A Dramatic Day in the Life of a Shared Indian Mobile Phone

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Abstract. The paper explores the area of culture strain and how it affects the usage and hence the design of products and services. In this era of globalisation, it is increasingly important to create a tool kit of methods and techniques that will address cross cultural use of a product. This is particularly important in cases where the product is designed in and for a particular kind of culture and then it is 'exported' for use in widely different cultures. Till date, it has been common to 'localise' such a product by looking at the dominant cultural characteristics of the culture where the product is being exported for use. This paper takes the view that it is equally important to look at the culture (where the product is being exported for use) not just as it is supposed to be but also as it is. The difference between the 'cultural ideal' and 'cultural practice' [1] does indeed provide some rich opportunity areas for value added design solutions.

1   Dramatic Conflict

Three dramatic scenarios…each different but at the same time united by a common thread. The common thread is the cell phone and the way it is used. Unlike the cell phone being an extension of ones individual identity, as is the case in much of the western world and in some small pockets within Asian countries, these scenarios are all about the cell phone playing a very conflicting role! A conflicting role because of one inherent attribute of the cell phone that contradicts a dominant cultural attribute of the user population.

And that attribute is that of the cell phone being an individual device, ideally meant for use by one person. While this works in the western world, where it was originally designed, this attribute is at odds with the largely collectivist culture of the Asian countries.

1.1   Scene 1

Seventeen year old Amar just came back home, rather sheepishly. Its midnight and his parents are sitting in the living room pretending to watch television. Pretending because they are actually sitting up waiting for Amar to return. They are not happy at

all that he has come back so late. Of course, that they are at least not talking about disowning him is because of that magical device, the cell phone!

Amar borrowed his father's cell phone when going to the party earlier this evening. In fact, that he was allowed to attend the late night party at all, was on condition that he would be available at all times on the cell.

Now that he is back …a little later than promised, he faces another major problem! He has to now return his father's cell phone.and the reason that is a problem is because he has made 12 phone calls to his girlfriend. They had a slight disagreement this evening and it took a dozen phone calls to bring things back on an even keel. Not to forget the nine text messages.

In the hurry to drop her back home after the party and rush back home since it was already past the Cinderella hour, Amar forgot to delete the calls and messages. The only hope is if his father forgets about the phone and asks for it in the morning. If he asks for the phone right now, Amar could be in deep trouble. If his father were to see the messages and all those calls to the same number, he would know about his relationship with Leena and that would be a major disasater!

1.2   Scene 2

Deepa and Saurabh have got married recently and moved to Mumbai just 2 months ago. he is a software engineer and she is a homemaker. She has heard so much about Mumbai that she is very fascinated by the city. She spends a lot of time exploring interesting home stores. The more she reads about Mumbai and all the bold and beautiful people who live here and sees pictures of their homes, the more she desires to create an unique home for Saurabh and herself.

The only hitch is that Saurabh does not quite see why she has to buy so many things for the house that seem unnecessary. He strongly believes that as long as the home is functional, they are done with setting up the home. All these frills and fancies seem rather extravagant to him.

Deepa spends her own money to create her fantasy home. She has saved money from the time she used to work in a school before her marriage. So, while she does not have to ask Saurabh for money for buying all the nice little frills for her home, she does often give a lower amount than what she really paid, when Saurabh asks her the price of some new artifact that she has just bought. She knows that he will throw a fit if he knew how much she really paid!

Deepa was reading the newspaper in the afternoon when she suddenly saw the large adverts for the 'red sale' at the upscale Bandhni home store. Today was the last day! Deepa decided that she had to go right away. She had a quick lunch and set out for Bandhni. She could not inform Saurabh since he had borrowed her cell phone today (his was at the Nokia shop for some minor repair job) when going for work.

