

***Mobile Telephony for Community Networking:
A Study of Thai, Rohingya and Hmong Communities in Multicultural Australia***

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Abstract

In situations of displacement from beloved landscapes and acquired tastes to the unfamiliar land, it is common for immigrants to retrieve what they have missed. Their actions may include the potential to recreate the atmosphere of their homeland in their new receiving lands, to maintain strong connections with people of the same groups, and to find their own places or channels that will allow them to enjoy their traditional ways of life. Smartphone, an emerging affordable new communication technology has become one of the most common ways through which minorities are empowered to sustain and constitute their community connections today.

To bring such telecommunication technology and a cultural study together, this Higher Degree research focuses on mobile phone usage amongst Australia's multicultural communities. It aims to better understand the ways in which ethnic community groups communicate via mobile phones.

The project explores whether communities are using these technologies to sustain and constitute their connections and cultures by also investigating what broader impact this technology is having on minority communities in Australia. Three communities — Thai, Rohingya and Hmong — are explored in this study. This study employed a case study methodology as the main approach which also includes the application of Ethnographic Action Research (EAR). This approach allows the research questions to be explored more deeply and contextually through the real experiences of the selected community participants and their cultural environments.

Keywords: Mobile telephony, Multiculturalism, Australia, Network technology, Network society

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Introduction

Mobile phones have become integral part of human daily life. Every aspect of people's professional lives is certainly involved either directly or indirectly with the mobile phones. They significantly enable people across the globe to freely communicate when, where, and with whom they wish. Nowadays, mobile phones range widely in price and functionality. Besides basic voice and texting communication features, most mobile phones in the market are equipped with smarter tools such as a high resolution camera, GPS functions, portable music players and internet access. As a consequence, it is not surprising that the mobile telephony has easily permeated across cultural groups, economic strata and age cohorts.

As well as other people, Australia's ethnic minority groups enjoy using the wireless communication technologies for many reasons (Sanders, 2002, Meadows et al. 2007). One of those which this research project set up to explore is the use of the mobile telephony for the practical purpose of maintaining and creating community connections and networks while living in multicultural Australia.

The primarily focus of this research will be on mobile phone uses as related to user needs rather than on the mobile phone features which associate with the mobile phone marketing perspective. Mobile phone users from three collective communities in Australia: Thai, Rohingya and Hmong communities are requested to reflect on their mobile phone experiences, opinions, attitudes, needs, perceptions and observations in their own words. The findings from each collective group were then be considered with the main research questions in mind to ascertain the influential factors that significantly encourage the mobile phone usage in their everyday live. Moreover, the relevance of cultural dimensions for mobile phone usage was determined and evaluated to find out whether the differences in traditional cultures and background particularly impact on the mobile phones usage of members of the three community groups.

This research on smartphone usage by minority people in Australia aims to develop the better understanding on the mobile phone uses behaviour and provide an insight on how the new communication technology assists ethnic minority people in Australia in the process of sustaining and constituting their community connections.

Australian Multiculturalism

Australia has a diverse population with people from all over the world. These people range from small religious groups living in local communities to large ethnic groups living side-by-side with the majority population, where people importantly contribute different ideas, religions, languages and customs. According to the Australia Multicultural Council (2011), Australia is made up of a majority population from a roughly homogeneous ethnic background and a number of minority populations. In addition, one in four of twenty-two million Australian residents (44%) were recorded either as having been born overseas or having at least one parent who was.

The Australian nation is a product of a unique blend of established traditions and new influences. Integration of people from different countries, ethnic or tribal groups and

religions has made this country one of the most ethnically diverse societies in the world (Australian Government, n.d.).

Multiculturalism is a concept and policy which has been formulated to respond to the notion of the recognition of co-existence of a plurality of cultures within the nation (Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2011). The term 'multicultural society' was first presented in a famous speech entitled 'A multi-Cultural Society for the future' delivered by the Minister for Immigration under the Whitlam Government, Al Grassby (Lopez, 2000). The term was used to highlight that government services and programs must be responsive to the needs of the country's culturally and linguistically diverse communities as the presence of ethnic communities was viewed as an enrichment of Australia. In respond to the matter, a Migrant Task Force was established to investigate the needs of ethnic minority communities. Moreover, there were improvements in the welfare and education systems to help the new Australian residents to become accustomed to the reality of a multi-ethnic society. Ethnic Communities Councils were instituted in all states across the Australian nation.

