



THE USE AND RELIANCE OF CELLULAR PHONES AS A PRIMARY COMMUNICATION DEVICE IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

Access to cellular phones as a primary communication device has wetted the appetite of most people both in the developed and developing countries like Zimbabwe. Statistics show that more individuals communicate with cellular phones than with any other device. Mobile is seen by many media analysts as its own medium with its own defining characteristics. The cellular phone has allowed not only talking, texting and blogging, but shopping, banking and reporting. Individuals are so dependent upon phones that the device has become critical in many aspects of everyday life. The mobile technology has empowered a global community of techno savvy consumers known as Generation C. Generation C is not defined by age or nationality, but by an insatiable appetite for all things digital. This discussion will present evidence of a global dependence on cellular phones, and what this means for educators, marketers, consumers and media practitioners.

Keywords: cellular phones, generation c, digital communication, internet, texting

1. Introduction

Cellular phones have touched so many lives in so many ways. The development and use of cellular phones has taken place in Zimbabwe at a time when the country is using multiple currencies and the access to cash is a challenge. The use of plastic money or making transacting money through the use of cellular phones has helped those clients that have cellular phones. The cellular phones are truly an effective communicative tool. If you did not have a cellular phone, there would be certain communication options that

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would be unavailable. Cellular phones are the classic communications model, a medium in which the message from sender to receiver is digitally enhanced and altered on a constant basis. As the role of mobile devices clearly transcends the function of mere message distribution, cellular phones will be presented here as a critical part of the lives of millions with various applications. This discussion will attempt to demonstrate the true impact of cellular phones as a device, a communication medium, and as an agent of change in Zimbabwean society.

2. A recent revolution

Mobile telephones are a relatively new device. In the early 1980s, car phones and transportable bag phones started to emerge. Wireless industry advocate CTIA (2013) recently recognized the 25th anniversary of the first commercial wireless phone call. The transmission originated from the Soldier Field in Chicago in October 13, 1983. Over the past 34 years, the way the world communicates truly has changed. There are now more wireless phones than wired ones. As of 2012, CTIA reports that there were more cellular phones than people in many parts of the world. Not only are more people communicating via cellular phones than by any other mode, but more people are using the phones to access the internet than personal computers. In just 34 years, we have come from no cell phones to “cellular” as the people’s choice.

CTIA also states that, in 2012 there were 321.7 million wireless subscribers in the United States. This figure is particularly significant in that there are now more cell phones than people in America. Zimbabwe’s mobile penetration increased in the last quarter of 2015 and now stands at 95.4% while active internet subscriptions increased to a total of 6,575,591 and the national internet penetration rose to 48.1% in December 2015. This information was shared in the latest performance report for Zimbabwe’s telecommunications sector covering the period from October to December 2015 which has been released by POTRAZ, the industry regulator.

According to the report, Zimbabwe’s mobile penetration increased from 92.8% in the previous quarter to 95.4% by December 2015. This increase has now become a trend as a growing number of Zimbabweans access mobile services while trying different operators as a way of maximizing service value. The number of wireless subscribers increases every day. Communications networks in Zimbabwe were first developed by Econet Wireless Zimbabwe. It is Zimbabwe's largest provider of telecommunications services, providing solutions in mobile and fixed wireless telephony, public payphones, internet access and payment solutions.

Econet launched its network on the 10th of July 1998 and listed on 17th September 1998. It is one of the largest companies on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange in terms of market capitalization. The company continues to upgrade its network to carry more subscribers, and further widen its geographical coverage, which is already the most extensive in Zimbabwe. In 2009, the network became the first operator in Zimbabwe to launch data services under 3G technology. The company's key infrastructure at the start of 2010 included three switches. In 2009, Econet began building an extensive fibre optic network, and also commenced an accelerated rollout of other key network infrastructure. Key subsidiaries and associates of Econet are Liquid Telecom, the largest internet service and access provider in Zimbabwe, and Transaction Payment Solutions.