She shopped to her hearts content even though she knew that she had overspent. It was fine, she told herself. Such opportunities came rarely and moreover, Saurabh would not know how much she spent. Thank heavens for her credit card! And suddenly she froze…

'Oh my god!' Deepa broke out in a sweat… her cell phone was with Saurabh and she had just used her credit card to buy all these wonderful home artefacts! 'Oh no!' she groaned… the moment she used her credit card, her bank sent an instant message

to her cell phone stating the details of the transaction, that is, the money spent and the place where the transaction happened. She loved this feature because it made her feel so secure. She knew that if anyone misused her card, she would know instantly! But right now, she would give anything to have not had this feature!

Saurabh would , by now, have all the details of the money she had spent and what was worse…if he looked at her text messages he would have a whole list of messages that gave details of all past transactions. And of course, since she often did not tell Saurabh the correct price when he asked, what he would see on her cell would be rather different from what she had been saying..

Deepa felt the ground below her feet sinking …and frantically wondered what she should do…

1.3   Scene 3

Kunjipur is a large village in the northern part of uttar Pradesh. Many families from this and nearby villages have their menfolk working in various countries of the Middle East. They earn a lot of money and try to convince themselves that that sort of makes up for their absence from the family.

The village is a very typical Indian village, with scanty infrastructure but a lot of spirit and entrepreneurship. Most houses don't have land line phones or cell phones or permanent 'power' connections. However, most of them do own television sets.

Raju lives in a large extended family in kunjipur. His father and fathers' two younger brothers have all gone to Sharjah to work as plumbers. So he lives with his mother, sister, younger brother, grandparents , two aunts and 5 cousins. They live in the ancestral home which has been recently extended , with the money sent by the men from Sharjah.

All of them miss their fathers /uncles/husbands/sons respectively. They don't have telephones in their house and therefore to speak with their fathers or uncles, they have to walk to the crowded village square and queue up for the one public phone booth their village has.

The entire family is very excited because they have just received these interesting 'cards' from the bank. Raju's father and his uncles would bring a lot of money with them when they returned home for their annual leave. However, they always felt scared carrying the cash with them. They also sent some money by using the unofficial 'havala' channel. He has heard from his father than even the 'havala' is not a very safe way to send money.

When they came home last month, the entire family went to the State bank of India branch in the district HQ that was 30 km from their village. It was a picnic for the whole family as his father and uncles spoke with the bank manager for a long time. His father, then explained to all of them that each family would soon receive a card. That card, would, magically be able to get them money from the state bank whenever they needed.

The cards had just arrived, one for his mother and one each for his aunts. They were all with him since he was the only literate member of the household. He read the letters that came with the cards and he knew that there was a number called a 'Pin number' that he needed to have before they could use the cards.

Raju felt so powerful holding the three cards in his hand. He felt that everything depended on him…he would be the one to get the money from the bank and give it to his mother and aunts. Perhaps they would give him a small amount as salary to do this task ? Or perhaps he should just take it himself and not even ask them?

As Raju stood thinking about this wonderful new position he had carved for himself, he was rudely shaken out of his reverie by the arrival of postman uncle. Postman uncle came on his bicycle with all the letters. Postman uncle was like a family member. Raju rushed in to get postman uncle the tea and snacks he always had when he came to deliver letters. Now that raju could write letters , postman uncle did not have to write his mothers and aunts letters for them.

What was very exciting though was that postman uncle was coming home nowadays with a cell phone! The government had started the 'daakiya aaya, mobile laaya'(the postman is coming, he is bringing the mobile phone) scheme for villages which had poor land line telephone infrastructure. So he came with his cell phone and everyone could make a call using his cell phone, for a fixed charge that differed per country.

Once postman uncle finished his snacks, he sat with raju and the rest of the family to make an important call to his father, then to each of his uncles. Postman uncle called his father and raju was the privileged person who got to speak first. His father said that he would now be letting him know the magic number that would enable them to use the card. He would also send the numbers for his uncles' cards. But he would not say it out on the phone. Instead he would send a text message with the Pin numbers right away on postman uncles cell phone. He then gave detailed instructions to raju about what to do with the numbers and the cards when raju went to the bank next week.

