

## Textperts and other Thumbomena: Mobile phones and Japanese cute culture

### Introduction

The world is far from Marshall McLuhan's "global village." Instead, we see that the dissemination and appropriation of global technologies is far from homogeneous. This is clearly evidenced in the role occupied by the mobile phone in contemporary culture; it is symbolic of globalisation and the increasing inclination towards mobility and so-called immediacy of being *connected*. In first world contexts, there can be a line drawn between two types of public performativity – one is the romantic flâneur that laments the demise of an imagined public, the other is what Luke Roberts calls the "phoneur" in which the phone is almost surgically attached to the individual (Roberts cited in Morley 2003). The former displays great disdain when a mobile phone "goes off" in their public space, the later clutches their phone in their sweaty palms as if it were an earthy demi-god whilst they continuously glance at it (to see that it is still alive). However, most of us live somewhere in between the flâneur and phoneur modes, in a space full of paradoxes and ironies. The mobile phone is not just a functional technology, it augurs types of status and cultural capital. What polyphonic ring or customised phone strap we attach *connects* us to a process of identifying and identification.

Contemporary aural landscapes are characterised by electronic cacophonies of polyphonic chirping and chiming produced by mobile telephonic practices. It is hard to be in a public space without a chime and a one-way conversation, "going off." As Sadie Plant argues in her study on mobile phones, "many people feel disconcerted and irritated by this new electronic soundtrack" (Plant 2002). Invoking McLuhan's connected/disconnected theorisation on telephones (1964), Plant outlines, "incoming calls provoke a sense of expectation, even urgency" and that "like a calling bird, a ringing phone demands a response." Mobile telephony is both everywhere and nowhere, or, to take Heidegger's state of "undistance" (*entfernen*) the abolishment of distance also, dialectically, destroys nearness. As Michael Arnold asserts, "In destroying distance we destroy closeness" (2003: 236). I will briefly visit the use of Japanese cute culture to customise mobile phones to illustrate that mobile telephonic practices are far from an example of a global village. Oh, hang on while I get this call...

### Logics of Duplicity: the odours of mobility.

In Japan, thumbs get even more exercise: games are played with the thumbs of two hands; messages and calls are made with one or both. Tokyo's *keitai* kids are known as *oya yubi sedai*, or the thumb generation: 'It's not only on the *keitai* that they use them,' says one man in his early 20s, to whom today's teenagers are already remote and alien creatures: they even point at things and ring doorbells with their thumbs. These kids are the world's leading textperts. (Plant 2002)

In Japan there is a growing phenomenon. Furnishing most mobile phones (*keitai*) with i-mode (internet) capacities are a plethora of "cute" (*kawaii*) characters that at face value seem little more than decorative. These characters are, however, not merely capricious forms of appurtenance but rather signify a particular persuasive mode of humanising and customising Japan's technological landscape. For Manuel Castells, "customisation" is the mode for the increasing penetration of technology mediating everyday practices in the form of ICT's (Information and Communication Technologies) as exemplified by the mobile phone (2001: 77). Kawaii culture, adorning both the inside and outside of mobile phones, is used by individuals in diverse ways as a means of self-expression and individualisation (McVeigh 2003). Examples of kawaii culture have long been associated with post WWII Japan – the most famous being the Sanrio Corporation's white cat, *Hello Kitty*. However, kawaii culture is not always as articulated by the stereotype of the consumer being a young, passive girl. Such characters such as PostPet acquire an active role, often unbeknownst to the user. PostPet writes emails without the instruction of the user and its combative style sees it fight to the death with any other kawaii characters on the desktop. This example illustrates that the terrain of kawaii culture is far more complex and paradoxical than benign.

Kawaii culture emerged from the Japanese tradition for gift giving, the symbolic value of animals in Buddhism, and as a form for lubricating the Japanese proclivity for shyness in social interactions (Kusahara 2001). This gift giving genealogy is pertinent in kawaii's translation into mobile telephony, highlighting and facilitating the "gift giving" cartography of mobile telephonic social rituals and symbolic exchange. Kawaii culture's role in customisation articulates and provides a type of "social glue" for the technological genealogy of immediacy and mobility underpinned by the concept of convergence – that is, the interweaving of television, telephony and the Net. In this way kawaii highlights that technologies do not exist in a vacuum but rather need to be read in terms of the grammar of convergence and remediation underpinning what David Morley identifies as the "contradictory dynamics" associated with the domestication and domesticating practices of new technologies (Bolter and Grusin 1999, Morley 2003). This uneven appropriation and dissemination is aptly encapsulated by Koichi Iwabuchi's paradoxical analogy of "odour" and

“odourless” cultural production and the associated transmutation of forms of cultural capital (2002).<sup>1</sup> Whether a product has an odour or is odourless has much to do with the “symbolic images” associated with the product’s country of origin. In this case, products such as Coca Cola are pungent with aromas of America, arguably more “American” than the actual nation.<sup>2</sup>

### **PostPet and other Thumbomena: customization, individualization and subjectivity**

In “Individualization, individuality, interiority, and the Internet,” McVeigh explores the usage of the Net through mobile telephony in Japan. Conducting case studies on Japanese university students, McVeigh focuses upon what he argues is the dominating “cyberstructure” in which the role of “individualization” is central to this logic and practice. Paralleling Castells’ notion of “customization”, McVeigh’s “individualization” operates in the face of mass culture and rampant consumerism.

