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Cell-Less in Atlanta

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Abstract: This paper describes the results of an exploratory qualitative study done among people do not who have cell phones. I surveyed 15 people in the metro Atlanta area about reasons why they don't use cell phones, factors that might affect their decision to acquire a cell phone, and attitudes towards cell phone use in public.

Introduction

In the past few years, cell phones have been the focus of attention from many researchers in the fields of sociology, communications and Computer-Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW). Conferences and books have elaborated on the changes and impact that cell phones is having on our daily life.

With all the important changes that cell phones are supposed to be bringing about, to not have one is more frequently seen as a significant disadvantage. Researcher Mimi Ito notes poetically, "To not have a keitei [cell phone in Japanese] is to be walking blind, disconnected from just-in-time information on where and when you are in the social networks of time and place"[3]. "Wired" magazine recently reported on a Contextual Research consumer anthropology study which showed that teens would often avoid contact with peers with out cell phones, which marketing analyst Seamus McAteer described as a "social faux pas for kids"[1].

James Katz and Phillip Aspden designed an extensive survey carried out by a professional survey firm, collecting data from over 1300 respondents to show characteristics of both cell phone and internet users and non-users. His conclusions

showed that non cell-phone users were less likely to work full-time, have less income, and not be married. He also noted the "stubborn puzzle" of the drop-out user, the person that had once had a cell phone but had decided not to have one anymore which turned out to account for 8% of his informants. Initially he had not expected disadoption of technology and attributed it to measurement error, but found this phenomena backed by several other studies. Katz ends up arguing that the digital divide for mobile phones should be supported by social programs to subsidize its development, similar to the programs in place to support access to the internet. [4]

In a piece aptly entitled "Non-Users Also Matter", Sally Wyatt refers back to this study, saying that the result questions the assumption of never-ending growth. She points out the historical significance of resistors of new technology, saying that their viewpoints also matter in the design process and emphasizing that "voluntary rejection of a technology raises the questions of whether non-use of technology always and necessarily involves inequality and deprivation"[6].

In determining the questions for my own research, I wanted to get a more holistic view and collect antecdotal evidence in addition to the standard demographic data. I was interested in seeing if non-users they feel like they're missing out, if they are also users or nonusers of other technologies, if they consider themselves sociable or not and what factors might lead to them obtaining a phone, if ever.

Methodology

The biggest challenge of this study was finding people to participate, which almost ended up being a study in itself. The initial method of finding participants was word of mouth. Most people had a cell phone and could not think of anyone that didn't, reflecting the high percentage of usage in the Atlanta area. I was also concerned that the sample be diverse and more representative than just students, especially not just international students, since this population often has different circumstances for not

having a phone. The final age range was from 19 to 61, with 6 female and 9 male participants. Of the 15 participants, 5 were recruited by asking directly or mentioning the study, 7 were referred by another person asked, and 3 were recruited by an ad for volunteers on the local Craig's List(an online classifieds site). They were all asked a basic list of questions,10 in person, 4 over the phone, and 1 over e-mail.

Results

The central question was finding out why people didn't have cell phones in the first place. Price ended up being a significant factor--for some it was too much of a strain on their limited budget, while others simply didn't think it was worth the expense. One participant couldn't obtain a phone because of his bad credit while the two international students needed either a driver's license, credit record or hefty $500 deposit in order to get a cell phone. One who was able to go without for two years recently tried to get a Blackberry, only to find she had been the victim of identity theft since someone had a phone in her name in another state. Three actually apologized for being Luddites and expressed sentiments about preferring a simpler life or reading too much Thoreau (although ironically, all three worked or studied in technology fields). Most expressed the sentiment that they were readily accessible by other mediums (home and office phones and e-mail) and that occasionally they just didn't want to be reached. All except for 2 had landlines and all except for 3 regularly used email and/or IM to keep in touch. Pay phones were used only occasionally and several mentioned that it was getting harder to find one.

When asked about times when they had wished they had a cell phone, most mentioned it might be helpful when they were running late, making long road trips or meeting up with people. The most dramatic example was one subject, who while pregnant, worried about going into labor during her hour-long commute, so ended up borrowing a phone temporarily from her fiancee as her delivery date approached.

One surprise from my results was that almost half of the people surveyed (7) turned out to be what Katz would term "drop-outs", much more than he would have predicted Some of these were clearly temporary drop-outs, such as s12, an international student who had a phone in his home country but couldn't obtain one in the U.S. and s15 whose phone was broken by his girlfriend but was waiting for a special deal before obtaining a replacement. One woman who had lost hers two years before recently tried to get another one and was unable to since someone had obtained one in her name in other state without her knowledge. Others had purposely given up use of their phone, mainly for financial reasons and lack of use, but also because of bad reception(s11), difficulty to keep track of(s14), and switch to a simpler lifestyle (s8,10).None appeared to be going through withdrawal symptoms, though in retrospect, it might have been interesting to have probed deeper to see the adjustments they made, especially in light of a Palen study that indicated the changes in behavior among new mobile phone users [5].

When asked when they might get a cell phone, most admitted they might get one eventually. Aside from having more money, finding a special deal and eliminating the credit problems that were preventing a few from getting cell phones, factors that might enduce them to get a cell phone would be upcoming job hunts or road trips, starting a business or working outside the home, or having kids. Most changes they suggested for phones were related to lowering the price or changing the minutes plan, suggesting that prepaid phones were still either too expensive or not as well known, something to consider since pay-as-you-go phones are not as common in the U.S. as in other countries.