At the end of the call, raju waited anxiously for the message to appear on postman uncle's cell phone. And suddenly, there it was! Three numbers for the three families. Raju felt like a king now. He had three cards and three pin numbers. Everyone had to depend on him for getting the money from the bank. He grinned at the many possibilities…

Postman uncle bid them goodbye and carried on to the next house. He was very happy because now he would show all the neighbours all these three numbers that raju's father just sent on HIS cell phone! Yes…there would be so much admiration for him for being such an important person!

2   Collectivism Defined

Collectivism is defined as one of the primary dimensions we often use to measure how cultures differ. The primary dimensions as developed by Geert Hofstede [2] are:

Power Distance Index (PDI) focuses on the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in the country's society. A High Power Distance ranking indicates that inequalities of power and wealth have been allowed to grow within the society. These societies are more likely to follow a caste system that does not allow significant upward mobility of its citizens. A Low Power Distance ranking indicates the society de-emphasizes the differences between citizen's power and wealth. In these societies equality and opportunity for everyone is stressed.

Individualism (IDV) focuses on the degree the society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships. A High Individualism ranking indicates that individuality and individual rights are paramount within the society. Individuals in these societies may tend to form a larger number of looser relationships. A Low Individualism ranking typifies societies of a more collectivist nature with close ties between individuals. These cultures reinforce extended families and collectives where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group.

Masculinity (MAS) focuses on the degree the society reinforces, or does not reinforce, the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control, and power. A High Masculinity ranking indicates the country experiences a high degree of gender differentiation. In these cultures, males dominate a significant portion of the society and power structure, with females being controlled by male domination. A Low Masculinity ranking indicates the country has a low level of differentiation and discrimination between genders. In these cultures, females are treated equally to males in all aspects of the society.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) focuses on the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within the society - i.e. unstructured situations. A High Uncertainty Avoidance ranking indicates the country has a low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. This creates a rule-oriented society that institutes laws, rules, regulations, and controls in order to reduce the amount of uncertainty. A Low Uncertainty Avoidance ranking indicates the country has less concern about ambiguity and uncertainty and has more tolerance for a variety of opinions. This is reflected in a society that is less rule-oriented, more readily accepts change, and takes more and greater risks.

Long-Term Orientation (LTO) focuses on the degree the society embraces, or does not embrace, long-term devotion to traditional, forward thinking values. High Long-Term Orientation ranking indicates the country prescribes to the values of long-term commitments and respect for tradition. This is thought to support a strong work ethic where long-term rewards are expected as a result of today's hard work. However, business may take longer to develop in this society, particularly for an "outsider". A Low Long-Term Orientation ranking indicates the country does not reinforce the concept of long-term, traditional orientation. In this culture, change can occur more rapidly as long-term traditions and commitments do not become impediments to change.

3 Culture Strain

So as one can see from the definition of individualism/collectivism, cultures where this dimension is strong are cultures where 'sharing' is a very important part of life. This implies that inherently people who belong to collectivist cultures share personal space and objects much more than those who belong to individualist cultures.

   With the advent of the cell phone, has emerged the contradiction between a collectivist population using a device designed for an individualist culture. Interestingly, this should have made it very difficult for, say the Indian population, to

use the cell phone. However, the rapid penetration of cell phones bears testimony to the fact that the cell phone is certainly very popular with Indian users.

What then do the scenarios described in the beginning of this paper really mean? All the 3 scenarios were about people using the cell phone in an individualistic manner (to a greater or lesser degree) amidst a collectivist 'ecology'. This led to the friction and edgy situations experienced by the 'actors' who were part of the scenarios.

Does this mean that in spite of a culture having a certain orientation, people can behave in a manner that contradicts the dominant orientation? The answer seems to be a resounding 'yes'. Cultures are not static entities and therefore they change and often over a period of time morph into an entity that is different from what it was a generation ago. Dr. Genevieve Bell, anthropologist at Intel believes that , in fact, the places where the tensions are strongest between cultural ideals and cultural practice are the most interesting. They're also often places where technologies are very successful (1).

