

Perpetual contact for business: Mobile phones and Fujian entrepreneurs¹

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Abstract

Similar to telephony in the 19th century, mobile telephony was first adopted by business people for business-oriented activities. Small and medium-sized entrepreneurs are one of the major user groups. Their use habits have thus contributed to the development of the mobile phone which in turn has transformed the business practice of its users. Despite its importance, there have been limited studies that examined individual business users of mobile phones; even fewer studies exploring the social roles of mobile phones for Chinese entrepreneurship, although Chinese businessmen were the first and important groups in China's mobile population of 539 million, which is the largest in the world.

This study, applying combined theories of social shaping of technology, affordance theory and domestication theory, analyses the social roles of the mobile phone constructed by its users, with a particular emphasis on mobile usage of entrepreneurs in Fujian Province, China, as Fujian businessmen have been characterised as one of the most diligent and successful business communities in the current world of globalisation. Through qualitative analysis of interviews, this study examines the mobile phone usage of Fujian entrepreneurs in relation to the characteristics of their business practices and entrepreneurial culture, and more importantly, the study explores the innovative uses generated by users which are afforded by technical attributes of the mobile phone.

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Research findings indicate that social characteristics of Fujian entrepreneurs are substantially enhanced by the mobile phone technology. Firstly, the mobile phone enables a 24-hour contact in business operations. Second, it facilitates a 'mobile office' which frees business people from constraints of place and location. Third, the artefact has also become a platform for staging a tricky performance in business negotiations. Finally, the mobile phone thus has become the central axis around which the lives of Fujian entrepreneurs revolve.

Introduction

China had leaped to become the world's largest population of mobile phone users of 539 million by the end of 2007 (Feng, 2007). The rapid development and penetration of mobile telephony in China have contributed significantly to an unprecedented transformation of Chinese society. The change is escalating in convergence with other new media technologies such as the Internet, text messaging, broadband/wireless connection, digital video and so on. It is also worth noting that this surge of mobile telephony coincides with the country's unparalleled economic growth, booming industrialisation and wide-spread urbanisation, especially in China's coastal regions.

One of the significant aspects of this mobile development is that the mobile phone was initially used by business people for business-oriented activities. Business people, especially entrepreneurs of small and medium-sized businesses, have become one of the crucial user groups of the device. Their use habits have thus contributed to the development of the mobile phone and the artefact in turn has shaped and transformed the business practice of its users. However, the social meanings of the business use of mobile phones in China remain mainly unexamined.

This paper focuses in particular on how the mobile phone is used by entrepreneurs of private businesses in Quanzhou city, Fujian Province, one of the most vibrant business centres in China, and what are the social meanings these mobile phone uses have generated in relation to business operations, customer relations, market expansion, enterprise management, and so on.

In Fujian Province, the telecommunication developed rapidly. In 2006, the landline telephone penetration rate of the province was ranked fifth nationwide, and the mobile phone penetration rate the sixth in the country. In October, 2007, the landline penetration rate was 48 percent while the mobile phone penetration was 65 percent (Province data net [PDN], 2007). In Fujian's economic development, private businesses have played a very important role. In 2007, the non-public sector of the economy has already occupied 76 percent of Fujian's economic aggregates, and has contributed 70 percent of the province's employment (Fujian Daily, 2007). In Quanzhou city, one of the most booming areas of the province, private businesses are essential to the city's economic growth. According to the data of the first national economic census, about 39.9 percent of Fujian's private business enterprises are based in Quanzhou, which employ 46.8 percent of Fujian's total labour force, and generate 39.4 percent of the province's business revenue (Fujian Statistical Bureau [FJSB], 2006). Entrepreneurs in Quanzhou stand as a representative group of the private business community in China that has emerged and developed in the country which took on the course of market economy and private enterprises 30 years ago.

After the emergence of mobile phone technology, the mobile phone has influenced almost every aspect of social life, for example the mobile phone culture, everyday mobile phone usage, mobile phone courtesy, mobile phone use by the youth, gender difference in mobile phone usage, and political use of mobile phones. In China, many scholars focus on the social role of the mobile phone as the 'fifth media', following newspapers, radio, television and the Internet. However, there are few studies which explore mobile phone uses and business people.

As researchers note, wireless technologies were initially invented for business people (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2004). Castells et al (2004) observed that worldwide, business users occupy a leading market in mobile phone services; the business users group is especially large in developing countries like China and the Philippines. However, the few mobile phone studies which analyse business impacts mostly emphasise the mobile phone's influence on the macro-economy of society (Gary & Scott, 2000; Katia, n.d.; Norton, 1992). On the other hand, some mobile

phone use studies do include businessmen, but their main focuses are uses and gratifications of businessmen (e.g. Ling, 2004; Wei & Leung, 2000). They emphasise mostly the motivations behind people's use of mobile phones, however they provide little understanding on how they use the mobile phone and what are the social implications of their mobile use. More discussion of these studies is needed.

