

## Cultural Interpretations of Non-verbal Communication Related to Mobile Phone Usage and Intimacy

Takashi Nakamura

Faculty of Humanities, Niigata University, 8050 Ikarashi 2-no-cho, Nishi-ku, Niigata, 950-2181, Japan

Cultural diversity can be observed in the way survey respondents interpret non-verbal behavior/communication in relation to the use of mobile phones. Studies have confirmed significant differences in the way the physical action of looking at a mobile phone display is judged by people in different countries. This difference reflects broader cultural differences in the perception of human relationships.

In most countries, mobile phone usage became widespread in the 1990s. Mobile devices were popular because they satisfied the desire to communicate promptly with people who could not immediately be reached by landline phones. After purchase, some mobile phone users disliked the fact that they could now be reached by phone anytime and anywhere. At the same time, users were increasingly concerned about missing incoming calls and, as a result, they looked at their mobile phone displays multiple times a day. (In romantic Japanese TV dramas in the 2000s, many scenes featured main characters looking at their phone screens to convey that they were thinking about their love interests [1]). In the 2000s, people began to develop and maintain social relationships via their mobile phones and to look at their phone screens frequently.

This physical action sends a non-verbal signal to anyone who is “co-present,” even though it may not be acknowledged and individuals perceive and interpret that signal in their own way, regardless of the actor’s intentions [2,3]. Most people know that looking at a phone screen sends a signal that is difficult to judge: Is the perceived signal intentional or not? Thus, mobile phone users can utilize this action in public spaces to conceal their thoughts and get through difficult situations [4]; they can also perform the action in front of loved ones to send non-verbal signals about ongoing conversations [5,6]. In some cases, the action of looking at a phone screen sends the message to the companion that the topic of conversation is inconvenient or unpleasant; in other cases this action communicates boredom. Alternatively, a person can suppress the desire to look at his or her mobile phone to send the message that he or she is concentrating on the conversation, even though the companion may not be aware of such restraint. Thus, such non-verbal behavior/communication can support the ongoing conversation and/or signify feelings and intentions. Most people are aware that the effect of such non-verbal behavior/communication depends mostly on the relationship between the actor and the observer and that appropriate non-verbal behavior/communication varies based on the companion.

In the mid-2000s, the communication speed of mobile phones was enhanced (3.5G), and the availability of web-based services increased. These improvements were driven by consumers’ desire to conveniently exchange massive amounts of information via mobile devices. Phone display sizes were enlarged, cameras were improved, and storage volumes were increased. Users were now able to access their favorite websites at any time and to easily carry their entertainment with them. As a result, people realized a new desire. Using their mobile phones, they learned to share interesting information immediately and to enjoy visual content together in face-to-face communication. Thus, the action of showing someone a mobile phone display acquired its own set of non-verbal signals [7]. People appreciate such non-verbal

### Publication History:

Received: August 02, 2017

Accepted: September 14, 2017

Published: September 16, 2017

### Keywords:

Non-verbal communication, Intimacy, Mobile phones, Cultural Interpretations

communication even when the shared information is disappointing. This is because the actor intends not only to share information but also to create a shared feeling of empathy and to strengthen the bond with the companion; generally the companion understands the actor’s purpose. The frequency of the action of looking mobile phone display increased furthermore, since people necessarily and voluntarily look at mobile phone display to prepare the action of showing mobile phone display. Then, some people became to accept the action of looking mobile phone display sympathetically.

As a mass product, mobile phones headed rapidly toward worldwide standardization in the 2010s. After the entry of Apple into the mobile phone market in 2007, smartphones began to spread; after the entry of Google into the OS market with Android in 2008, many manufacturers worldwide adopted open-source licensing. Developmental resources were concentrated on the leading operating systems, and users selected the most usable functions and applications and spread them worldwide. The operating systems supported multilingual use, and a small number of manufacturers began to satisfy the desire to dominate the world market. Beginning in 2011, messenger applications started to spread worldwide, and most people gradually learned to use some type of communication platform. In 2014, the ITU (International Telecommunication Union) reported that the number of cellular subscriptions in the world had reached 6.9 billion (ITU official page) [8], meaning that almost everyone now owns a mobile phone. Thus, most people worldwide use similar applications supported by similar OSs on similar devices. This creates ideal conditions to study phone-related non-verbal behavior/communication cross-culturally.

Cross-cultural survey was conducted in 2013 [9]. As expected, the level of intimacy between the companions influenced the judgment of the action of looking at the mobile phone display. The results were consistent within individual countries and divergent among countries. As the intimacy between the actor and the observer was increased, the number of respondents who reported feeling angry when their

\*Corresponding Author: Prof. Takashi Nakamura, Faculty of Humanities, Niigata University, 8050 Ikarashi 2-no-cho, Nishi-ku, Niigata, 950-2181, Japan; E-mail: [takashi-nakamura@human.niigata-u.ac.jp](mailto:takashi-nakamura@human.niigata-u.ac.jp)

Citation: Nakamura T (2017) Cultural Interpretations of Non-verbal Communication Related to Mobile Phone Usage and Intimacy. Int J Journalism Mass Comm 4: 125 doi: <https://doi.org/10.15344/2349-2635/2017/125>

Copyright: © 2017 Nakamura. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

companion looked at the mobile phone display increased in the USA [9]; in contrast, in Japan the number of respondents who accepted this action increased [9].

