

# **A MODERN FETISH: THE VALUE OF THE MOBILE PHONE IN SOUTH KOREAN YOUTH CULTURE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to analyze the cultural significance of the mobile phone to the youths living in Seoul. It is based on the observation data produced by a group of communication students at Seoul National University. The paper presents the students' observations on mobile phone use in the public and urban context of Seoul area as well as the students' personal reflections on the subject. The paper further discusses the mobile phone as a significant element of Korean youth culture and, further, of the contemporary modern society.

## **KEYWORDS**

Mobile phones, South Korea, youth culture.

## **1. INTRODUCTION TO A MOBILE CULTURE**

### **1.1 A Mobile Phone is Not Just a Phone**

It took some time for researchers to consider the mobile phone as a worthy object of research and something more than a telephone that one can carry with. In fact, from a cultural anthropologist's view point the mobile phone is nothing less than a technological innovation par excellence, a r/evolution of communication and as a cultural influence at least as significant as the Internet (e.g. Horst & Miller 2006; Goggin 2006; Katz 2006). Today's mobile phone is not only a media hub but also a device of fashion with visual and haptic qualities similar to those of the magical charms and tribal totems. In its miniature symbolism the phone is an everyday personal crystallization of its carrier used to construct and communicate identity. Whether we see the mobile phone as a revolution, evolution or nothing new under the sun is a matter of choosing a discourse. However, we should not "hype the phone" and get seduced by the utopian anarchism that mystifies rather than enlightens the meaning of the cell phone. In contrast, we should also beware the "hopelessly romantic technophobia" often noticeable in critical cultural studies. (McGuigan 2005, 46 & 55; Green, Harvey & Knox 2005, 817). In this paper, the mobile phone is considered as having paramount implications in the sociological configurations of modern cultures. Hype or not, the phone is not just a phone but it should be viewed as a unique emergent entity in techno-evolution and a lot more than the sum of its parts.

As for techno-evolution, South Korea has a vastly developed media culture which is connected to the rapid economic growth and the resolute construction of information society. The Korean youth are clearly the most eager and versatile consumers of the new media. (See e.g. Webb 2007; *Ubiquitous Network Societies* 2005.) In short, my question here is “What is the mobile phone to young Koreans?” To answer it, I will introduce a few interesting points of studies on Korean mobiles and then present and discuss the observations and reflections of fifteen undergraduate students of communication at Seoul National University. In the observation rehearsal the students observed mobile phone use in a public place and reflected on their own use as well as the significance of mobile phone culture in Korea. Rather than explaining causal connections and assuring validity by measurement, I attempt to reflect on the system of meaning inherent in the mobile phone culture. In my view and treatment of the material, the subject matter is a complex and abstract social phenomenon with prevalent cultural elements to it. The mobile phone is a sort of worm hole to a world of cultural values, dynamics and interplay of socialness, esthetics, prestige, play and information.

Although mobile phone culture has attracted various studies already, the subject of Korean youth harnessing the technology has produced close to zero publications discussing the experience and significance of “being mobile”. I am aware of my introductory paper being limited in both theoretical discussion and methodology but, at the same time, I am hopeful that the reader can forgive me my shortcomings and relate to the text as a modest prelude to a wider exploration of the mobile phone culture in Korea.

## 1.2 Of Koreans and Mobiles

Although there is a major quantitative bias in Korean research on mobile media communication (Jouhki 2008, 257; *ibid.* 2007, 37) some researchers have founded their research on qualitative and even ethnographic material (see e.g. Hjorth 2008). For example, Lee Dong-Hoo has combined gender and communication research in the context of mobile phone culture in a rather interesting way. Contrary to popular conceptions, young Korean women are rather active in adopting certain technological novelties brought by the multi-media mobile phones. In Korea, the apparatus itself seems to represent a counter-phenomenon against the hegemonic patriarchal ideology. Contrary to the analogue phone, mobile phones for women are not an escape from the confinement to private spaces but a reinforcement of the activeness of a social womanhood. Camera phones allow young Korean women to explore themselves in a novel mode, for fun and play, and supplant the male gaze by peer-gaze and, perhaps, even narcissistic gaze. (Lee 2005; see also Choi 2007; Hjorth & Kim 2005.)