A small number of mobile phone use studies on microenterprises were conducted in developing countries especially the African countries, (e.g. Donner, 2004; Goodman, 2005; Samuel, Shah & Hadingham, 2005). Although these studies offer some details into mobile phone usage, they shed no light on the relationship between private entrepreneurs, their business practice and mobile phone use. Therefore, this study is one of the first research attempts to analyse the social meanings of mobile communication by a significant group, i.e. the private entrepreneurs in Fujian Province, China. It first investigates how Fujian businessmen use the mobile phone in regard to their business practises, company operations, customer relations, business negotiations, space and time coordination, and so on. It further elucidates how these particular characteristics of phone use reflects specific features of Fujian entrepreneurs and, more importantly, the social significance of this communication technology in the age of China's transformation and globalisation.

Literature Review: Social constructive view of new communication technology

Williams (1990), in his monograph on television and its influence, challenges the dominant notions of technological determinism which sees new technologies mostly as an external and autonomous force to transform society. He argues that the emergence of new technologies, particularly new communication systems, are a result of complex interactions among a variety of forces in a technological, social, cultural, political, legal, and economic context. Different cultures and political systems will exploit emergent technologies in divergent fashions. His concept suggests that the new media technology, instead of rolling in from outside and impacting the society, affects a series of extended negotiations and contestations among competing elements and interested parties, which could be emergent or well-established, visible or invisible, change-oriented or resistance-biased. For Williams, the focus is on how the

institutional forces shape the media technology (television in this case) and eventually construct it into an institution.

Fischer (1992), in his study of the telephone history in America, arrives at a similar view of communication technology. He objects to the assumption that technological inventions come from outside society and their applications and development follow essentially from their instrumental logic. He suggests that the word "impact" should be rejected in the discussion as it leads to a misperception of technology's effects – they are mechanistic and utopianised. As he states:

Mechanical properties do not predestine the development and employment of an innovation. Instead, struggles and negotiations among interested parties shape that history. (Fischer, 1992, p.16)

Unlike Williams (1990), Fischer is particularly concerned with how end-users, in the development of their own logic of usage, construct the role of technology (in this case the telephone) in their lives and how this new medium build-up alters their lives.

Social meaning of mobile telephony in developed countries

Mobile telephony is becoming an increasingly ubiquitous part of everyday life. Within the paradigm of social construction of communication technology, scholarly works that examine mobile systems in the West (Glotz, Bertschi, & Locke, 2005) accentuate the media as a series of arenas for negotiating issues essential for the sustenance of social life and associated cultural representations, such as self identity, micro-social community, power, resistance, mobilisation, and so on. The mobile

...plays a number of sophisticated roles in social interaction and everyday life. It is an enabler of social interactions, hierarchies and communication. It is a fetishised object that reinforces a sense of individual identity. It is a transformative technology that changes the way we do business. It is a device that changes the way how we manage space and time. It is a tool for text-messaging.... Perhaps most of all; the mobile phone is coming to be associated with presence. With fixed-line telephony we call a place; with mobile telephony we call a person. (Glotz *et al.*, 2005, p.11)

Mobile telephony implies autonomy with respect to spatial location, time constraints and, to a large extent, social and cultural norms (Castells et al, 2004). It puts communicative power into the hands of individuals, freeing them from the locality-based, time-specific context of interactions (Geser, 2001; Green, 2003; Geser 2004; Crabtree, Rodden, Hemmings, & Benford, 2003). Because of the mobile phone, people need not be controlled by time-based scheduling and coordination. Temporal preplanning is reduced as well (Geser, 2001; Green, 2003; Ling & Haddon, 2001). Moreover, it restructures the setting of our communication, the boundary between the public space, the workplace, the communal milieu, and the private home becomes blurred (Gant & Kiesler, 2001). Consequently, this may influence social behaviour and mental schemas of individuals.

Mobile communication empowers and enlarges the sphere of micro-social interaction. Individuals (and youngsters in particular) build relationship networks initially through face-to-face experience and common interests. The social networks are maintained, reinforced, and constantly reorganised through varied forms of contact practice. Some individuals are added, some ignored, some deleted over a period of time. The expansion or modification of networks is made following "a decentralized multiple entry/exit structure of communication" which is highly susceptible to the moods and orientations of individuals in action (Castells et al, 2004, p.240). Granted that the choice of sociability and social networking of individuals is continuously structured by institutional imperatives and limits (as well as many physical properties, e.g. the weather, and our bodies - sleeping, eating, etc), the new media, to a considerable extent, enlarges the choice and enhances the intensity of the interactions (Castells et al, 2004). Predominantly, mobile telephony maintains a selective relationship in closed social groups. It keeps relationships between self-controlled social groups, but at the same time shields users from the wider surroundings. And along with the development of mobile phone technology, users can identify the caller, and decide whether to answer or not. For instance, using the technology of ringtones, users can divide people into different groups, identify them by different rings, and decide on the respective types of handling (Bell, 2005). It also enables the negotiation of interaction between family members, specifically parents and children. It is used both for

maintaining a hierarchical relation within the family and also providing a sense of security and emotional support (Bell, 2005).

