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# Personal Portable Pedestrian: Lessons from Japanese Mobile Phone Use

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## Personal Portable Pedestrian: Lessons from Japanese Mobile Phone Use

By Mizuko ITO

Ever since rapid adoption of the mobile Internet in the late nineties, Japanese mobile phone use has been the object of international attention. Although other countries have led in terms of wireless technology development, mobile phone adoption rates, and certain usage patterns (such as political mobilization), Japan is considered by many to define the future of mobile phone use. In addition to high rates of adoption of Internet-enabled mobile phones, 3G infrastructures and camera phones, Japan has also been considered an incubator of popular consumer trends that integrate portable technologies with urban ecologies and fashions. In *Smart Mobs,* the book that catapulted mobile cultures into heightened visibility in Western public culture, Howard Rheingold (2002: xi) opens with a scene of texters eyeing their mobile phones as they navigate Shibuya crossing in Tokyo, allegedly the site of the highest mobile phone density in the world. A BBC reporter writes in a piece titled "Japan signals mobile future": " If you want to gaze into the crystal ball for mobile technology, Tokyo is most definitely the place to come to" (Taylor 2003).

While recognizing the persuasively globalizing imaginary around Japanese technoculture, however, I would like to insert some cautionary notes about using Japan as a template for a mobile future in other countries. Drawing from research in *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian,* a recent volume on Japanese mobile phone use that I helped edit, I argue for the international importance and even centrality of the Japan case, while highlighting the specificities of social, cultural, and historical context in structuring the development and deployment of mobile phones.

The current Euro-American fascination with Japanese technoculture has deeper roots than the recent turn to the keitai Internet. Invoking Japan as an alternatively technologized modernity (or post-modernity if you prefer) is certainly nothing new. On one hand i-mode is held up as a technological and business model to be emulated, on the other hand, discourse abounds on the cultural strangeness of Japanese techno-fetishism that casts it as irreducibly foreign. William Gibson's inspired cyberpunk Tokyo landscapes, *Wired*'s steady stream of oddities in their "Japanese schoolgirl watch" column, ongoing coverage of the Japanese video game industry in Euro-American gaming magazines: here and elsewhere Japan provides fertile fodder for a wide range of techno-imaginings that are valued at least in part because of their cultural distinctiveness. As Tim Larimer (2000) writes in his cover article for a special issue of *Time Asia* on "Gizmo Nation," "More than any other country on earth, Japan has put its faith—and future—in the hands of technology."

Despite the ascendancy of the vision (and fears) of a Japonesque mobile future for the world, there are reasons to question an eventual global technology upgrade to the latest and greatest Japanese version. The US, the supposed vanguard of the information society,



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has, until recently, been relatively resistant to the allures of mobile messaging, and NTT DoCoMo's exported i-mode model has faced challenges abroad. Perhaps most significant are countries outside the high tech Euro-American-East Asian axis, particularly those using wireless to leap-frog from a struggling landline infrastructure into the information age. The social transformations developing countries, where mobiles are reaching the hands of those who had no access to telecommunications infrastructures, is more radical and broad-based than the earlier wave of mobile adoption in high-tech countries, driven by youth uptake. The second and more massive wave of mobile phone adoption in China and India, as well as the more advanced wireless and broadband infrastructures of South Korea promises to overshadow Japan's continued dominance in discussions of mobile societies.

All of this leads to an argument against the implicit technological determinism that drives much of the conversation about the international "mobile revolution." In line with much of contemporary technology studies, I don't see technology as a foreign object "impacting" and "transforming" social life and cultural patterns. Rather the relationship between technology and society is more organic and co-constitutive. Technologies are objectifications of particular cultures and social relationships, and in turn, are incorporated into the stream of social and cultural evolution. In other words, Japanese technology and usage patterns are likely to replicate in other contexts only to the extent that there are similarities in the overall "technosocial" ecologies of mobile media practice and communication. Nothing "inherent" in the mobile handsets themselves is socially or culturally transformative. Japanese mobile phone use can be described by a constellation of characteristics—personal, portable, and pedestrian—that grow out of a particular history of technology use. These terms are meant to signal characteristics that are simultaneously technical, social, and cultural.

