Tokyo Expatriates and the Social Construction of Mobile Phones

One will rarely find a foreign resident of Tokyo without his or her mobile phone. Like the native residents of that city, most expatriates consider mobile phones to be a necessity of life. But the needs and desires of the various subsets of the foreign community in Tokyo are often quite different, and the factors that make mobile phone ownership obligatory vary accordingly. The expatriate population is a particularly interesting domain for SCOT analysis because of its marginal status. Although there are almost 350,000 registered foreign residents of Tokyo (and quite a few more unregistered ones), this is still less than 3% of the total Tokyo population. It is safe to say that the major mobile phone manufacturers are not developing their products with the foreign population in mind. Thus this analysis will be a test of the claim that SCOT can be successfully applied to groups involved purely in using, as opposed to designing or developing, a technology.

Foreigners come to Tokyo for a variety of reasons. The following list of groups is not exhaustive but is intended to illustrate this variety. As the heart of the world's second-largest economy, Tokyo hosts branches of most of the world's multinational corporations, and thus many foreign businesspeople make their home there. These high-paid executives usually live in wealthy enclaves jokingly known as gaijin ghettos (gaijin being a pejorative term for foreigner). The Korean, Chinese, and Southeast Asians who make up the largest segment of the foreign population live in ghettos of a different sort, but their economic motivations for going to Tokyo are similar to those of the businesspeople. Exact statistics are hard to come by, but a significant portion of these immigrants are young women working as domestic help or as “entertainers.” Western women working as strippers, hostesses, or models are also lumped into this category, although they are more often motivated by a thirst for adventure and exotic experience than by raw financial need. This is true as well of the young travelers and fresh college graduates who go to Tokyo to work as English teachers. Finally there is the large group of foreign engineers, which includes not only many of the aforementioned Asians but also Western engineers drawn to Japan by its reputation for advanced technology.

This sort of classification of foreigners by occupation and country of origin is common, but for the purposes of this analysis it may be more useful to look at the sorts of problems faced by foreigners in Tokyo. The particular problems faced by a certain group help to determine whether that group views mobile phones as cheap, personal, convenient, advanced, small, or some combination of these qualities.

All of the groups named above face the problem of friends and families living overseas with whom they want to keep in touch. Until very recently land lines in Tokyo were extremely expensive, putting them out of reach of domestic helpers, entertainers, and English teachers. For these groups, mobile phones were a cheaper alternative to installing a land line. PHS (Personal Handyphone System) phones were particularly attractive, as they were even cheaper than standard cellular phones. Unfortunately many PHS phones do not allow international calling, making them useless for foreigners.

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Even now that the prices of land lines have started to fall, many foreigners opt not to install them. For the entertainers and English teachers who often share “gaijin houses” with several roommates, having their own personal mobile phone solves the problems posed by a shared land line. Engineers, who can usually afford land lines as well as their own apartments, also prize the personal quality of the mobile phone. Although most companies insist on having a home phone number, they rarely require employees to disclose their mobile numbers. Engineers will often take advantage of mobile phones to keep in touch with friends and family but not give their mobile numbers to employers, so as to avoid being called to the office on weekends for “emergencies.”

Businesspeople want to keep in touch with friends and family as well, but unlike engineers, they want to stay maximally available to their employers. Since their jobs often involve extensive time out of the office and away from home, they are willing to pay more for more advanced phones that ensure reception anywhere and everywhere. Business users rejected PHS phones because the reception area was limited to major cities. For businesspeople mobile phones are not cheaper or more personal land-line substitutes, but are tools of convenience intended to be used where land-lines are unavailable.

Engineers are also concerned with power and reception, but for different reasons. Engineers in Tokyo often carry mobile phones for their geek chic, priding themselves on having the latest models with the most cutting-edge features. They revel in the fact that they can try out new technologies a year or two ahead of their contemporaries at home. In addition to having a wider range of reception, they want faster data transfer rates for using features like email and web browsing. Businesspeople are not as interested in the technology itself but see the value of using email and the web to keep up with work. This development has caused them to re-evaluate PHS technology, as it has faster data rates than cellular despite its narrower coverage. Many businesspeople now carry one cellular phone for voice communications and another PHS phone to use as a wireless modem.

But the interest in Internet functionality is not limited to engineers and businesspeople. The Internet, and email in particular, is for many foreigners the primary means of communication with home. Besides being cheaper than international phone calls, email has the added benefit of being asynchronous, thus avoiding the problems posed by distant time zones. Although Internet cafés are plentiful in Tokyo, having a mobile phone with email is more convenient and far cheaper than buying a computer. For the less wealthy members of the foreign community, the mobile phone is once again a cheaper substitute for an alternative technology.

Reading and writing emails and browsing the web requires screen space. The rise of the mobile phone as an Internet access device has seen screen sizes and phone sizes increase dramatically. This is particularly interesting because in preceding years the trend was for smaller and smaller phones. Businesspeople in pursuit of convenience wanted very small, lightweight phones, which could fit in their suit pockets while traveling. Engineers in pursuit of bleeding-edge technology wanted marvels of miniaturization. Entertainers wanted fashionably slim phones, which fit into handbags and looked good in nightclubs. But as some groups of users began using mobile
phones more for data and less for voice, those fashionably small screens became unfashionably inconvenient.

Screen size is just the most dramatic example of the tension between different groups of users and their views of what makes a mobile phone useful. To English teachers and Filipino maids for whom a mobile phone represents cheap personal communication, a ¥60,000 gadget with a Java applet for 3D gaming is useless. To businesspeople who need reception on the bullet train, a ¥10 PHS phone is useless (though a ¥10 wireless modem is very useful). Moreover, what counts as a necessary feature of this necessary device is constantly changing. When mobile phones were used primarily for voice communication, most foreigners didn’t care if their phone had multilingual menus. Now that there is increased interest in advanced functionality, this is a crucial feature for foreigners who can’t read Japanese well.

Mobile phone technology is still in its early stages, and it might be argued that attitudes about what makes it useful and necessary will converge once the technology stops developing so rapidly. Yet even after the development stage, it seems unlikely that Chinese immigrants planning on making a life for themselves in Tokyo will buy and use mobile phones for the same reasons as backpackers teaching English for the summer before heading to Goa, or Fortune 500 execs running the Tokyo office before they make their move to corporate headquarters. Though they may end up purchasing the same physical device, each of these user groups will view different aspects of that device as essential.

The SCOT concepts of relevant social groups and interpretive flexibility do appear to be useful for investigating the meanings of technology even among user groups considered marginal by designers and developers. The technique of determining the relevant social groups and then iterating the problems faced by these groups and the ways in which different aspects of mobile phone technology are interpreted as solutions (or non-solutions) to these problems, uncovers a much richer web of interconnections than one might expect for the relatively constrained domain of “Tokyo expatriates.” While this is excellent for exploring possible paths along which these meanings may continue to evolve, this web of possibilities has a tendency to spiral out of control. For older technologies this tendency may be counteracted by the countervailing forces of stabilization and closure, but for mobile phones, which have no closure in sight, the number of possible meanings has the potential to grow unmanageable. As a result, SCOT analysis might not be helpful for observers who are examining attitudes toward new technologies for specific trends or conclusions, rather than simply surveying the landscape.