The suggestion that Australia had become a multicultural country was commonly accepted. Having the essence of multiculturalism at the core of the notion embraced minorities' shared values and cultural traditions. The ethnic rights and responsibilities are acknowledged as enshrined in the citizenship pledge and supported the rights of all Australians to celebrate, practise and maintain their cultural heritage, traditions and language within the law and free from discrimination.

Ethnic minority cultures are now welcomed and celebrated as enriching Australian national culture rather than threatening it. To understand an inclusive view of Australia, it has become impossible to exclude the consideration of the multiculturalism. Until the present, multiculturalism remains situated in the heart of national policy. A statement written into the Australia's 2011 multicultural policy, the People of Australia (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2011, p. 2) reads: "Australia's multicultural composition is at the heart of our national identity and is intrinsic to our history and character". The People of Australia policy reinforces strong encouragement for a socially-united nation with an expression of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Mobile telephony: the Network technology and the Network Society

While the specific patterns of mobile diffusion differ across geographic regions and social groups, it is clear that mobile technologies are becoming an integral part of people's everyday activities. The ubiquitous influence of mobile technology has been signified in recent years by the emergence of a series of "m-" neologisms, such as m-commerce, m-learning, m-government, m-literature, m-entertainment, m-gaming, m-etiquette, mobil-ization, and moblog. The list goes on, and the spread of mobile technology will continue to change the ways in which people conduct their lives.

The above statement written by Castells et al. (2007, p. 77) indicates that as advances and familiarities with mobile communication technology continue, people across the globe could find the very broad range of their social practices permanently changed. People's routine seems to be constructed or relied greatly on the mobile communication technology. In other words, Goggin (2006) insists that mobile phone

has played a significant role in surrounding and constituting people in many different dimensions of their everyday life.

In today's world, cell phones, particularly features phones and smartphones, have come a long way beyond voice telecommunication devices. Converged with other technologies such as the internet and camera, mobile phones are not only enabling easy communication across vast distances as analog phones have previously done, they also contribute "an attrition of the limitations and conditions locations and time otherwise exert on human communicative" (Barney, 2007, p. 48). Habuchi (2005) developed the term "tele-cocooning" in reference to an expression used to describe human computer interaction through personal devices supporting communication. Habuchi (2005) states that in the world of the personal computer and mobile phone, the concept of tele-cocooning can be used to represent global society where people rely heavily on communication technologies to achieve their communication with others without having physical interaction. With the help of the digital network technology, people are not limited to face-to-face communication. They are able to experience new or more intense ways of interacting and to participate more fully in their culture.

The ranges of new communication technologies continuously develop and enlarge the range of options for conversation for people, who are also considering taking greater advantage of the benefits offered by new and smarted technologies. A considerable number of added-on, non-voice functions on mobile phones are importantly and widely adopted to enable people to communicate and maintain connection with others beyond geographical, cultural and logistical barriers in certain degrees (Potts, 2010).

Online social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Myspace and LinkedIn are among the main communication methods that many people use to create a new form of social interaction, dialogue, exchange and collaboration in today's digital culture. Since mobile phones became mass-consumer products that meet the connectivity gap of people around the world, the growing accessibility of social media networking is much easier than ever before and has become the dominant presence in people's lives (Eyrich et al. 2008; Barners and Lescault, 2011). The 2010 *Measuring the information society* report conducted by International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reveals that there is growth in the number of people who access social networking sites over their smartphones. Their statistics (ITU, 2010) show that at a global level, the number of mobile broadband subscriptions reached an estimated 640 million at the end of 2009, driven by the increasing demand for smartphones. ITU (2010) report also denotes that in 2010, there could be more than one billion people who access new applications and social networking services.