Because of the density in mobile phone use, the artefact generates an emotional attachment from its user (Gant & Kiesler, 2001). The emotional relationship is in fact not for the mobile phone itself, but for the content it enables, the social and personal relationships it maintains, and the information it delivers (Vincent, 2005). It thus becomes an emotional device or even a fetished object (Fortunati, 2005). This personalisation of mobile phones indicates a kind of constant practice, confirmation, expression and renegotiation of the self identity. Features of the device, such as shape, colours, ringtones, ornaments, as well as brand models become personal marks, constantly produced and articulated to the immediate social circle of the user (Castells et al, 2004; Vincent 2005).

... these devices become the repositories of our memories and social connections in the phone numbers, photos and messages that they store. The phone becomes an icon of 'me, my mobile and my identity' (Hulme & Truch, 2005, p.137), something that embodies our social and emotional life rather than just merely enabling it. (Glotz, et al, 2005, p.15)

Social meaning of mobile communication in China

Donner (2005), based on Orlikowski and Iacono's typology of conceptualisations of "ICT artefacts" (2001), summarises the research approaches to mobile use in the developing world into four conceptual categories:

- *Instrumental approach*: The mobile is a tool for providing new forms of communication and information processing;
- *Proxy approach*: The diffusion of mobile is examined via 'proxy' of quantitative measurements such as individual perceptions, diffusion rates, etc., and compared in cross-national or cross-cultural attribute projects;
- *Project approach*: It concerns mobile use and adoption as something that can be encouraged or deployed by certain initiatives, either as individual projects or as national policy development plans;

- *Embedded system approach*: The mobile is examined as a new mediator and enabler with respect to established complex social interactions, political systems, cultural representations, and so on, which are interplayed with various perspectives and settlements of global and local, individual and collective.

Donner's *embedded system approach* bears resemblance to the social constructive view of media technology. Donner (2005) suggests that this approach is 'most valuable' to the conceptualisation of mobile phones in the developing world.

Mobile communication is seen as an enabler for negotiating political mobilisation and resistance (Rheingold, 2002) in cases such as the political activities in the Philippines (Uy-Tioco, 2003) and Nigeria (Mudhai, 2003). It also facilitates affordable contacts, information exchange and social networking for the underprivileged populations, like the villagers in India (Sawhney, 2005), rural women in Bangladesh (Aminuzzaman, 2005), migrant workers in southern China (Law & Peng, 2004; Castells, et al.); guest labourers in Singapore (Thompson, 2005), small businessmen in Rwanda (Donner, 2005), and grassroots religious groups in the Philippines (Ellwood-Clayton, 2005) and Nigeria (Agbu, 2004).

On the other hand, mobile communication is also regarded as a symbol of tension between tradition and modernity, rural values and urban norms, local affinity and foreign infringement, communal rapport and diasporic dispersion, familial kinship and virtual networks, individualism and globalisation. (Alhassan, 2004; Law & Peng, 2004; Pertierra, 2005; Snowden, 2000; Strom, 2002; Yang, 2007; Zhao, 2007).

Mobile phone use studies and entrepreneurship

At the beginning of the spread of wireless technologies, these technologies were initially invented for people to conduct business (Castells et al, 2004). In terms of the integrated studies of Castells et al, (2004), worldwide business users occupy a leading market share in applying the mobile phone services; this users group is especially

large in the developing countries like China and the Philippines. However, after an overview of mobile phone use studies in the communication field, it was found that there are limited studies which are specifically related to individual business people and the patterns of their mobile phone usage. The few mobile phone use studies which are related to business usage are based mainly on two perspectives; one is the productivity approach and the other is the uses and gratification theory.

The mobile phone studies in the productivity approach refer to

the ability to do the same or similar things faster, more frequently, or at lower cost thanks to the introduction or use of ICTs. (Donner, 2006 p.5)

These studies argue that the information and communication technology provide great benefits to lower the search and information costs, bargaining costs and policing and enforcement costs. Norton (1992) finds that substitution of phone calls reduces the transaction costs and saves time when users are on trips, and he argues that a telecommunications infrastructure effectively lowers transaction costs in various markets and contributes to the macroeconomic growth. James (2002) also found a similar result in developing countries, as in Katia's (n.d.) study of telecommunications and the economy in Brazil. And Leff (1984) stated that telecommunications reduces both the fixed costs of searching information and the variable costs of participating in various markets. Gary & Scott (2000) summarise the influence the mobile phone technology has on the macro-economy worldwide by stating that