We define this as culture strain, where the gap between what **ought to be** and what **is** creates dissonance and hence opportunities for design solutions.

Amar would have definitely liked an easy way to guard his privacy with regard to the calls he made and messages he sent using a shared cell phone, Deepa would have loved to guard her privacy with regard to the purchases she made and the resultant messages she received, when her cell phone was being shared and raju's family would be better off if they were guarded against raju's temptation to misuse the Pin numbers that he possessed.

4   Some Examples of 'Culturally' Dual Purpose Products

4.1   Cell Phone

In fact, the cell phone is a very good example of a device that has become very popular in both modes of usage , that is, 'mainstream culture' as well as 'counter culture' even in cultures which it was not designed for. The cell phone has become immensely popular in asia because it allows people to communicate and stay connected (very mainstream cultural attribute of this region) especially given the uneven quality and quantity of private and public land line telephone infrastructure. However, the cell phone's popularity in the region is also because it allows 'counter culture' behavior. Take the example of Asian women and the cell phone. The cell phone has allowed immense empowerment of women in the region by allowing women the freedom to converse and connect with anybody, anywhere…in private. This is very 'counter culture' behavior but became possible because the same device also met the needs of mainstream cultural requirements. Products that can meet both mainstream and counter culture requirements in a quiet and not 'in your face' way, have immense potential of success. In addition, if design solutions could make usage of the cell phone easier in both modes (such as in the 3 counter culture scenarios described), the penetration and adoption rate would be even faster and higher.

4.2 Television

It is interesting to note that one of the most successful media is television and this is for various cultural profiles. What is even more interesting is the kind of 'culture strain' the TV helps deal with. Television continues to be one of the most popular home entertainment media in China, USA and India. Interestingly, in each of these countries, television is used in both 'mainstream' culture as well as 'counter culture' modes. The fact that television reflects attributes of the mainstream culture is very well known. However, the average American and Chinese families use the TV a lot, perhaps because it helps them feel more 'collectivist' when they are in the middle of an individualist environment whether at home or in society (the extreme popularity of chat shows which is essentially about 'talking' to or being connected with people). The average Indian family, on the other hand, use the TV because it provides them an escape route (via suitable programming) from the complete control of the collective (all the films and soap which glorify rebelling against the established societal order).

5 Conclusion - Compensatory Model the Way to Super Hit Opportunity Spaces?

It is interesting to note that the way the three scenarios illustrate the use of the cell phone involve counter culture thoughts or behaviour. amar uses the phone to communicate with his girl friend, deepa uses it to track personal purchases that she hides from her husband and raju gets important information via the cell phone and grins at the many possibilities…

In other words, the cell phone is used by amar, deepa and raju in a compensatory mode.

A compensatory model looks at a given culture and its characteristics. It posits that these characteristics can cause people to behave in a certain predictable way but at the same time the characteristics can put pressure on people. This causes people to behave in accordance with their culture but also seek release to the consequences of the constraints of the culture, at least in subtle ways. This behavior would be classified counter culture.

The questions that need more research, for designers and developers of new products/concepts or for those entering new markets, are:

- Is it possible that those opportunity spaces/concepts that are used in a compensatory mode BUT in a form that is very much in keeping 'with culture' norms, are the potential candidates for major success?
- Should designing to accommodate compensatory mode usage become a standard part of the design process?

These questions can be answered with further research. If the 'compensatory model of product usage' is indeed correct, then it implies a shift in focus from the 'given' cultural characteristics to the 'tensions' between the 'given' and the 'desired'.

Specifically in the emerging economies, where the 'old' and the 'new' exist in startling juxtaposition, for products to be successful, the amars, deepas and rajus must

be empowered to deal smoothly with the duality of their existence. A duality that is captured very well by the Scottish journalist, James Cameron [3]:

> I like the evening in India, the one magic moment when the sun balances on the rim of the world, and the hush descends, and ten thousand civil servants drift home on a river of bicycles, brooding on Lord Krishna and the cost of living.

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