



Expanding the Scope of Localization: A Cultural Usability Perspective on Mobile Text Messaging Use in American and Chinese Contexts

Current Work

Chinese
Technical
Communication

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A Mobile Message Saved in My Phone...



My husband sent this "Good Luck" note to me while he was driving from Syracuse to Troy for my defense on the next day...

Research

General Info

My dissertation project explores how mobile text messaging, originally designed as a business application, is localized differently by frequent users to fulfill their various goals.

The success of mobile text messaging poses many questions for usability studies. Considering the inherent usability weaknesses of mobile phones such as the small display, poor input methods, the moving environment, and noisy surroundings, this success is hard to explain with traditional usability theories that ignore the social-cultural context.

The driving questions for this project is: *Why is mobile text messaging so popular even though mobile phones are not a good tool for writing?* I'm interested in understanding how cultural factors influence and shape the adoption and use of mobile text messaging technology in an age of globalization. To answer this question, my project proposes a new framework of cultural usability for the research, teaching, and practice of technical and professional communication efforts. I examine and compare socially-situated digital literacy practices surrounding mobile messaging technology in American and Chinese contexts.

The cultural usability framework is a developing response to the contextual problem in usability studies and localization practices, one that brings social-cultural contexts into user activities and integrates key concepts and methods from activity theory, genre theory, and British cultural studies. This approach distinguishes itself from other explorations on cultural dimensions of usability in that it defines culture as a dynamic process and attends to both general and ethnic cultural factors.

A case study approach is used to describe ways of localization in fieldwork. More than 40 frequent users of mobile messaging participated in the study, 20 from each site. A new view of localization is surfacing from various use histories collected by survey, diary study, observation, focus group, and qualitative interview, which argues that every situated use is a local use with specific "localization strategies" developed by users. The study shows that different users in different locales localize the same technology in different ways to fit in with their own life styles. From a broader perspective, this study suggests that digital literacy practice is a complex and dynamic interaction with

underlying contextual factors and asks us to study it in rich social and technological contexts. At the same time, this study has implications for information design and technical communication pedagogy: urging us to move from a functional perspective to a broad socio-cultural perspective and develop information products that resonate with users' lifestyles.

The phenomenon of text messaging is a hot topic among researchers. Two major trends have emerged. One trend focuses on the "text aspect" of this technology: Some researchers are exploring how messaging technologies affect people (especially teenagers) in the Western world by studying the process of social shaping and its implications for future design. Another group of researchers are interested in how ad-hoc chats could support collaborative projects and work conversations as a business tool. However, in light of the questions posed by people's use of this technology, we see little research combining a focus on both the tool aspect and the text aspect of the technology, which is what I seek to accomplish in this project.

I defended the dissertation in July 2004. Here is the [extended abstract](#).

Other Ongoing Projects about Mobile Messaging and Mobile Technology

The phenomenon of text messaging is a hot topic in the fields such as HCI, mass communication, and science & technology studies.

- Alex Taylor & Richard Harper (the Digital World Research Centre, the University of Surrey, Guildford, UK): [Rituals of exchanges in teenagers' cell phone use](#)
- Rebecca Grinter et al. (PARC): ["y do tngers luv 2 txt msg?"](#)
- Nina Wakeford & Nalini P. Kotamraju (sponsored by the University of Southern California Annenberg Center for Communication): [Mobile Devices and the Cultural World of Young People](#)
 - A very thorough reading list from this group: [Mobile Phone/SMS/Instant Messaging Research](#)
- [Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution](#)
- ...

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