In an emerging global economy the ability of the telecommunications sector to provide an internationally competitive network for transferring information has significant implications for trade and economic growth. (Gary & Scott, 2000, p.893)

Some mobile phone use research that focuses on businessmen was conducted in developing countries, especially in African countries. Samuel et al, (2005) addressed the significant roles of mobile phone technology to microenterprises in South Africa, Tanzania, and Egypt. Their research supports the findings that the mobile phone technology had increased the profitability of business. Donner has also found that

entrepreneurs from Rwanda use mobile phones to improve productivity or for personal convenience (Donner, 2004). Furthermore, he indicates a tendency of transformation from business use to personal use in the entrepreneurs' mobile phone uses. Similar results are found in Goodman's (2005) study in South Africa and Tanzania. It shows that the mobile phone is used more frequently to manage and maintain strong ties, especially within a family, instead of weak ties.

The studies in the use and gratification theory concentrate mostly on the motivations and behaviour of users, with a particular focus on why and how users use a landline phone and mobile phone (Wei & Lo, 2006). Both the studies by Keller (1977) and Noble (1987) categorise telephone uses into two broad aspects: the intrinsic gratification and instrumental gratifications. Intrinsic gratifications refer to calling to socialise, to chat, to keep family contacts and to achieve a sense of security. Instrumental motivations include calling to do business, to make appointments, and to seek and obtain information. Their findings show that users utilise telephone technology most for their intrinsic uses rather than for instrumental uses. In other words, the telephone is more an intrinsic tool that helps people in their social communication, mainly keeping in touch with their social networks.

Two studies conducted by Wei & Leung (2000) and Wei & Lo (2006) provide more relevant reference to the present inquiry on business usage of mobile phones. Wei argues that the use and gratification theory provides a leading framework for studying the mobile phone because it assumes that individual differences underlie each user's act in seeking different media and using them differently (Wei & Leung, 2000). In other words, the use and gratification theory provides a *user-centred* perspective which emphasises an individual's agency in using a media technology to fulfil special needs. Different groups of people use media technology differently according to their own interests. In one of his studies, Wei & Lo (2006) categorises gratifications sought in mobile phone use into six types: information-seeking, social utility, affection, fashion and status, mobility, and accessibility. In connection to business-related gratifications, he concludes that they appear to be for instrumental reasons, which are gratifications of information-seeking, mobility and accessibility.

Another related study is Ling's study (2004) which finds that business people use mobile phone technology to make their life more effective. They make calls while in their cars, they use it while on public transport and they apply the technology to enlarge their social network.

This study, however, attempts to explore the mobile phone use from the social constructivist perspective. It is concerned specifically with the issue of how business users construct social role of the mobile phone which is highly integrated into their daily life and business practice. It may be true that business people use the artefact out of need and gratification, and for instrumental purposes of productivity, cost reduction and market expansion. However, during the highly intensive use of the device in everyday life, new types of social acts are constructed; some of them, on one hand, are influenced by the mobile phone as a communication artefact, others are an expression of the social characteristics of its users. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a new approach beyond the above-mentioned two perspectives – the productivity approach and use and gratification theory. Some current studies, specifically Wei's analyses of three business-related gratifications (gratification for information-seeking, mobility and accessibility) offer some useful reference for this examination of social roles of mobile phones in Fujian entrepreneurs' lives.

What at issue is a complicated relationship among the artefact, the user and the social context where the interactions take place. The use and gratification theory has been criticised for providing little explanation on the formation or emergence of an individual's psychological and social need, which is the first step of any media use (Zhu, 2004). In other words, this *user-centred* theory ignores the role the technology plays in this communication interaction and the social environment where the uses are embedded. In addition, the use and gratification theory may also be too simplistic to comprehend the complicated nature of the relationship between an everyday artefact and its users, which is particularly evidenced in the use of mobile phones. Needs and gratifications may be initial stimulations for the adoption of a mobile phone, but during the process of integration into users' everyday lives, new social roles and

meanings are generated. For this inquiry it is necessary to introduce two emerging theories, namely the *affordance theory* and *domestication theory*, to formulate a set of complementary concepts.

The concept of affordances originated from Gibson's (1977) article "The Theory of Affordances", which refers to an action that an individual can potentially perform in his/her environment. Hutchby (2001) introduces this concept into communication studies (a telephone in this case), which emphasises features a communication technology possesses to fulfil its users' need. He argues that different technologies possess an inherent range of affordances, and these affordances constrain the ways users use them, but "the full range of affordances of any object cannot be available to immediate perception," (Hutchby, 2001, p.28) and the most suitable use of the technology is often discovered at last (Hutchby, 2001 p.28). He supports his argument in a study about how the social function of telephony has changed since its invention, influencing social interaction which is shaped by the technological affordances. It has found that new meanings of space and identities are discovered by the affordances of the telephone.