Yoon Kyongwon’s studies on Korean youth and their mobile phone culture represent the pinnacle of qualitative youth studies in Korea. Yoon has set the mobile phone culture of Korean youth against the backdrop of common images of globalization in Korea. According to him, globalization has evoked images of Koreans being forced to enter a world where the Western individualization destroys traditional values of communality. In mass media and academic literature Yoon finds representations portraying the Korean youth as estranged from their families because of the use of personal communication technologies. The cell phone has been seen as an apparatus causing young Koreans to diverge from the norms of harmonious communality and destroying collective and affective relationships. (Yoon 2003, 327-328.) Yoon also found two opposite hegemonic representations, the “youth in cybertopia” and “youth at risk.” In research literature young Koreans are generally depicted as having natural affinity to new technologies and innovations. However, many Korean inquiries see young people in crisis because of new technologically mediated environment and its perceived negative impacts, for example individualization, disembodiment, inauthenticity and being out of parental control. On the surface the moral panic and cybertopia seem to contradict to each other, but on the deeper level they reproduce the representation of “a recurring duality” which means that young people are celebrated as the precursors of a bright future and at the same time denigrated as the evidence of moral disorder. (Yoon 2006, 754-756; cf. Cho 2003 & 2004.)

Although mobile communication is most evidently a tool for enhancing communality and collectivity (see e.g. Lee, Kim & Jeon 2005; *The Mobile Communication Society* 2004, 247; Yoon 2003, 331-332) in the negative representations about Korean youth, the mobile phone use is compared to disease and addiction isolating individuals from the society and depriving them of sense of reality. According to Korean media a particular age group – the youth – is more prone to develop these pathological symptoms. The most concerned views implied that “personalized” ownership of mobile telephones might lead to teenage

prostitution and other adolescence delinquencies. Especially young girls were seen as most vulnerable to the “unsound environments” the new technology made accessible. Recently, marketers have tried to reduce the social concern over youth by producing positive images of the technology and promoting cheap products with different strategies like humanizing the technology by mascot-use and localizing the technology within specific cultural norms and using local visual and linguistic formats. In advertisements foreign languages have been avoided and localism emphasized. (Yoon 2006, 761-763; see also Kim & Jung 2004 and Lee, Ann & Jeong 2004.) In Korea, on the surface, popular discourse has seen new technology as a facilitator of “successful” globalization. However, a close examination reveals that new technology is perceived and consumed through local filters, including social relations and norms. Indeed, the current conceptualization of youth and technology in Korean appears to rearticulate the “cyberkids” rhetoric on the basis of neo-Confucian norms and social relations. (Yoon 2006, 764-767; see also Ok 2008, 302-303.)

## **2. STUDENTS ON MOBILE PHONE USE**

### **2.1 A Note on the Method**

During the spring term of 2008 I held a course introducing the culture of digital communication at Seoul National University. The course was called *Global Communication: Messages of Digital Age* and as a part of the course work the students were to observe details and general tendencies of young Koreans using a mobile phone in a public place. The students (14 women and one man) were required to first observe the public mobile phone use at least for an hour, then reflect on their observations, also in relation to their own phone use, and finally discuss their views on the significance of mobile phones to young Koreans. In other words, they were to observe and reflect on their observations. No interviews were made. The students had two weeks to write their four-page (Times New Roman, 12 pt, line 1.5) reports which then were further used as data for this paper.

Obviously, the method used poses several problems. Firstly, the students were not trained observers. Even if they had been, their observations would still have been influenced by numerous factors that are all too well problematized by all critical users of the ethnographic method. One may also wonder how much the personal properties of the observers like gender (most were female) and status (academic students of a prestigious university) had influence on observations. Moreover, their observations were part of a course work which might have lead them to color or exaggerate the observations to suit something they had imagined a foreign teacher such as myself find proper and interesting. On the other hand, as members of the Korean culture, they might have suffered from home-blindness and failed to notice unique elements of Korean mobile behavior they found simply natural, obvious and not worthy of mentioning. Further, in the reflections of their own mobile phone use and that of Korean youths in general their personal interpretations and use of language (academic and English) might have lead them to misrepresent their thoughts and ideas. In fact, there are countless possible reasons to claim the subjectivity of the observers and denounce them as not neutral tools of data collection. However, this is a common problem of all empirical fieldwork where humans interpret humans. To my purposes this kind of questioning of reliability is not that significant as I am not that interested about what the “reality” behind all the observations, interpretations and discourse is but find the discourse about the reality more relevant. Although the students produced interesting data as observers, they also functioned as informants that were analyzed themselves too.