3. Research questions

- What are the positive and negative effects of using cellular phones on family relationship?
- Examine the positive effects of cellular phones on economic development of a third world country like Zimbabwe?

4. A Device Dependency

People use their cellular phones for so many things that the devices are often personal extensions. Usages like internet access, electronic messaging, texting, blogging, E-Books, social networking, music downloads, movie downloads and taking pictures all fall within the area of expected digital media distribution. In the Cell Phone Activities 2012 Report, The Pew Research Center (2012) elaborated on usage trends. The study noted that 85 percent of Americans had access to cellular phones. Younger individuals are more likely to use cellular phones. Mobile use increases significantly every year. The report contained details on how cellular phones are part of the lifestyles of all ages. Listed among the top cell phone activities were taking pictures and texting.

5. Design and Instruments

The study used was a case study design. The design enabled the researchers to single out for thorough, intense, detailed an in-depth study (Merriam: 1988) the role played by cellular phones in the lives of Zimbabwean population. The other advantage found in the use of a case study design was its compatibility with the use of instruments like

interviews and observation to generate data (Chikoto et al: 1995). The design was also found to be cost effective since it restricted the study to a single geographical area Bulawayo (Chikoto et al: 1995).

6. Target Population and Sampling

The grant total population in Bulawayo that make use of cellphones could be about 500 000 but the study was keen to establish the influence of cellular phones on the youths, the family unit and the education system. To draw participants into the sample, purposeful sampling was used. The objective was to draw into the sample only the “information rich” (Patton: 1990) or “data rich” (Creswell: 2012) participants. The data rich participants were defined as those members of the population who are in constant use of cell phones and have got a sound knowledge of its impact upon society. The 50 participants who were involved in this Zimbabwean study highlighted some of the top activities where cellular phones are utilized.

One of the participants argued that she take the loveliest photos using her cellular phone as the need arises.

- One of the participants stated, *I use my cellular phone to send and receive messages, communicate with my bank manager regarding my banking transactions and receiving text messages. Even people living in remote rural areas are able to make bank transactions whilst in the comfort of their homes.*
- *All participants agreed that they used their cellular phones to access internet. Students can access useful information when downloading critical academic information. They can research on internet on subjects they study at school.*
- *The cellular phones are used for recording videos and music.*
- *Sometime I look for Health or Medical Information on-line.*

Cellular phones are also critical in the distribution or redistribution of other media. Television, radio, newspaper, books, magazines, and movies all have extensions into the consumer world via mobile devices. Digital Book World (2013) reports a significant number of E-books are viewed by smart phone users, although tablets and pads dominate. Games on cellular phones are common. Activities such as Angry Birds have been created especially for phones.

Few could have seen utilities going far beyond media applications to include banking, shopping, maps, alarms, schedule management, and more. Every day there is a new application for your phone to allow you to complete another task.

One of the participants observed that, *“The ability to gather information via cellular phones has also developed an entirely new form of journalism. Today, pictures and videos can be*

recorded and uploaded instantly. Grassroots journalism, the process of reporting community news, has become cyber journalism."

Cyber journalism is the collecting of story content via mobile devices and instantly uploading it to the web (Cyberjournalist.Net, 2013) The digital collecting and distribution of information has changed the way news is reported. It is commonplace to view a CNN (2013) Report, or view an uploaded cell phone report on a local or national news broadcast.

Another participant argued that, *some of the negative effects of cellular use include poor family relationships since family members tend to concentrate on messaging with social partners rather than communicate with family members at home. Teenagers are easily exposed to pornography through the net and some of the videos and films screened through the internet do not inculcate moral and cultural values that Zimbabwean society expects. There is a tendency for members of society to emulate western values that people are exposed to rather than appreciate the Zimbabwean African traditional values.*