To consider these differences, some comparative cultural studies should be referenced. One of the most accepted perspectives is to distinguish between Western and non-Western cultures. In this context, the USA is included in the West, and Japan is contained in the non-West. A large body of research adopts this dichotomy in cultural studies; this research is based on the theory, which is “independent and interdependent self-construals.”

The theory of “independent and interdependent self-construals” depicts differing attitudes toward individuals’ interdependence. In Western cultures, people believe in the inherent separateness of each person, and they think that an independent self should be individualistic, egocentric, separate, autonomous, idiocentric and self-contained. In contrast, in non-Western cultures people think that each person should be part of an encompassing social relationship and that an interdependent self should be sociocentric, holistic, collectivistic, allocentric, ensembled, constitutive, contextual and relational; the degree of interdependence is larger as the relationship grows closer [10].

The theory of “independent and interdependent self-construals” explains the divergence. In a culture of independent selves, people are separated, and they generally attempt to enhance relationships with intimate persons in face-to-face communication. As the level of intimacy grows, people are more likely to reject the companion’s action of looking at the mobile phone display. Referring to the theory, it can be considered because this action disturbs face-to-face communication. In a culture of interdependent selves, people are socially relational, and the reliance increases as the intimacy grows. Even if the action of looking at a mobile phone display suggests relationships with other persons, in most cases observers will respect this action. It can imply that the actor’s relationships with others can be part of the companion’s and should be esteemed as part of the actor’s self. Thus, the concept of independent and interdependent self-construals makes understandable the intimacy-based variations between the USA and Japan.

The different interpretations of the action as non-verbal behavior/communication can be elucidated by cross-cultural comparison, and this means that non-verbal behavior/communication has been influenced by each country’s respective culture. Non-verbal behavior/communication related to mobile phone usage is an intrinsic side effect because mobile phones were developed to address the desire to be able to communicate at all times. Because it is a side effect, this type of non-verbal behavior/communication has been utilized in various situations and interpreted in many different ways. The action and its interpretation are related to cultural value judgments. People iterate non-verbal behavior/communication in their own ways which would be influenced by their inherited cultures. Consequently, the diversity between countries has appeared.

Furthermore, in the 2010s, people have sometimes hesitated to put mobile phones away in front of companions [11]. Attentiveness is needed to develop and maintain rapport in face-to-face communication. Not using a mobile phone in front of a companion is considered good manners, as is putting the phone away. However, the action of putting the mobile phone away makes it impossible to show

the mobile phone display, and it means losing the opportunity to share information and thus develop empathy between the actor and the companion. Thus, some people dislike the action of putting the phone away, believing that it creates doubt and distance, whereas others appreciate the action and consider it to be good manners. People have to carefully balance the action of putting away mobile phone not to be disappointed. The action is also considered as non-verbal behavior/communication and it should be also discussed cross-culturally (in preparation).

Thus, we can examine the non-verbal behavior/communication that has evolved during the past few decades of mobile phone usage and discuss it cross-culturally. It has evolved based on people’s behavior and the interpretation of that behavior in each culture. Phone users’ spontaneous selection and modification has enlarged the discrepancy between cultures. Hereafter, the non-verbal behavior/communication of mobile phone users will not only be continuously influenced by culture but will also constitute a part of each culture. To enhance this research, the physical action of using mobile phone should be analyzed in detail, and other cultural studies are needed. There are many opportunities in public and domestic spaces to observe ongoing cultural diversity.

## Competing Interests

The author declare he has no competing interests existing.

## References

1. Nakamura T (2014) *The Wave of Excitement, in Japanese Romantic TV Drama and Mobile Phone* (Ed. Nakamura, T.), Seikyū, Tokyo. (in Japanese).
2. Goffman E (1963) *Behavior in public places*. New York: Free Press.
3. Richmond VP, McCroskey JC, Hickson M (2011) *Nonverbal behavior in interpersonal relations* (7th ed.). Pearson Education.
4. de Souza e Silva A, Frith J (2012) *Mobile interfaces in public spaces*. Routledge, New York.
5. Nakamura T (2007) Looking at “Keitai” (mobile phone) displays as a form of nonverbal communication. *Journal of Japan Information-Culturology Society* 14: 31-38.
6. Nakamura T (2015) The action of looking at a mobile phone display as nonverbal behavior/communication: A theoretical perspective, *Computers in Human Behavior* 43: 68-75.
7. Nakamura T, Oe H (2010) Another form of non-verbal communication: Showing the users’ own mobile phone displays. *Journal of Japan Information-Culturology Society* 17: 11-18.
8. ITU official page, Statistics (2015). Committed to connecting the world. Global ICT developments.
9. Nakamura T, Acar A, Ng M (2016) Cultural Comparison for the Action of Looking At a Mobile Phone Display: Focusing on Independent/Interdependent Self, *Bioceramics Development and Applications*, 6-2, pp. 1-9.
10. Markus HR, Kitayama S (1991) Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological review* 98: 224-253.
11. Nakamura T (2017) Action of Putting Away One’s Mobile Phone as Nonverbal Behavior/Communication, in Celia D. Park (ed.), *Nonverbal Communication: Insights, Importance in Healthcare Settings and Social Influences*, Nova Science Publishers.