### **2.2 Summary of Observations: Use and Non-Use**

To summarize the observations, the students who did their observations in a restaurant or a café noticed how most people set their phone on the table and kept checking it regularly. Women and young people did this the most. While on the move or standing, most people also carried their phone in their hand. When waiting alone, the mobile phone was number one pastime. People texted, played, or just fiddled with the phone. In groups also the phone was constantly checked and caused accepted interruption. The phone was according to all observations a device with fashion value and a significant part of one’s identity and prestige. The phone had

esthetic value, and especially young women were seen active in decorating their phones. They had jewelry, stickers and colorful covers on their phones, and they seemed to check the phones and use them more. Most people used their mobile for texting, calling, watching TV and movies, listening to music and playing games. Texting was considered to be the “more cool” way to communicate instead of plain talking on the phone, which seems to be something the older people do – and often too loudly. The older Koreans were not aware of the strict phone etiquette that the young Seoulites obeyed: no high ringing volume (preferably only vibration) and no loud talking, not to mention the value of the looks of the phone. The old people also checked their phones only when they beeped or rang, not out of habit. All people but the young especially had external appliances like a subway pass or USB-extensions in their phones. The most popular phones were white and with a slide or shell form. Practically no one used the hands-free ability of the phone. Watching television was also a very common thing for the young travelling in the subway or bus, but nowhere else.

The observed use of mobile phones was also significantly non-use as the mobile phones were often actually not used but idle although explicitly present, uncovered and showcased. And if they were used, they were surprisingly often just fiddled with and touched about. Most of the time the phones were sort of on-call, potentially used, handily in-hand, frequently checked for possible missed calls, text message, time or multimedia messages, and constantly physically in hand or in reach. What was interesting to us all was that most Koreans carried their phones in their hands and not in their pockets or bags. Perhaps it was because of the crowds, the noise and so forth which made hearing the phone ring or feeling it vibrate in the pocket or bag difficult if not impossible. Checking the phone seemed to be close to a compulsion, a sign of the imperative of not only being connected but also being connected instantly. The older generations seemed to keep their phones tucked away, in the bag or pocket, even in the cell phone holster which seemed to be considered an unfashionable thing.

These were the informative observations made by my students but in the following personal reflections they continue to interpret the observations, explain and bring reason to them and construct the image of Koreans using mobiles.

## 2.3 Reflections of the Students

“A brand new, cutting edge mobile phone is always envied,” a student explained, as “[p]hones are a matter of self-expression, style, and personality for Koreans.” She continued to reflect on the significance of mobile phones to Koreans who “seem to have an emotional and social dependency on mobile phones that make them want to have their gadgets forever in their reach.” It was also a question of security as “[m]obile phones are central to both social life and personal life, and having the device under control seems to provide people with sense of security.” The phone is a multifaceted tool and the convergence of services is palpable in Korea. “In a sense,” she continued, “cell phones have become a reliable ‘being’ that provides connection to other people, recreation, schedule management, and so many other functions that are crucial to everyday life.” (Student A.) Another student reflected on how the cell phone can be used as a subject of conversation when small talk has run out. People can quickly turn to each other’s phones and talk about their brand, celebrity endorsers, functions and browse through pictures taken with their cameras. When young people socialize, the mobile phones are usually “on stage” also because they are expensive and stylish, she concluded. (Student B)

Most students mentioned how in Korean culture it is important to be social and open to social connections regardless of what one is doing. This gives special significance to the mobile phone in-hand. One student recalled how surprised she had been to see the French people turning off their phones when they liked. Shutting a mobile phone was impossible in Korea. (Student D.) Another student found the mobile phone a rather integral part of her life. “Every day and every moment of my daily life, I definitely realize the significance of the mobile phone. It is the main tool of communication, information and entertainment.” In her view the mobile phone to the Korean youth is “a requirement to function effectively in a culture” as they fear “isolation and separation” and “and hope to reassure themselves of their bonding with the rest of the society”. (Student C.) Many students agreed with her, and one reflected on how especially the youth and the women were unable to be separated from their mobile phones. She also reflected on her own close relation to her phone.

I also regularly check my cell phone even though I do not get any signals from my phone. If I do not have my cell phone in my hand, I feel very nervous and kind of isolated from the society. (Student E.)

