

Mobile phone bling may be a personal, but also cultural thing

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Credit: Peter Griffin/Public Domain

(Phys.org) —Choosing mobile phone cases and customizing phones with charms and decorations may reveal a lot about a person's culture, as well as increase attachment to the devices, according to researchers.

In a study on culture and [mobile phone](#) customization, researchers found that people from Eastern cultures tend to be more motivated to change

the look and sound of their mobile phones than people in Western countries, said S. Shyam Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory, Penn State.

"People who live in collectivist cultures are often more other-directed," said Sundar. "They want to know how others might look at them and also look to others as a way of influencing their own behaviors."

The researchers gave American and South Korean students surveys on how they customized their mobile phones and asked them how they perceived their social identity and efforts to self-promote. Mobile phone accessories, which are big business South Korea, Japan and other Eastern countries, include physical items, such as charms, cases, bags and stickers, as well as functional additions, such as ringtones and screen wallpaper.

The surveys revealed that Koreans were more focused on how to fit into social situations, according to Sundar, who worked with Seoyeon Lee, a mobile user-interface and user-experience researcher at LG Electronics in Seoul. They also were more likely to look at the actions of others to give them cues on behavior. Americans, on the other hand, valued self-expression more and were less worried about how others perceived them. This could be why Americans customize less, while Koreans accessorize their phones to a greater degree.

People see their phones not as a tool, but as part of themselves, according to the researchers, who present their findings in an upcoming issue of Media Psychology that is now available online.

"The more you customize your phone for aesthetic reasons the more it reflects who you are," said Sundar. "You see your phone as your self."

While people who live in Eastern cultures, which are typically more collectivist than Western cultures, tend to be more expressive with their mobile phone customization than Westerners, both cultures become more attached to the devices after they are customized.

Technology companies may want to provide more ways for a consumer to customize products to enhance this feeling of attachment.

"Tools for aesthetic customization can enhance people's attachment to a device, regardless of culture," said Sundar. "In this study we looked at phones, but it could also apply to other information technology products that people use in public, such as iPads."

Market research may help these companies to better match their accessories to consumers, according to the researchers.

"This may differ from one country to another," said Lee. Phone manufacturers sell different designs, colors and accessories in different countries, she added.

The study also reinforces previous research that showed how people are becoming more connected with their mobile phones, according to Sundar.

"If you ask people what objects they want to make sure they have with them when they leave their house, usually their phone is in the top three, along with keys and money," Sundar said.

A total of 400 American students from a U.S. university and 205 Korean students from various South Korean universities were asked to fill out a survey with 112 questions. Approximately 49 of the respondents did not have any customization.

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