Boasting the “world’s biggest Net-linking mobile phone market,” the Net and its attendant modes of spatiality and “customization” practices are very much indivisible from mobile telephony in Japan (2003: 20-21). Mobile phones with Internet capacities are the normal for Japanese consumers and this therefore constructs a different relationship to the Net and corporeality than through personal computers. McVeigh asserts that the physical characteristics of mobile phones with Internet capacities – being small and “handy” – has a lot to do with their overwhelming popularity. In his study of Japanese university students and their relationship to mobile phones, McVeigh found three common phrases attached to such practices – they were *ureshii* (happy), *tanoshii* (enjoyable), and *benri* (convenient). The phenomenon of texting and emailing on mobile phones is so pervasive and integral to life in Tokyo that the thumb has taken precedence over the roles and importance of the index finger as Sadie Plant noted in her study (2002). McVeigh too identifies this phenomenon – or should I say “thumbomenon” – of such skilled users as *oyayubi-zoku* (meaning “thumb tribe”) (2003: 22). This thumbomenon has much to do with the customizing role of kawaii cultures in establishing modes of individualization.

The assumed ubiquity and democracy of “information” provided by keitai and Net practices are, as McVeigh found in his study, often an illusion. Much of the “information” was saturated in advertising and the associated lifestyle vernaculars pushed by global conglomerates. This “miniaturized window shopping” saw “individuals” being inundated by “I think therefore I consume” type rhetoric that frames identity and freedom in terms of purely economic capital; this is the downside to the increasing modes of individualization performed by/ through new technologies. As McVeigh asserts, this “increasing individualization and interiorization” of mobile telephony is part of a technological genealogy. From the 1970s there were *heddo-honzoku* (head-phone addicts), then video games, followed by *pokeberu* (a colloquium for “Pocket Bell” a popular brand of pager in Japan) in the early 1990s that operated as the precursors to mobile Internet telephony and forged such markets as the booming adolescent niche. This lineage is discussed by Katsuno and Yano in their

study on the migrating genealogy of the *kaomaji* (“face marks”) from early Net usage, then pagers and then mobile phones (2001). Katsuno and Yano argue, the kaomaji is not a form of post-humanism but rather neo-humanism.<sup>3</sup> McVeigh’s case study of university students using the “cyberstructural environment” through mobile telephony identifies some inter-related areas. He argues that processes of “individualization” (disciplinary practices and associated forms of organization through educational and employment systems), “individuality” (personal uniqueness), and “interiority” (subjectivity, i.e. emotions) are tightly interwoven within Net practices (2003: 30).

### **Conclusion / Being there: Customised Connections**

The synthesis between kawaii and keitai cultures articulates that far from providing a global blanket of homogeneity, kawaii’s marriage to mobile technologies, whether in the form of actual mobility or in the genealogy of mobility as witnessed in technologies of immediacy of praxis of convergence – from the television, to the telephony and computer/ Internet – operates to provide points of resistance and subversive practices. I am not suggesting a type of sycophantic celebration of the liberty of consumerism but rather I am highlighting that within the ubiquity of ICTs and NMTs there are discursive formations around gender and ethnicity (to name a few) that contest the inevitability of a “global village.” In the case of the Asia-Pacific, we are seeing diverse modes for expression and identification which go beyond ICTs being purely Machiavellian forms of instrumentality – that is, just as new technologies do not come out of vacuum but rather form a genealogy, it is the mode of customisation which works as a type of social glue of which the substance, content and interpretation exceeds the corporation’s original expectations and framing.

Customisation, as the vernacular to the grammar or repertoire of technologies, demonstrates that the local and processes of individualisation do not necessarily lead to fragmentation. For example, in South Korea, fears about mobile telephony widening the gulf between generations and destruction of the “Cheong” traditional social relations has been subverted by such practices as mobile sharing. As Kyongwon Yoon’s study attests, the claim that mobile telephony has “disembedded” young people from “local sociality” is more rhetoric than in practice, rather young people “are imagining the local through global imagination technology” (2003:327). So too, in Japan which shares with Korea a traditional for gift giving, we see that it is the kawaii culture – born from the gift giving tradition – that operates as a way to strengthen rather than erode social bonds. This is where we see that the proclivity for “networks” so endemic in ICTs is operating to remind us that such a formation was based in the micro politics of sociality that has arguably always been fraught with contradictions and paradoxes.