One student pointed out that the young generation “seemed to make the most out of it” and older generations still regarded the mobile phone as a mere phone, “in the traditional sense.” She continued to the scheduling of everyday life and how for example making a date had become more flexible, without the need to decide on the exact place or time. Breaking a date had never been easier either – a quick SMS did the job. Also, the time waiting for someone was often spent with a mobile phone. Especially young people were conscious about the way they appeared to others, she explained, and thus “just fiddling with [the phone] seems like at least doing ‘something’.” A crowded subway train was also a good place to use a mobile phone and to put one’s eyes on when it was not proper to look around at other people. In addition, the phone brought safety to a public place. In a place such as a chaotic subway station holding a phone in one’s hand makes one feel more secure. “It feels like it protects me from not getting lost among people.” She also wondered if people who carried phones in their hand feared losing contact as to her forgetting the phone at home was a terrifying thought. In the student’s view, young Koreans considered their phones to be of an utmost importance and the mobile phone was clearly an extension of a human being. (According to Student J people even slept on the subway while grasping their phones.) Moreover,

it is acting like one’s other self, a part of a body. Since there are various colors and designs that we can choose from, it is one way of representing our identity and style. The mobile phone sometimes is a friend who easily helps us not to get bored, and a protector who gives us some sense of security and saves us from being isolated. It is a way of not getting lost in this popular and crowded place, and not being looked idle. (Student F.)

Many other students mentioned the subway as the place for making “the most out of mobile phone” because the advanced infrastructure enables it as the user is not distracted by other things such as walking or driving but has to stay put. One student remarked that

the tendency that people are usually alone in subway affects the use of mobile phone. While being alone in subway with strangers around, people might feel bored and even lonely and that can lead to mobile communication with their family or friends. (Student G.)

The observations revealed that the mobile phone is also, simply, just a pleasant thing to hold and touch, and the “fiddling” and the extension-of-body aspect came up often in the observations. To Student G, for example,

[t]he most surprising finding [was] that people were almost always holding mobile phone in their hand. Even though people were not using the phone and even when they were sleeping, mobile phones were kept in hands. [...] From this I got the impression that mobile phone was a part or extension of their body. I could also assume that people were greatly dependent on mobile phone or they have strong desire to communicate with others or fear of being isolated or disconnected.

A mobile phone was communication device but also a device for entertainment and to “kill time” with. It was a pocket-size machine that contained media convergence and had immense entertainment value. Moreover, the aspect of fashion came up in every report, for example, Student G had observed how

young Koreans are very sensitive to trends. [...] People seem to think that mobile phone is worth the high price because it plays a significant part of their daily life or it represents their identity. Young people’s sensitivity to fashion works as a fundamental driving force for Korean mobile phone industry to prosper.

There was also a lot of gaming going on in the subway too. However, one student found it interesting that hardly no one took any mobile pictures in the subway – it would have been “too shameful” – not to mention taking video calls. (Student H.) According to the students’ reflections, there seemed to be strict etiquette limiting mobile photography in a closed public space. For example, one student noticed how a few girls

started to take pictures of each other in the subway and attracted disapproving glances from other passengers (Student D).

The “vibration syndrome” was observed in many reports. It means that people in a (often noisy) public place check their phones constantly, even if they do not ring or vibrate. As for the widely observed use of mobile phone decoration, Student D noticed how some boys have more decoration on their phones than others. She explained that although it was the girls who usually decorated their phones, boys who have girlfriends often had to wear the decoration given them by the significant other. Couples tended to decorate their phones uniformly, and the function of it was similar to that of engagement rings. The perhaps feminine decoration hanging from a boy’s phone was a message from the girl to others meaning “Lay off, he’s taken.” She also wondered why people did not decorate their MP3-players or mobile televisions and came to the hypothesis that it was because the cell phone was a more public device and people were attached to their phones more. She thought the massive decoration culture in Korea was a sign of restricted self-expression in some other areas of life. In Europe people hardly ever decorated their phones, perhaps because they were more open in general and allowed to express themselves in various ways, including speech and dressing. In Korea young people were more conformist and uniform (e.g. school uniforms), obeyed rules and feared being isolated. In this climate the cell phone was one of the few tools to express oneself. Moreover, one could not have much time with friends because school and studying took up most of the time, so the cell phone was the main tool for networking. (Student D.)