## Personal

In his survey of the history of Japanese mobile media, Tomoyuki Okada (2005) describes the trend toward personalization of telephones that took place in the later decades of the 1900s. In the eighties, wireless phones were attached to ships, trains, and cars, and were considered mechanisms for conducting communication in transport vehicles. As mobile phones became adopted for business uses, they were generally shared by a group of people, such as workers at a construction site. Similarly, pagers were initially shared by groups, such as among salespeople, and were simply a mechanism for the office to tell them to call in. In the nineties, in the hands of teenage girls, pagers were transformed into a medium for personal communication, and mobile devices came to be attached to individuals rather than groups or institutions. When pagers were designed that displayed callback numbers and the cost of subscriptions dropped, teenagers began adopting them in large numbers as a way to send numerically coded information to one another. Okada also traces similar trends in landline telephony and the personalization of media such as television, radio, and stereo, where these media have moved out of the shared space of the home and into bedrooms and portable forms. The current norm, that mobile phones are intimately tied to a particular individual, is part of a more general trend in the personalization of media.

In our ethnographic studies of mobile phone use, we found that the personal dimension of the mobile phone was a central characteristic that structured usage patterns. Users stated that they would never answer the phone of another individual, even of a spouse, and looking at another person's handset uninvited is socially unacceptable. Phones are now



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almost always attached to individuals, and are valued as a guaranteed mechanism for connecting with a particular person, in sharp contrast to the home or office phone which presents the risk of someone else answering. All teenagers stated a preference for calling a mobile rather than a home phone because they could avoid talking to a parent (Ito and Okabe 2005a). Spouses would often state a preference for calling a mobile even when their partner was near an office phone if it was "personal business" and they didn't consider it appropriate to call the shared office phone. Other studies have shown an overall increase in family and couple communication with the advent of mobile media because it facilitates casual exchanges between close individuals, such as asking to pick up something on the way home from work, or other coordination tasks (Matsuda 2005b).

The value on personal and private communication was particularly strong for high school students living with their parents, who had very few settings in which they could have private conversations with friends and lovers. We found the highest rates of mobile communication among young couples living apart. The mobile phone became a space of intimacy that was theirs alone. Much of the exchange between couples was "sweet nothings" that functioned to affirm their connection with each other rather than explicit acts of communication. For example, a teenage couple in one of our studies would start by sending a steady stream of email messages to each other after parting at school. These messages would continue through homework, dinner, television shows, and bath, and would culminate in voice contact in the late evening, lasting for an hour or more. A trail of messages—"it was nice talking to you," "yeah, me too," "I'm getting sleepy"—might follow the voice call, ending in a good night exchange and would begin again upon waking. This steady stream of text exchange, punctuated by voice calls and face-to-face meetings, define a kind of "tele-nesting" practice that young people engage in, where the personal medium of the mobile phone becomes the glue for cementing a space of shared intimacy (Ito and Okabe 2005b).

Another dimension of personalization is handset customization. A handstrap sporting a favorite character or design is a nearly universal form of customization in Japan. Different plates, screened and painted designs, special antennaes, and screen guards are other more advanced forms of customization (Hjorth 2003) . Customization and personalization has also been the primary driver of mobile web access, since download sites of ring tones and "wallpaper" images to decorate the keitai screen are the most popular sites on the mobile web (Yoshii, et al. 2002) . The crowded conditions of Japanese urban life, ongoing intergenerational tensions, and a pervasive sense of social surveillance in schools, workplaces, and homes, have no doubt contributed to this attachment to a communication device that is personal and personalized, an oasis of privacy and individual identity.

### *Portable*

The Japanese term for a mobile phone, *keitai,* might roughly translated as "a portable," or "something you carry with you." In contrast to "the cellular phone" or "the mobile" which stress technology and function, the Japanese term stresses the relation between user and device. A *keitai* is not so much about a new technical capability or freedom of motion, but about a snug and intimate technosocial tethering, a personal device supporting communications that are a constant, lightweight, and mundane presence in everyday life. Originally the term was *keitai denwa* (portable phone), but after they became popular in the late nineties, the term was shortened to simply *keitai,* evidencing a shift



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away from telephony as the dominant function of the device towards a more general device for "always-on, always with you" connectivity. After 1999, Internet email and web became increasingly common on keitai, and in the past three years, functionality has expanded to include digital cameras for still and moving images (that can be emailed to other and the web), as well as an expanding palette of options such as gaming, schedulers, instant messaging, and digital cash. As Misa Matsuda (2005a) states in her review of *keitai* studies, " among young people, the *keitai* is not so much a phone as primarily an email-machine." For these young people, the mobile phone is almost always with them, a constant presence that accompanies them even as they move about the house. It is less about the ability to communicate "on the go" and more the fact that social relations are always close at hand.