7. Current usage of cellular phones

With all of the uses, cellular phones are everywhere. In public, people are constantly talking on cell phones. So many people are texting and driving, that laws had to be developed to stop the practice. Cellular phones are now a part of emergency communication plans. Most colleges have programs that allow students and faculty to register to receive emergency notifications and official information from the school. Phones are now more accepted in the classroom. Realizing that faculty can no longer separate the student from the phone, academicians such as Burns and Lohenry (2010) are trying to find ways to develop a cellular phone protocol for students and faculty. Schachter (2009) sought to find ways to utilize cellular phones to overcome technology deficiencies in middle school. Educators are finding that cell phones in the classroom are valuable as a means to distribute course information and as a forum for feedback. There are applications (Apps) for everything. Layar (2013) is an augmented reality App that enhances print by allowing consumers to view digitally superimposed content in the real world. This is an example of a cellular phone App that enhances another media; in this case print. Other Apps allow cellular phone holders to listen to radio, watch television, read books, access banking information, and get directions. It is this seemingly infinite plethora of Apps that connects the consumer to the world.

We have discussed cellular phones as a primary communications device, and more. Now we consider mobile as media itself.

8. The Seventh Media

Different media have evolved throughout history. They all are related to each other, and have certain characteristics in common. As mobile emerges as a medium the same rules apply. Not only does mobile utilize the same formats as previous media, but it also serves to redistribute the content of other media. Mobile uses words, pictures, music, and sound like other media. Entire content segments of radio stations, television station, or musical recordings can be redistributed via cellular phones. Other media have done this in the past. News has transitioned from print to radio to television to internet, for example. Music has progressed from live bands playing in person, to studio performances at radio stations, to recordings, to digital data transfers. Media content continues to be sought by consumers. The mobile medium allows the distribution to be faster, more enhanced, and more convenient than previous methods.

Figure 1: The Seven Mass Media

First Mass Media Channel	Print
Second Mass Media Channel	Recordings
Third Mass Media Channel	Cinema
Fourth Mass Media Channel	Radio
Fifth Mass Media Channel	Television
Sixth Mass Media Channel -	Internet
Seventh Mass Media Channel	Mobile

Source: Ahonen Mobile as the 7th of the Mass Media (2008)

The characteristics that define mobile as a medium truly set it apart from other information delivery systems. Print works with words and pictures. Radio works with sounds. Television and movies work with moving pictures. The internet developed favor as an “interactive” medium. The defining principle of mobile is “connectivity.”

Mobile is wireless. The fact that cellular phones are wireless means that they are extremely portable and they go where we go. Our phones are always with us. As networks go global, phones will continue to develop true global access.

Mobile is convenient. One of the reasons for the staggering growth of cellular phones has been the convenience. Now everything comes to the user. A consumer watches television, listens to music, downloads content, and utilizes services all on his or her schedule.

Mobile is immediate. Communication occurs instantly through connecting directly to someone's personal communication device. Texting, instant messaging and web searches are designed to occur immediately.

Mobile is personal. A cellular phone is a personal communication device. A phone keeps your schedule, remembers your contacts, and can be personalized to suit an individual. With its unique set of characteristics, mobile serves the consumer like no other medium. Due to its involvement in so many functions of daily life, Ahenen (2008) has argued that mobile is the most powerful medium. Among the effects of this emerging mobile medium are the development of global digital communities and Generation C.

9. Generation C

One of the results of all of this technology is that it has changed the way that people interact. Mobile technology has empowered a global community of techno savvy consumers known as Generation C. The "C" is for connected. Generation C is not defined by age or nationality, but by an insatiable appetite for all things digital. Imagine if you will a two year old being entertained by an Angry Birds game on a cellphone, and mastering a swipe technique that clears the introductory levels. Think about 70 plus year-olds who use cellular phones to keep up with family and friends on Facebook and other social networks. Generation C is a digital community, not a demographic. Research giant Nielsen (2012) who has spent decades measuring media markets lauds Generation "C" as the most connected consumer group in history. Connectivity that started with personal computers allowing internet access has evolved to smartphones providing connections to a plethora of consumer services.