The *domestication theory*, introduced by Silverstone & Hirsch (1992) was originally developed to study ICT uses of householders in a home environment. Emphasizing both the artefacts and the mediated content, it argues that technology is necessary to go through a process of being 'tamed' and 'cultivated' in order to suit the everyday life of household users (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992). In the development of domestication theory, Katz's (2003) contribution is significant. He argues that, at first, technologies are invented and introduced into everyday life and adapted by the users in their daily practices. Then, the functions and services of the technologies start to influence the users and their use of the environment. Finally, the complete adaptations of the users bring feedback to the technologies and influence the technologies' future development. This theory is mainly in opposition to the notion that technologies have power and control over human beings and stresses the agency or ability of users which can 'tame' and 'cultivate' the technologies to become part of their everyday life (Katz & Sugiyama 2006). In the book "Machines that Becomes Us", Katz (2003) on

one hand emphasises the involvement of communication technologies into the users' lives and their bodies as part of his argument, 'machine becoming us'; on the other hand, and more importantly, he addresses the technology users' agency and ability and argues that technology users actually continue to influence and control the technologies for their own benefit – as part of his argument, 'us becoming machines' (Katz 2003).

Both of the aforementioned two concepts provide complementary perspectives to the guiding framework of social shaping of communication technology. The *affordance theory* offers a notion about how the mobile phone offers affordances for some new uses, new perceptions and new possibilities for the exploitation of new uses and perceptions, while the *domestication theory* provides a more sophisticated elaboration about the agency and ability of the users in 'taming' and 'cultivating' the artefact into their daily life.

In this current study, entrepreneurs and the mobile phone technology are typically in a high interaction relation, as Jean (2004) states, when a social environment changes and new people with new perceptions come into contact with the technology, so new affordances, new possibilities for its exploitation, will become apparent (Jean, 2004). This notion is also echoed in Katz's (2003) writing, the technologies

...quickly lose any external reality and simply become part of the taken-for-granted world of the user. As such people use them as invisible tools. People used their technology in creative ways that had no bearing on the features of the technology, but rather as invisible means to accomplish personally pressing objectives (Katz, 2003, p.18)

In analysing the mobile phone use of Chinese entrepreneurs, Fisher's social constructivism model is used as a guiding concept and it is combined with the affordance and domestication theory. The concept presented here is an integrated model that is used to evaluate how the social roles of the highly interacted ICTs, like the mobile phone, is constructed by Fujian entrepreneurs. On one hand, it examines how the social characteristics of the Fujian business people as a social group are

expressed in their use of mobile phones. On the other hand, it recognises that the mobile phone, with its technical attributes and functions, also provides affordances for users to create new uses and new meanings of the artefact in their daily activities.

In this inquiry, it is assumed that Fujian entrepreneurs make use of mobile phone technology in a way which is in accordance to the known characteristics of their business culture. They utilise mobile phones for functional purposes, such as creating business opportunities, searching for business information, conducting business bargaining and negotiations, developing customer relations, managing their enterprises and coordinating their personal lives. In addition, drawing reference from the *affordance theory*, the technological features of the mobile phone are considered and how they would offer affordances for the exploitation of some of the new uses and new perceptions in mobile phone usage. Fujian entrepreneurs are conceptualised to be in the process of 'domestication' in the daily interaction with the mobile phone. They are not passive users but active agents who utilise the artefact according to their personal and instrumental needs. They first adapt to the technical features of the device, gradually, based on the technological affordances of the artefact, transforming it into an integral part of their business practice and life routine. They are actually taming and cultivating the mobile phone in order to achieve business success. Through their innovative uses, the mobile phone has been constructed and reconstructed into a range of new social roles and meanings.

Research questions:

The central research question is: *What are the social roles of the mobile phone constructed by Fujian entrepreneurs in their daily business life?* This issue is examined from two dimensions: one focuses on the social attributes of the users and the other on the technical attributes of the artefact. Hence, there are two sub-issues:

- 1) *How are the characteristics of Fujian entrepreneurs expressed in their daily use of the mobile phone?*
- 2) *What are the innovative uses created by Fujian entrepreneurs which are afforded by the technical attributes of the mobile phone?*

Methodology

In-depth interviews were employed. There were a total of 12 interviewees, 10 males and two females, aged between 29 and 51, who were selected through a snowball method of recommendations by friends, acquaintances or interviewees. They are all entrepreneurs of private businesses in Quanzhou City, Fujian Province. All of them hold managerial posts in their enterprises; some are also owners of their enterprises. They are active business persons who always travel around to participate in national and international trade affairs. Most of them have national and international business networks. The interviews were conducted face-to-face between December 2007 and February 2008 in interviewees' homes or offices. An average interview lasted about 40 minutes. All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed word-by-word into digital document files, which were analysed through a research application Nvivo.

