and the U.S. ([Katz and Sugiyama, 2005](#)). Comparative studies such as by [Bell \(2006\)](#) across multiple countries in Asia, and by [Campbell \(2007\)](#) of international and local students at the University of Hawaii, similarly show that some users orient to their phones as resources for identity display.

Extending such work, [Al Zidjaly and Gordon \(2012\)](#) suggest that mobile phones are usefully conceptualized as “cultural tools”; following [Scollon \(2001](#); see also [Vygotsky, 1978](#); [Wertsch, 1998, 2005](#)); cultural tools are material or symbolic “mediational means” that people use to achieve social actions.¹ Cultural tools are not neutral objects; they are shaped by their histories and contexts of use. For example, for some young people in Oman, a mobile phone serves as a means of defying the traditional Islamic prohibition of private communication between unmarried members of opposite genders ([Al Zidjaly and Gordon, 2012](#)). No such prohibition exists in the U.S. or Ukrainian mainstream cultures. Thus, it makes sense to suggest that the mobile phone is not “the same” object in each country: It is a cultural tool that has been, in each context, differently mobilized for action and therefore has a differently attributed meaning. Given examples such as these, it is not surprising that how mobile phones connect to users’ identities differs across groups.

3. Data, method, and background

3.1. The questionnaire

We distributed paper-based questionnaires about the role of mobile phones in the social and academic lives of first-year college students in three countries: the Islamic Arabian country of Oman, the Eastern European country of Ukraine, and the United States. The students represent a convenience sample, based on our connections to educational institutions in each of these countries. The 150 participating Omani students were enrolled at Sultan Qaboos University, the national university of Oman; they completed questionnaires in the spring of 2014. The 100 participating Ukrainian students were attending a university in the Western Ukrainian city, Lutsk; data were collected in the spring of 2013. The American students, 143 in total, were enrolled in a private university in the Northeastern United States, and data were collected in fall 2012 and fall 2014. All participating students were pursuing an undergraduate humanities/social science degree. Summaries of participants in the study appear in [Table 1](#).

This dataset enables our exploratory study of mobile phone use. In the sample, Ukrainian men are most notably underrepresented, owing in part to the fact that they are underrepresented in the humanities and social sciences at the university in Lutsk (and in Ukrainian universities more broadly; as [Kogut, 2014](#) reports, in the 2013–2014 academic year, in the humanities and social sciences at Ukrainian colleges and universities, over 76% of the students were women). Further, we did not ask questions about race/ethnicity, which would have been especially interesting in the U.S. context (at the institution where the U.S. data were collected, the

¹ While [Scollon \(1998\)](#) often uses the terms “mediational means” and “cultural tools” interchangeably, we use “cultural tools” in this paper. This follows [Scollon \(2001: 17\)](#), who reserved “cultural tools” “for cases in which a mediational means has been subjected to some degree of technologization and objectivization,” both applicable to mobile phones.

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