In our ethnographic studies, we found that most mobile phone communication was done with a small circle of close friends and family, generally 2-5 others, rarely more than 10. While mobile phone address books might contain over a hundred entries, the actual communication logs of our research demonstrated that by far the bulk of exchanges was with the intimate circle. This kind of social formation is what Ichiyo Habuchi has called a "tele-cocoon" (Habuchi 2005), and Misa Matsuda (2005b), following Ichiro Nakajima, Keiichi Himeno, and Hiroaki Yoshii (1999) , calls the "full-time intimate community," For heavy mobile phone users, particularly those who rely on the lightweight modality of text messaging, their social relations are "always on." In fact, we are finding an emergent social norm around frequent text messagers that they will signal their unavailability from the shared online space by sending good night messages, or messages such as "I'm taking a bath now." In other words, the connected state is the default and the disconnected state is noted.

Many of the messages that our research subjects recorded for us in their communication diaries were simple messages sharing their location, status, or emotional state, and did not necessitate a response. For example, a user might text, "I'm walking up the hill now, it is really long," "that TV episode today was great wasn't it," "class is so boring," or simply "sigh." These messages are akin to the kind of awareness that people might share about each other if they occupied the same physical space. The metaphor is side-by-side rather than the more engrossing face-to-face modality of a telephone conversation. These lightweight messages can be sent and quickly viewed while engaged in other activities such as in classroom settings, as one is in transit, or even while engaged in a social situation. If both users are not otherwise directly engaged in activities requiring immediate attention, these virtual taps on the shoulder might result in a more engaging chat-like sequence or a voice call, but often these kinds of messages are simply a way to quickly affirm a connection or a sense of co-presence (Ito and Okabe 2005b).

Portable, handheld technologies occupy a particular social niche that differs from mobile technologies more generally in that they are low-profile devices that enable lightweight connection and disconnection. Portables colonize the inbetween spaces of everyday life, and afford "continuous partial attention" (Stone 2004). Unlike, for example, the laptop computer, they are generally always powered up, can be manipulated with one hand, and can be viewed privately and surreptitiously in a wide range of social situations. In this constellation of technosocial characteristics, the small screen and keypad are positive usability features rather than a limitation.

## Pedestrian

This low-profile and portable characteristic of Japanese mobile phone use is related, in turn, to a street level presence that melds with



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pedestrian urban ecologies. By pedestrian, I am indicating both this on-the-street dimension as well as the mundane character of much mobile phone communication and information exchange. In his description of mobile youth cultures, Fujimoto (2005) describes "*nagara* mobilism" as a central component of young people's usage patterns. *Nagara*, which could be translated as "while doing something else" is a term used to describe young people's tendency to multi-task, to read while watching TV, to eat while walking, or, in the case of *nagara* mobilism, to use the mobile phone while walking or biking. Fujimoto describes the now familiar scenes in urban Japan of kids texting while riding their bicycles at a snail's pace along crowded sidewalks, of traveling to and from school in small packs while chatting and talking and typing into their phones.

As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons why text messaging has been such a popular modality is that it can be sent and received in situations that would not be amenable to voice calls. Text exchanges can be done while in public transportation or while engaged with other activities that require partial or sporadic attention, or the appearance of attention. For example, in our communication diaries, we found one user who engaged in an extended text message exchange with her boyfriend while she was riding a bus, got off the bus, waited on a train platform, and rode a train home (Ito and Okabe 2005b). It would be difficult to maintain a voice exchange through all of these changes in location, even if it were not socially inappropriate to make voice calls in public transportation. Similarly, in another diary, we found a user who was engaging in a text exchange with a friend about a pair of shoes her friend had found while out shopping. Our research subject was on the job, and was ostensibly dealing with her work while communicating sporadically with her friend. The exchange has long pauses of 10-20 minutes while work issues were being attended to, but the exchange could continue through these pauses and in the interstices of the face-to-face demands that the user was attending to.

More recently, in our research on camera phone usage, we have found that pictures taken by the camera phone have a more pedestrian quality to them than those taken by the traditional camera (Okabe and Ito 2003). While users prefer to use a film camera or a higher quality digital camera for special occasion and archival photos, pictures taken by mobile phones are often of the more fleeting and mundane moments of everyday life—a cake that looked good at a café, an interesting but everyday scene or viewpoint, or a sudden moment of cute kid or pet activity. Often these pictures are enjoyed for a few days and then forgotten, soon to be erased from the limited memory of the camera phone. Fujimoto (2005) uses the metaphor of "refreshment" to describe the pleasures afforded by the mobile phone—these engagements are more like a coffee or a cigarette break, unlike the more demanding and sustained pleasure of conversations and the immersive but more passive modes of movies or television. These pedestrian photographs, the ongoing exchange of text sweet nothings, are brief attentional interludes uniquely characteristic of the role of portable technologies in Japanese life. These characteristics are likely to find resonance in an increasingly linked set of international mobile cultures that both draw from and depart from the paradigms incubated in Japan.

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