

Mobile phones facilitate romance in modern India

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Although mobile phones have long been a part of the business community, they are quietly becoming entrenched in personal lives. Cell phones play a crucial role in relationships among a group of young people in a high-tech Indian boomtown, according to new research focusing on the very personal side of personal computing.

Technology workers in Bangalore use mobile phones to bridge modern and cultural values – to facilitate arranged marriages, as one example. They also rely on the phones to maintain personal relationships despite the modern realities of living apart or working hectic schedules, suggests research by doctoral student Carolyn Wei in the University of Washington's department of technical communication.

The research was conducted last summer in the fast-growing city of 6.1 million that is experiencing forces of globalization and modernization. Many educated Indian people have moved to Bangalore to work for foreign corporations. The 20 participants in the study were aged from 18 to 30 years, and were fairly typical of young people who have moved to Bangalore for jobs, Wei said. They were financially stable, most had lived in Bangalore for less than two years and most spoke both English and Hindi but none of the local languages. More than half the study participants worked the graveyard shift because they provided technical support for people working during the daytime in North America.

"The people I studied were in this 24/7 environment and they were always on the go," Wei said. Many were involved in long-distance

relationships with someone working or studying in another city. The phone provided couples with a "perpetual virtual connection." For people working long hours and commuting in Bangalore's heavy traffic, the mobile phone was even crucial for maintaining relationships with people in the same city.

Technology also played a role in arranged marriages, something most study participants considered as an option for finding a partner.

"The mobile phone makes it a little easier to facilitate an arranged marriage at a distance," Wei said. She discovered instances where people used mobile phones to get to know partners vetted and approved by their parents. Mobile phones could influence the trend toward relaxing traditions on the amount of contact permitted before marriage, Wei said.

The research found several instances where mobile phones played a role in romance:

- In arranged marriages: A young man was given some time alone with a prospective bride-to-be and he had one question for her: "What is your mobile number?"

- Between working couples: One research participant called or sent text messages to his wife, also living with him in Bangalore, often. If he lost his mobile phone he would be scared, he said, not because he had lost a phone but because he had lost this connection with his wife.

- Traditional etiquette: Indian mobile phone companies typically bill the person making the call. Men will occasionally ignore or hang up on a girlfriend and then call her right back, a modern instance of picking up the tab.

- Domestic spats: One partner might deliberately ignore calls to punish

the other, or one might become angry when the other wasn't answering. In one instance a participant threatened his partner that he would not answer her calls for a month.

Mobile phones and their owners have developed such a close relationship that the devices are often taken for granted, Wei said, like wristwatches and eyeglasses. There are now nearly 150 million cell phone subscribers in India, according to a recent report by the market research firm IDC; more than two thirds of the country's phones are mobile. Wei's accompanying literature review found that most studies of cell phones' influence on youth culture have taken place in the West, while studies elsewhere focus on purely economic uses.

Beth Kolko, Wei's advisor and an associate professor in the department of technical communication, researches how people in emerging markets, particularly in Central Asia, use new technologies.

"What Carolyn has done it take this really interesting element of youth culture – courtship – and identified how mobile phones interact with those pre-existing patterns of interaction," Kolko said. "Technology doesn't trump culture, it doesn't change culture on its own, but it is a force that pushes against cultural patterns."

Source: University of Washington

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