For the qualitative data analysis, several major classifications were established. Under the major classifications, many sub-categories of nodes were generated during the course of data analysis.

Findings: Mobile phone use and characteristics of Fujian entrepreneurs

The findings explore how characteristics of Fujian entrepreneurs are reflected in their mobile phone uses. These characteristics are summarised as striving for business success, attitude of pragmatism, business shrewdness, striving for extensionality (to expand business beyond one's locality) and family-oriented business networks.

Our findings indicate that all the characteristics of Fujian entrepreneurs are clearly demonstrated in their mobile phone use patterns.

1. Keeping connected 24 hours

Fujian entrepreneurs strive to keep 24-hour contact in order not to miss a single business call. They never turn off mobile phones, even during holidays and vacations. As Andy Huang explains:²

² The first names of all the interviewees are changed to English names to protect their privacy.

Because customers in the country call us any time in the morning, in the evening, foreign customers may also call us for some emergency help, they may not know the time difference... If you turn off the phone, you will lose business opportunities. (Andy Huang, 34)

In addition, they all choose two types of alerts – vibrate and loud ring alerts – so as to catch every business opportunity. As Kevin Liu explains:

When I am having a dinner with customers, I may not hear the ring, so I need a vibrate alert... when I am taking a shower, I can't feel the vibrate alert, so I need a ring alert too. (Kevin Liu, 46)

They seldom forget to bring their mobile phones with them, if they do forget, they get them back as soon as possible. As Amy Lin states:

Lots of businesses are connected through mobile phones because I am always out of my office. If I forget my phone, I just can't find any information and don't know what happens. (Amy Lin, 32)

To ensure that no single call is missed, they utilise several phone functions or services such as a missed call display, call divert, mobile phone mail box and three parties talk.

To use Mike Lin's word to summarise:

I can't stop connecting with the outside for any moment, I (use all the functions) to make my mobile phone exert the largest effect to keep the connection unblocked. (Mike Lin, 53)

2. Mastering mobile phone uses

Fujian entrepreneurs are known for their pragmatism. This attribute is exhibited in their good command of various uses of the mobile phone. They skilfully use the artefact in all the major aspects of their daily business practice and operations from searching business information, catching business opportunities, business bargaining, customer relations, to enterprise management and even self-management.

Fujian entrepreneurs are remarkably proficient in making good use of many mobile phone functions. Beside daily phone conversations, several other functions offered by the mobile phone, such as the Internet connection, office organisers, camera, video, ringtones, etc. are skilfully utilised to pursue an efficient operation of business. Pragmatism also lies in their priority consideration in choosing a mobile phone or a service package. All the interviewees said that the top consideration of choosing a mobile phone is signal, followed by the speech quality, functions, the quality and capacity of a mobile phone, and so on. As Mike Lin says:

The first choice is mobile phone signal, the second is function, the last is appearance... good mobile phone company gives you a larger coverage, everywhere you can receive calls and connect with the outside. (Mike Lin, 53)

They use mobile phones for frequent search of business information. They make an efficient use of tele-information centres such as 118114, 10000 to seek information about companies, products, weather, hotels and travel agencies. They also search information on the Internet through the mobile phones. Some have even subscribed to a SMS service of economic news which provides the latest news on foreign exchange quotations, financial information, CPI statistics, bank interests, new policies, etc.

3. Keeping a low cost on phone bills

Another element of being pragmatic is their frugality in running a business. The entrepreneurs pay special attention to keeping their mobile phone costs very low. They admit that mobile phone bills account for a minimal part in their enterprises' whole business expenses. This consideration for cost effectiveness is also shown in the fact that all of them have two phones with them. One subscribes to the Personal Handy-phone System (PHS) for local calls, which offers cheaper rates and one to Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) of China Mobile for national and international calls. The cost is the top consideration in choosing a mobile phone service package. For instance, Mr. Li from NN Corp orders a monthly package of RMB280 as it can largely reduce the cost for long distance calls. Joanna Wei adds: "My package has lots of benefits. The monthly fee of RMB288 actually equals to RMB500 of [the previous] phone bill." (Joanna Wei, 31)

4. Being calculating in dealing with phone calls

Fujian business people's pragmatism is also reflected in their thoughtfulness in dealing with customers. Some of them even set different ringtones for different customers. As Kevin Liu says:

I set different ring tones for all of my customers, therefore, when I hear the tones, I know which customer it is. (Kevin Liu, 46)

The time difference is another carefully considered element in their phone use. As Roger Lin states:

Because some customers are in different time zones... and I certainly need to be accessed by my colleagues and customers, so I turn on my mobile phone 24-hours.(Roger Lin, 48)

The difference in holidays is also taken into account. To quote from Sean Li, who made a business deal during China's dragon boat festival: "Holidays in foreign countries and China are different, so I make my mobile phone power on in holidays." (Sean Li, 29)