Case study: Thai, Rohingya and Hmong communities in Multicultural Australia

This research project is a critical analysis focusing on mobile phone use amongst Australia's multicultural communities. The research sets out to explore the ways in which various ethnic community groups are using communication via mobile devices and to explore whether communities are using these technologies to sustain and constitute their community connections. The study is also interested in what broader impact this communication technology is having on minority communities in

Australia. There were three minority communities — Thai, Rohingya and Hmong — that were examined as cultural collectives in the research. These three cultural collectives were chosen to stress the central focus of the project limited to Asia, the region from where I come (Thailand). Moreover, I was aware of synergies between these and the Thai community to which I belong. The reasonable familiarity with the range of cultural backgrounds, values and practices that the three communities have shared would help me understand, explore and reflect better on the criteria for interpreting the finding. The cohesive of the unit of analysis was believed to be more likely to produce meaningful outcomes.

In Australia, according to the latest Australian Census in 2011 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011), the number of Thai people living in Australia was 45,465— an increase of almost 48.8 percent from the 2006 census. The most recent census also records the estimated number of Thai people distributed throughout the various states and territories. New South Wales had the greatest number of Thai people (17,541), followed by Victoria (10,766), Queensland (7,022) and Western Australia (5,662).

Rohingya, the Muslim ethnic minority, is one of the refugee and asylum seeker communities in Australia. Rohingya people mainly migrate to Australia as refugees as they encounter increasing levels of oppression in their homeland, Myanmar. The number of Rohingyas residing in Australia is difficult to quantify. However, Australia's Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2011) reveals that the majority of stateless maritime arrivals to Australia are from Kurds, Palestinians and Rohingya.

Hmong is one of the Australia's smallest ethnic minorities. There is no official report from the Australian Government indicating the estimated number of Hmong people in Australia. However, Tapp and Lee (2010) reveal that there are more than 2,000 Hmongs distributed in four of Australia's eastern states. The appearance of Hmong communities in Multicultural Australia has been first recorded in March 1976.

Research Methodology

This research project employed case study methodology as the main research approach and could be recognised as a multiple-case study as it was consisting of three units of analysis—Thai, Rohingya and Hmong communities. The cases have been selected to predict similar or contrast result.

This research also included the application of Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) methods. The application of EAR research methodology in this project allowed the research questions or issues to be explored more deeply and contextually through the real experiences of the selected community participants and their particular cultural environments. The participant technique that I employed to explore the central research question of this study is in-depth interviews. Each in-depth interview was last approximately forty minutes and was designed to encourage participants to talk freely. There were seven people from each community group participating in the in-depth interview sessions.

All in-depth interview participants were expected to have mobile phone experiences. They had to use mobile phones to communicate with their peers in Australia and elsewhere. Moreover, they were willing and able to comment on the nature of their activities. As a consequence of this requirement, one hundred percent of in-depth interview participants adopted the mobile phone. In addition, the majority of mobile phones used by the participants were smartphones. There were only two participants, one from the Hmong group and the other from the Rohingya community, who possessed Nokia feature phones.

In this research, I also applied the methodology of participant observation. The purpose of exploiting this method was primarily to gain an understanding of the communication processes that operate at community level. At the same time, it significantly helped to identify possible interviewees from Thai, Hmong and Rohingya communities.

Imagined Community and Mobile phone use

According to Anderson (1983), vernacular print capitalism played a central role in sustaining national consciousness. Daily newspapers become a vital technical means to bond people together where Anderson (1991, p. 36) states that “Newspapers made it possible for people to think about themselves, and relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways”. By reading the daily newspaper, people have the feeling that everyone else in the nation is reading the same source of national information and they are equal in terms of access to the information.

As time passes, not only print media, but also other communication methods including mobile telephony have played an important role in articulating a community imagining. The growth of communication technologies has made it possible for people to link themselves to others much more conveniently and effectively (Tsaliki 1995). As a consequence, it is not surprising that Anderson (1991) acclaims mass communication as a significant factor holding the fabric of imagined community together (Anderson 1991). However, in the 1992 article entitled ‘*The new world disorder*’, Anderson proposes the other factor which is ‘mass migrations’ as one of the most significant aspects together with mass communication that influentially generate nationalism and construct imagined community.