A. Communication with the connected international community

The formation of digital communities is a natural emergence of connectivity. Ahomen and Moore (2005) describe the development of digital communities. These communities support global communication networks as well as world-wide consumer groups. In their presentation the "C" stands for community. The community they speak of is the

“digital” community. The principles are the same. The common thread is connectivity. The power of the cellular phone now allows us to be connected to each other like never before. As technology and the availability of information becomes more profound, care must be taken to ensure that all citizens can adequately navigate the digital environment. Advancing digital literacy will improve the distribution of technology and equitable access. Not only must users be aware of how digital devices work, but also become knowledgeable of how digital communication system function. (Eshet, 2004). The emergence of technology has propelled holders into a high speed world of global information.

B. Saving and spending money

For many rural people, visiting a bank is expensive if you live in a region where banks are few and far between. The convenient banking services we take for granted (like credit cards, savings accounts, direct debits, etc.) aren’t easy to come by for millions of people. But mobile phones enable instant digital transactions that are often cheaper than paying with cash. There are also various schemes to make credit available to the poor directly via a mobile phone, enabling them to quickly start a business or invest in their future in countless ways.

C. Using mobile phones in health consultation

Health consultation has become a way to connect people in remote areas with relevant healthcare professions, all connect via mobile phones. Mobile phones have enabled health workers in Africa to contact specialist staff who can assist with more complex issues, helping them to more quickly determine patients that need hospitalization, or suggesting a particular course of drugs and treatment. With near-instant links to information online and colleagues in other locations, that job would be much harder for the staff on the ground.

D. Keeping in touch

The World Bank says that 75% of people on the planet have access to a mobile phone of one kind or another, with more than 6 billion mobile subscriptions active today (an increase from a billion in 2000). But 5 billion of those subscriptions are in developing countries. Smart phones, applications and the latest Galaxy or iPhone, are using mobiles as they were intended for person-to-person communication.

E. Helping farmers and those in rural areas

Mobile phones are reducing communication costs to farmers and those in rural areas who can respond more quickly to natural disasters, conflicts and disease outbreaks. Farmers can also more readily get information concerning when to plant and harvest their crops, impacting heavily on the yields they can expect and ultimately their economic success.

F. Creating new markets

Online market places and classifieds sites have sprung up all around the world, as a way to place or respond to ads about products and services. There are such a range of such market places, some of them using a web interface, but some still use an SMS-based method that means even the most basic phones can access at least some of the information.

G. Finding jobs

Besides actually having access to online job sites and getting information quickly about relevant work, mobiles have turned millions of people into entrepreneurs, as they discover new ways to use the technology to their advantage, as well as using it as a learning resource to gain new skills. One obvious example is that of web-based freelancer sites, where a good proportion of those offering their services are from places such as Bangladesh, the Philippines and other parts of Asia.

With a cheap laptop and a mobile phone, many people are finding there is a demand for Internet-based work that can be done on an ad-hoc basis, by someone on the other side of the world, and by someone that may not have previously has the opportunity to do such work. It really has transformed the online job market into a global phenomenon.

10. The implications for the Future

There is little doubt that technology and the ways we communicate will continue to change. It is important as educators and media practitioners that we fully embrace not only technology, but the resulting engagement in the global digital community. Cellular phones will continue to be disruptive at times. The new technologies will periodically present challenges that we are not ready to deal with. At the same time, the opportunities to produce and receive content instantly in a global marketplace make this an exciting time to live in. Digital communication has also shown itself to be a valuable asset in the distribution of information in a number of settings. Education is one. The potential for student-instruction or interaction is limitless. New technologies allow additional options in the distribution of information. The reach of cellular phones will continue to grow, Digital applications will continue to expand, and the mastery of the devices will increase. Digital literacy is a major challenge today. And, its importance will only grow. With our major communications medium being mobile, more individuals, organizations and businesses need to be acquainted with digital applications and how to use them. The challenge to established media professionals is

to work to increase digital literacy throughout the global community to be sure that no segment is unnerved, or underserved.

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