The characteristic of pragmatism is also represented in their calculative act of answering phone calls. The interviewees all said that they would not answer any incoming calls immediately. They would decide whether to answer them or not by comparing the importance of the calls to the customers they are dealing with. As Leo Zheng states:

If suddenly my phone rings, I will compare the importance of the call to the customer I am meeting with and decide whether to pick it up or not. (Leo, Zheng 27)

5. Developing a long distance customer relationship

Fujian business people strive to expand their business into the national and international markets. The characteristic of extensionality is signified in their specific efforts to develop a friendship with customers who are located in different parts of the country or even abroad. They consider a customer friendship as an important element

in their business development and they not only do business with their customers, but also develop a deep friendship with their customers.

Most of the entrepreneurs have international customers and some of them frequently go to international affairs and make business trips. In the development of a long-distance customer friendship, entrepreneurs use mobile phones to gossip with their customers frequently. For example, Peter Wang states:

For some close customers, I use the local dialect to talk with them. Though it looks like quarrels, we feel very close. But for other unfamiliar customers, I use more friendly tone to talk; it is different. (Peter Wang, 42)

They also send greeting messages to their customers during holidays. As Mike Lin states:

Some customers we often meet, some seldom meet, and some even never meet, but we can use the mobile phone to contact... I send greeting messages to them, or holiday greetings. The interacted customer relationship can make business smoother. (Mike Lin, 53)

It is interesting to note that female entrepreneurs tend to use frequent gossips and holiday greetings to develop a long-distance customer relationship more than male businessmen. Only half of the male entrepreneurs who have international business operations undertake this kind of strategy to develop customer relationships.

6. Shrewd mobile phone use in bargaining

The entrepreneurs highly correlate the success of their business with cunning uses of mobile phones. The characteristics of business shrewdness and unconventional ways of practice are clearly demonstrated in their invention of a series of new uses of mobile phones in dealing with business negotiation. In frequent business bargaining, voice calls are preferred. Most entrepreneurs use voice calls to negotiate business terms, especially when they are out of the office. But they also utilise SMS in their business bargaining because a text format is believed to be reliable proof. As Amy Lin mentions:

(when the customers deny our agreement) I can say you have a confirmation message in my phone, I can find it out as text evidence to protect me. (Amy Lin, 32)

Taking advantage of space difference in mobile phone communication, they have developed several creative uses. This will be elaborated in the next section which deals with how the technical attributes of the mobile phone afford some new uses and perceptions.

7. Communicating in family business networks

Half of the interviewees have business relations with their family or extended family networks. About the family business communication pattern, the entrepreneurs apply mobile phone communication to complement unimportant details and long-distance situations, and they prefer face-to-face communication when they encounter some important issues. The entrepreneurs communicate with their relatives through both face-to-face and mobile phone communication. As Kevin Liu states:

If we are not in the same place, the mobile phone is most convenient, if we are together, face-to-face is more clear... when I am out of town, then some protocol needs to be complemented by the mobile phone. (Kevin Liu, 46)

The mobile phone and its innovative uses

The mobile phone is much more than a communication device. It offers a range of functions and services, making it possible for business people to explore new uses and perceptions. The mobile phone is distinguished in some of its technical attributes as a communication platform:

- 1) It enables communication in different places, thus affords several possibilities. Communicators involved do not have full knowledge of the real situation of each other; communicators do not know each other's exact whereabouts;
- 2) It is a one-to-one conversation, and its content cannot be heard by a third person who is present in the phone talk;

- 3) Compared with a face-to-face communication, the phone conversation is easier to start and to end;
- 4) SMS talk is voiceless and can not be heard by a third person in presence

These features have freed communicators from the constraints of time and space in the face-to-face conversations, providing affordances for users to explore new types of usage in their business practice. The findings in this study uncovered three sets of innovative uses – tricky usage in business bargaining, uses in business supervision and self-management.

1. Tricky uses in business bargaining

The entrepreneurs relate the success of their business to cunning uses of mobile phones. Taking advantage of space difference in mobile phone communication, they have developed several creative uses of mobile phones in their business bargaining and negotiations. First, they create a fictional scenario. On one hand, they fake a scenario of self-presence or absence. As Amy Lin mentions:

(Customers call me when I am out of the office) I say I'm not in my office but I am still in town, I am supervising your order in the factory. (Amy Lin, 32)

And Mike Lin says:

The mobile phone doesn't have a space boundary, I can tell the customer I'm in another place, even in another country. (Mike Lin, 53)

On the other hand, they fake a scenario of others being present or absent. As Roger Lin mentions:

In a meeting (with a customer), you can answer a phone call, make up a scenario that other people also want to do this business, it is useful. (Roger Lin, 48)