The movement of people from an origin to destination, or from a place of birth to another destination across international borders has often been acknowledged as the difficult trend to measure, model and forecast. It is a phenomenon that is growing in scope, complexity and impact which interconnects world’s populations. In situations of displacement from beloved landscapes and acquired tastes to the unfamiliar land, the relocated people need to adjust their new lives to the new ways of living and cultural differences as well as retrieve what they have missed. Their actions may include the potential to recreate the atmosphere of their homeland in their new receiving lands, to maintain strong connections with people of the same groups, and to find their own places or channels that will allow them to be able to enjoy their traditional ways of life. Shavit (2009, p. 24) insists that “these efforts were constructive in reducing to some extent yearning feeling and in bridging some of the gaps between individuals and their homelands”.

In order to fulfil the need to maintain strong links and identification with the tradition of the homeland, this research found that technological use and communication practices are one of the most common ways through which ethnic minority employed as key strategies to work around the problem. The mobile phones facilitate resources which are available and important for the reinvention and reconstruction of cultural identity.

Mobile Phone Practices for Community Networking

For Diasporic Connection

In an age of digital communication technology where mobile phones are widely perceived as the greatest communication innovation of the century, it is not surprising that mobile phones are significantly adopted by many migrants including Thais, Rohingyas and Hmongs as a means to strengthen diaspora identifications and connections.

Stories from in-depth interview participants demonstrate the difficulties people encountered in the situation of displacement from their home country and settlement in Australia. Foremost is the need to access and use communication to remain connected to family and friends overseas. As the mobile phones in today's world allow users to communicate more effectively and experience new or more intense ways of interacting, the participants from three communities report their use of voice functions and other non-basic features such as social networking sites and video calls to keep in touch with their family members overseas.

The crucial role of mobile phones in facilitating connection with family members and friends overseas is clearly evident in the Rohingya participants' responses. As it is almost impossible and/or very difficult for Rohingya refugees to travel back to see their family and friends who are living in their native homeland and refugee camps, many Rohingyas use their mobile phones as the only means of communication to remain contact and reassure their family members, relatives and friends that they are unharmed and still alive. According to one Rohingya participant (2015, pers. comm.), the more intense ways of interacting via smartphones he has experienced support and enhance his emotional well-being despite his distress while he is living away from his loved ones.

Mobile phones are not only employed as a means to maintain the connection with their family, friends and acquaintances regarding personal matters, they are also utilised to correspond with others of the same community across the globe to request assistances with particular issues as well as to keep abreast with the latest news relating to the particular community. According to participants' responses, mobile phones crucially function as a platform for community strengthening and development. The mobile phones are employed to organise activities to advocate, raise awareness, and provide resources for the benefit of the particular community.

For Cultural Reinvention and Reconstruction

Living in the diasporic space, ethnic minorities encountered many positive and negative changes in their lives. They need to adapt and re-adjust themselves and their perspectives in order to successfully and smoothly live in their new homeland. At the same time, it is understandable that they state their need to maintain some dimensions of the traditional ways of living and their need to reinvent their cultural identity while living in Australia.

A sense of loss and displacement importantly drives people to engage with other of the same groups who have shared the same cultural background and some forms of common identity. Being able to stay close to the people of the same ethnic group importantly ensures that they could enjoy their traditional and comfortable ways of living. The research found that many research participants employ the mobile phone as a means to sustain and constitute their community connection in Australia. However, the use of mobile phones in this role is noticeably more intense in the Rohingya communities than the others two. Through discussion with the Rohingya participants in the field, I found that most participants wish to talk about and share some of their past experiences. The sharing experiences predominantly include many trauma stories, where the narrative under the scope of 'life without security' appears to be the most frequently mentioned theme. Those stories are often revealed in association with greater levels of well-being, freedom and security that they experience while living in Australia. Such responses suggest that the refugee trauma experiences, which may be embedded in the Rohingya participants' minds, could influence their strong motivation them to feel safe and secure. Inevitably, the use of mobile phones among the Rohingya participants demonstrates the needs to maintain intimate social relation to the group to generate a safe environment where the Rohingya know that there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need.

With the help of mobile phones, research participants report that many cultural activities and events such as food sharing activities, performances and cultural sports, are organised to strengthen ongoing links and to build new connections among people of the same group. Most activities are set up as fun, in a friendly, sharing, relaxed and informal atmosphere, which is believed to create a better sense of belonging and social cohesion.