Most people seemed to be introverts, but there didn't seem to be a clear-cut correlation since the extroverts seemed to be happy with not having cell phones. With respect to other people's use of cell phones, most seemed fairly neutral, only mentioning that it was bad with driving and with rude people talking too loud in public places. The people who worked in semi-public places such as a video store and the zoo

were exasperated at the number of people using cell phones in their workplaces, with the former video store worker mentioning the frequency of people using it as she was trying to check them out and the zoo worker mentioning how often adults would walk through the zoo ignoring their kids because they were on the phone. One person marveled at the change in the past 5 years, between her undergraduate and graduate experience since most people have a cell phone but pointed out that when walking around campus, it struck her how many people who were walking by themselves had cell phones " as if people don't know how to be alone anymore".

Although I didn't specifically ask about social pressure to get a cell phone, several students mentioned that their parents had strongly encouraged or even offered to buy them a cell phone so they could keep in touch more easily or for safety reasons. Only one subject (s10) indicated pressure against getting a cell phone, from her husband (s8). Indeed, another subject expressed his opinion that some people had one because they saw other people with it, "keeping up with the Jones'", and added that "even tramps have cell phones".

Conclusion

A report on "Defining New Poor" defined poverty as "information deprivation" and further categorizes the deprived as "the have nots", "the care nots" and "the want nots" which they borrow from another article by Vogt. [Boyd et al] They do distinguish how the element of choice differs among these categories but still seem to impart a value judgment, calling the attitude of the care-nots inhibiting.Though they are useful in framing the debate, I didn't feel the categories were as clear-cut since even those who would be defined as have-nots because of their economic situation shared sentiments with those defined as "care-nots". Also rejection of one technology doesn't mean rejection of another, since most used multiple means of communication. This seems especially relevant in light of the recent internet access tax ban passed to

encourage more people to sign up for high-speed broadband. It would appear that the U.S. is more encouraging of people using the Internet through wired rather than wireless means. Given that cell phone taxes total almost 20%, would similar subsidies be needed or applicable for cell phone use in order to use it for more purposes? At what point does the fact the U.S. is behind a lot of other countries in the use of MMS and mobile internet become a cause for concern?

As a follow-up, it would be interesting to track the interviewees over the next year to see if they end up deciding to get a cell phone, and what ends up being the influencing factor.

References:
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2)Boyd, John; Hughes, Marianne; Riddiford, Sarah; Sulliven,Bob. "A New Social Phenomenon Explained and Strategies Presented for Government to Expand the Use of Information Technologies in New Zealand
"http://www.2020.org.nz/research/newpoor3.htm

3)Ito, Mizuko "A New Set of Rules for a Newly Wired Society" Japan Media Review, posted 2/14/2003 http://www.ojr.org/japan/wireless/1043770650.php

4)Katz,James "Internet and Mobile Phone Digital Divides" presented at Computer Networks and Social Networks conference, 8/25/03

5)Palen, Leisha. Salzman,Marilyn. Young, Ed "Going Wireless: Behavior and Practice of New Mobile Phone Users", CSCW 2000

6)Wyatt, Sally "Non Users: Also Matter:The Construction of Users and Non-Users of the Internet" from How Users Matter:The Co-Construction of Users and Technologies, 2003.
Summary Table

| s1 | 21,M,single Undergraduate | Maybe Ive just read too much Thoreau, havent |

	Student	needed, rather not be interrupted, dependent on PDA
s2	61,M,single,tech support	bad credit and cant afford, people can reach me when they need to
s3	26,F,single,grad student	My life just isnt that crazy that need it on me all the time...can always get ahold of me
s4	19, M, single, international Undergraduate student	dont have drivers license(unable to obtain without one), doesnt call that much anyway
s5	19,F,single,Undergraduate student/part-time at video store	on tight budget, use home or work phone, would be nice if running late or car broke down
s6	27,M,single,graphic artist	I dont trust technology, uncertain effects of microwave radiation, hates phones, marketing--not going to pay for privilege of someone else selling me technology
s7	26,M,single,grad student	partially laziness,very bad with bills, turned off in a way, reactionary/luddite response, may be forced to get cell phone for job search next year
s8	29,M,married,computer consultant working from home	simpler life, dont have anything in life that timely, available by IM or phone,maybe if had kids or worked outside house
s9	27,F,divorced,3 kids,customer service	lost cell phone 2 yrs ago,identity theft victim, borrowed phone from fiancee while pregnant, not necessity, kids school has multiple contact numbers for her
s10	29,F,married,usability consultant	would probably get if lived alone, doesnt feel need to spend extra money just for added convenience
s11	50,F,single, cares for grandkids,housekeeping staff	I dont believe in them, might get in 2005, would like for calling grandkids when at work
s12	21,M,single, Undergraduate student(international)	had for 3 yrs in Pakistan, cant get one because dont have drivers license, parents pressure to get cell phone but prefer not being accessible at all times, misses out when friends cant find him
s13	54,M,separated,1 kid,housekeeping staff	has 3 not turned on, doesnt see any use for them, waste of money with 1-2 calls a day

s14	35,F,single,zookeeper	doesn't fit into my limited budget, and I really don't like talking on the phone anyway, much less let people always be able to find me - and pay for it!
s15	36,M,single,1 girl, security guard	phones keep breaking, looking for right deal, borrows cell phone from girlfriend occasionally