Second, they use tricks to give out twisted information. They take the advantage of a mobile conversation in which the customers can only see a person talk on the phone, but can not hear what is said on the other end. As Sean Li describes a situation when a bargaining of prices is underway with a customer:

I would call my business operator asking the price of a product, the person may say 20. Then I would purposely say, 'You sell 24 dollars there?' and the customer will believe the price we offer is lower. (Sean Li, 29)

Third, they apply a time delay to get rid of troublesome customers. Sometimes they purposely delay a phone answering time to get rid of troublesome customers. As Amy Lin states:

Some customers keep requesting samples, but you don't want to give it to them, sometimes, when they call me, I delay answering the call for a certain period of time. (Amy Lin, 32)

And they postpone a mobile phone bargaining time in order to think over their business. As Peter Wang says:

I'll say 'I'm busy now, call you later.' I'll still call back. I hang up the phone in order to think how to deal with the business. I'll give myself time to think how to convince the customer. (Peter Wang, 42)

Finally, they use SMS to share some confidential information with team members in business negotiations. As Steven Su describes:

In a business negotiation, a customer changes his demand to a new product that makes the price change a lot. In this case, I will send SMS to my colleagues to consult about the price first. (Steven Su, 46)

2. Performing business management tasks

The entrepreneurs have developed new mobile phone uses to efficiently supervise their employees' work. They call the employees' office landlines to discover the employee's presence when they are out of town. Sean Li provides a sophisticated example:

I arranged one of my subordinates for a purchase, then I called the shop, asking whether he arrived there and what he did. (Sean Li, 29)

They also use mobile phones to cooperate and supervise their employees' business tasks. As Mike Lin concludes:

Whatever tasks are being carried out, results or efficiency of my employees, all can be cooperated and supervised by my mobile phone. (Mike Lin, 53)

Moreover, they use mobile phones to review their business performance and customer relationships. As Kevin Liu explains:

When I am out of town, I call my managers to ask about daily achievement... and if some close customers have not called, I will ask my managers to communicate with them. (Kevin Liu, 46)

3. Self-management

The entrepreneurs utilise the mobile phone agenda alert to strictly manage their life schedule. Mike Lin even uses the agenda alert as a habit to regularise himself. He states:

I always input unfinished tasks in my phone, gradually it becomes my habit and I check them every week... just like people buying stocks, they check everyday, I check my agenda once a week. (Mike Lin, 53)

The entrepreneurs also use the wake-up alert to manage their lives. Some of them set a regular alert to start a day's business, while some set their alert only on business trips. As Amy Lin explains:

I seldom use the daily wake-up alert, my body clock is stable at home, but it is different on business trips, my body clock changes, sometimes I go to bed very late and am afraid of sleeping in the next morning. (Amy Lin, 32)

Conclusions

This study looked at the roles constructed by business people in southern China where mobile phones have been integrated into the everyday life of private entrepreneurs. The mobile phone, as a highly interactive artefact, provides a range of affordances for Fujian entrepreneurs to have a greater play in their initiatives and aspirations to succeed in the business enterprise. First, it enables a 24-hour contact when doing business operations. With the mobile phone, the business liaison is not restricted to an eight-hour working schedule. For Fujian business people, every minute could be a working time as every phone call is viewed as a potential business opportunity. Therefore, the daily life is not organised as distinctive time slots of working time, after-work time and relaxing time. But rather it is a continuous working time devoted to unremitting business talks and negotiations. Even holidays and leisure trips are mingled with customer liaisons, company management, business negotiations, etc.

Second, the mobile phone facilitates a 'mobile office' for business people. The common notion of the 'business office' which is situated in a particular geographic place is shattered. For Fujian entrepreneurs, their mobile phone is their office. When they carry their phone, they have their business office with them. They use it for a variety of business functions ranging from searching for information, contacting customers, negotiating contacts, to supervising employees, etc. In addition, this mobile office, not bound to a particular place, is outwardly oriented to a market expansion beyond the local territory. To a certain extent, it favours national and international networks of customers and business networks over local networks since more business tricks could be performed and undetected with long-distance mobile communication.

Third, the artefact has also become a platform for staging a tricky performance in business negotiations. Taking advantages of attributes of mobile communication such as an absence of communication cues in face-to-face communication and a lack of knowledge of local situations, Fujian entrepreneurs have brought their characteristics of business shrewdness to full play by innovating a series of mobile phone uses in

landing business contracts, getting rid of troublesome customers or maximising business achievements.

Last, the mobile phone thus has become the central axis around which the lives of Fujian entrepreneurs revolve. It sets and structures their daily life routine with wake-up rings, agenda alerts, 24-hours calls, SMS and news feeds. It brings the business office to the home, blurs the private life with the business operations, disturbs family dinners with customer relations, and encroaches on vacation trips (including writing numerous holiday greetings). In essence, the artefact becomes the 'magic wand' *par excellence*.

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