According to the interviews, members of the Thai, Rohingya and Hmong communities emphasises the need to maintain strong links with others in the community. As a consequence, there have been community organisations, community websites and Facebook pages established to make a significant contribution to support members of the particular community. Those aim to be an important source of news and information and entertainment that suits the needs of the particular group of people in Australia. In addition, they offer a place where particular culture is communicated. Their roles have paved the way for one identity, language and culture to establish its place as part of the Australian society. Furthermore, they provide comfort to the target people by allowing them to connect to other people who have similar backgrounds and interests.

The emergence of the community media, particularly in the form of social networking sites and new media, underlines the customary use of modern technology to communicate with other people while they are living in Australia of the migrants. Although it is arguable that Rohingya people have a very low level of technological literacy and have less experience with mobile phones due to the unlawful treatments which include a strict ban on ownership of mobile phones, all Rohingya research participants interestingly revealed the immediate possession of a mobile phone after their arrival in Australia. They also indicate the improvement in their telephone skills after a certain period of owning modern mobile phones.

While the community organizations and other community media dedicate their role in empowering people of the community and fostering community connectedness, the members of the particular community themselves also do their part to maintain, strengthen and develop their close connections among their community members. Participants from the Thai, Rohingya and Hmong communities reveal their high commitment to sustaining their links with friends and building good relationships with new friends. By doing so, research participants believe that the atmosphere of one community public sphere is healthily recreated in Australian public sphere.

Ullah (2014, pers. comm.), a Rohingya participant, reveals that, through the use of mobile phones, his relationships with the Rohingya friends remain dynamic and powerful. The mobile phone offers him rich possibilities to actively engage with friends and make his social networks more complex and extensive with a few clicks. His narrative precisely demonstrates his pleasure in using his mobile phone. Ullah (2014, pers. comm.) says:

It comforts me. Having it, I know that I can never be lost, never go missing. I mean I can find my friends and they can find me anywhere and any times. We're always in touch.

Mobile phones do not only help ensure the growing sense of belonging and connectedness in the people's community, they also importantly enable the circulation and dissemination of cultural materials. The ability to read, write, hear and speak in their own language through the use of mobile phones is frequently mentioned by a majority of the research participants. Some of their comments were: "I feel more comfortable talking in my language"; "it's how I celebrate my identity while I am here (Australia)"; and "it (communicating in their own language) creates some private and special zones".

The ability to communicate in their native language facilitates a culturally safe and secure community environment, where the members of the community feel more comfortable and confident to consume, produce and publicise their proud identity. As languages do not only emerge as a way of communication, it also conveys people's culture and identity. Therefore, the use of one language certainly is the embracement of the culture and identity as it generates a special space where only members can access.

Conclusion

This research provides an understanding of mobile communication practices for community networking in the three small minority community in Australia; Thai, Rohingya and Hmong.

The use of mobile phones for the purpose of social interaction was found the first and foremost mobile communication practice that all research participants from the interviews were aware of. While living away from their homeland, the need to maintain their social connections with their own group is paramount. By using mobile phones, the needs are possibly fulfilled. The minorities are able to maintain their interpersonal ties and cohesions within family and friendship groups by employing their mobile phones. In addition, an integrated email capability and internet browsing through compact mobile phone models allow the mobile phone users to more intensively participate through interacting with content and other users in the online world. The ability to keep in touch and connect with family, friends and other encourages them to feel interpersonally close to others, perceive other people as friendly and approachable and also be able participate in social activities. Therefore, it is not surprising that the mobile phone has been denoted as the future of networked communication (Yuan, 2012).

Using the mobile phones, local dialects and languages, local issues, and local codifications of social reality of a particular group have come to acquire its own status. The maintaining of language which is an important part of “a structure of behaviour” through the media, helps by promoting a sense of local identity, and strengthening the ability to stand up to stronger, neighbouring language communities. Moreover, it allows the community to develop some sense of public sphere. Therefore, it is not surprising that the mobile phone has been denoted as the future of networked communication (Yuan, 2012).

It could be argued that the mobile phones certainly help foster new and meaningful relationships and also reinforcing the pre-existing friendships. This use of mobile phones encompasses the motivational need to feel a sense of belonging and companionship among their social groups.

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