## **2.4 Conclusions on the Mobile**

In the light of the observations, one could say the mobile phone has become a culturally *essential* device for young Koreans who seem to be in constant physical touch with the phone. It is in reach, in sight and in touch and it enables (or requires) being in reach and sometimes even in sight of one’s peers. According to the observations, young Koreans greatly value their personal multimedia, a hub of essential elements that together build up a sociocultural configuration producing entertainment and sociability as well as security, comfort and esthetic (and haptic) pleasure. The mobile phone was observed to be in display while the phone itself displayed and transmitted information from and for the shared web of meaning of the Korean youth culture. The fear of being isolated was apparent in the students’ reflections and in that way the phone had become an extension or intension of the person. One student even thought that “a person who does not have a mobile phone can be considered as not civilized (Student I).” To be a part of the greater whole required constant connection and not missing any text messages or calls. Communicating fashion through the phone was appreciated and shared by the community.

## **3. DISCUSSION: A MODERN FETISH**

The mobile phone has become a modern fetish. Traditionally, the mobile phone has been a device for mobile interpersonal communication. However, most people who are alone and not communicating find great comfort in the gadget. “I’m not alone. I’m with my cell phone.” (Plant 2000, 42 & 62.) The device operates both as a tool for self-identification and cultural capital (Hjorth 2005). In Asia, the cell phone fits the communication culture like a glove. Compared to the Americans who hesitate to consider the phone an essential part of their lives, Asians feel more comfortable with the apparatus. Nevertheless, the use of the cell phone seems to reveal more intracultural than intercultural differences as the ways of using the phone vary a lot. (Plant 2000, 78-79.) Another element that comes out of the literature as well as the observations and reflections of the students is the haptic dimension. Fiddling with objects, like beads, cigarettes, keys, and so forth seems to be a fundamental part of human nature, and a means of obtaining pleasure. The fiddling of the phone might even be a part of a messaging ritual. (Brown & Williamson 2007, 4-5.) And it just simply feels good to touch a prestige object like the phone. Heidi Rae Colley reflects on the “special fit” she describes as being “the particular relationship” between the hand and the mobile device which “occurs at the instant of contour when the hand forms to the [device] and the [device] gives to the hand.” The fit is not “a condition or

quality” but it is more like “a moment of acting in and through, a moment that reveals the potential for dynamic and reciprocal engagement.” (Cooley 2004, 136-137.)

There is a becoming-one, an experience of bonding that “produces a ‘mystical feel’ rising from ‘a combination of a good mechanical marriage and something in the nervous system’.” (Wilson 1999, 63 & 94.) The fact that people frequently hold their phones even when they are not using them has something to do with design but it also indicates a special bonding between the human hand and the device. No wonder the surfaces of mobile phones are also called “skins”. (Cooley 2004, 141.) If we continue to deeper analysis of the haptic quality of the bond, we might come to agree with Jim McGuigan who claims that the cell phone’s value is more than is usually believed, and the device could be viewed as a modern day magical fetish, “which is certainly the message of much advertising. The mobile is a symbol in itself, an obscure object of desire and a sign of the times.” (McGuigan 2005, 46.) To young Koreans the fetish was surely more than a feel of surface. The device seemed more like a way of being than a tool for communication. It is difficult to imagine a more popular, more frequently used device that had as intimate a bond with its carrier in Korea.

Unlike desktops and other immobile technologies, mobile phones resemble more tools or body-extensions prosthetic devices. The cell phone becomes extension of hand and enable ubiquitous (everywhere, anytime, with whomever) connection. Bodies themselves become tools of writing when “phoneurs” negotiate new urban spaces. Urbanity itself becomes a new quality of mobility. This new urbanity is augmented by other communication technologies like video, DVD and other multimedia interfaces. In a way we can say that with the help of nomadic technologies like the mobile phone the present-day virtual communities that exist in an everyday diaspora materialize in physical space. (Pertierra 2005, 25.) Holistically viewed, the mobile phone culture of Korean youth is a gold mine for an anthropologist specializing in technology research. We are talking about an extension of our body in a stronger than the McLuhanesque way. As a cybernetic entity, it is more important than an extra limb because it does not just add to our bodily existence but add an element of hybrid reality to it. On the other hand, the mobile phone could be viewed also as any kind of mundane tool or device. Like a car, a sword or a blank check, it has the power of potentiality. We can use it if we want and its value is both in its latent energy and active functionality, in being only in reach and being used. But the mobile phone differs from many traditional tools in that it enables transgression of tangible world and, once merely a Sci-Fi machine, it has become an apparatus that brings us to another sphere of omnipresence.

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