As McLuhan notes in his film *Medium is the Message*, some words, just like media, can be too involving, too demanding in participation. Rather than calling “help” in public – which McLuhan argues is too low definition and thus leaves the participant in a state of high activity in the form of interpretation and therefore often results in no reply because it is too

involving – McLuhan substitutes “help” with “fire.” As he proposes, while “help” is ambiguous and thus involves high participation and interpretation on the behalf of the bystander, “fire” is direct and explicit, thus requiring less energy. Perhaps this could be seen as an appropriate analogy for media today...

As telecommunication and the assumed expansion of knowledge industries spread like rust throughout an old car, it seems that “help” involves too much elucidation, too much involvement, too much teleologism. Instead “help” seems to cut to the narrow of fears predicated around capitalism, consumerism and the growing sense of cool alienation lit by the glow of the electronic / digital screen. Mobile telephony and its attendant modes of customisation clearly evidence the struggles between neo-humanism and post-humanism arguments. As McLuhan asserts, “All Alone by the Telephone” has come full circle. It will soon be the telephone that is “all alone and feeling blue” (McLuhan 1964: 292). Maybe the blue is symbolised by a kaomoji or kawaii icon, representative of a subject’s grappling with identity, mobility and neo-humanism; or, alternatively, the blue colour could be that of the cadaver who is truly post-human.

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**Larissa Hjorth has been annoyed by mobile phones and cute culture for a long time. Taking the cliché of keeping our enemies closest to us she has discovered they are not as bad as a cursory glance would suggest...**

#### Notes

1. Central to the paradoxical logic of odour is its manifestation in the mode of customisation. On one hand, customisation is about being flexible to an individual’s need to make “friendly,” or what Morley calls “domesticate,” new technologies into local contexts. On the other hand, the “odourlessness” of Japanese production continues to represent particular forms of cultural taste and symbolic logic specific to Japanese socio-spatial politics (i.e. miniaturisation and cuteness). This paradoxical cartography is central to the logic of mobile telephony, clearly enshrined by the ironic and contradictory ways modes of customisation are employed. The upsurge of research in modes of texting as a form of customisation is another example of vernacularising the grammar or medium of mobile telephony (Goggin 2003). I suggest that the customisation is inexorably linked to the logic of convergence prevalent within mobile telephony and that customisation operates to illustrate specific discursive formations such as gender within the context of the local or region. The salient reappropriation and customisation of mobile telephony in contingent and divergent ways attests that global technologies are far from painting a global village. So maybe the medium isn’t the message... **Rather**, the messages are within the practices and appropriations of kawaii culture as a vernacular for genealogies of technologies in the grammar of convergence.
2. The “odourless” product is one in which the scent of national culture has been eliminated and thus ensures easy reappropriation by other cultures. And yet even the “odourless” state emits a form of odour. In a period of globalisation, it is in the contestation of locality that we see that culture *stinks*. This analogy of odour and adaptation is most notably outlined by the disjunctive and yet ubiquitous employment of mobile telephony and attendant forms of customisation in the Asia-Pacific region as evidenced by the diverse penetration rates. Locations such as Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan – known as the

“four tigers” – have over 70% usage, followed by Japan (53.4%) and Australasia (49.6%), whereas the rest of the Asian region is at a remarkably low 4.2% (Katz and Aakhus 2002: 5). In the areas with high penetration rates of mobile telephony, there is a clear demonstration of kawaii culture as *the* dominant form of customisation. This appropriation of predominately Japanese kawaii culture is marked by contradictory identifications and symbolic modes of exchange and cultural translation/indigenisation, best identified by the odour/odourless analogy’s ability to articulate the mobility of commodities and their attendant and salient forms of cultural capital.

3. As Sharon Kinsella argues, the kitten writing of the 1970s saw Japanese youth rebelling against traditional Japanese culture particularly by reconfiguring Japanese words, citing the example of *kakkoii* (meaning cool or good) being intentionally mispronounced and misspelled as *katchoii*. Perhaps in the context of my argument here, the most telling example of this intentional subversion was the phrasing of “sex” as *nyan nyan suru* or “to meow meow” (1995: 225). Following that line of logic, Hello Kitty is capable of representing paradoxical duplicity. Her seeming mouthlessness and lack of genitals are misleading. Her kawaii is both sexual and also a space for exploring repressed sexuality in Japan. An initial reading of character culture would seem to suggest that the characters reinforce heterosexuality by placing women as mainstream consumers into passive roles of heteronormality. However, in practice consumer modes are hardly reinforcing the normative categories deemed through advertising avenues. As Catherine Driscoll notes, the category of “girlhood” does not actually correspond with a neat demographic (2000). This parallels Merry White’s discussion of the Japanese category of “childhood” as a site for adult preoccupation rather than actual children (1995). It is important to recognize that kawaii culture provides a space for convergence between traditional and contemporary Japan insofar as its genealogy grew out of the Japanese social proclivity towards gift giving and its concomitant role in articulating social status.

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