

ABSTRACT

University of Tampere, Faculty of Social Sciences

International School of Social Sciences

Department of Sociology and Social Psychology

GREGGER, SEBASTIAN: Logout is not an option. Normative and rational aspects of availability in the mobile phone society.

Master of Social Sciences Thesis: 96 pages, 7 pages of appendices

Sociology

Supervisor: Assistant Professor Jari Aro, Ph.D.

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The penetration of mobile phones among young adults in Finland is close to 100%. Nearly everybody is permanently connected to a huge network of computer-mediated communication.

This thesis is a phenomenologically based case study about normative and rational behaviour of mobile phone users concerning availability and network connectivity.

The role of the mobile phone in society is described from a micro-sociological perspective. With a special focus on related aspects of interaction theory, society is presented as a network of interactions that is being enhanced through the mobile phone, consequently leading towards an "online society". In this work, social norms are explained to be the regulating element of conduct. They are internalised and considered part of the rational orientation that the rational choice theory defines as the decisive element of individual behaviour.

Qualitative interviews with nine students between 21 and 24 years of age investigate the reasons and patterns of behaviour for remaining permanently connected to the mobile phone network. The method applied is a derived form of focussed interviews.

According to the analysed material, the individuals share a common sense that missed calls are to be responded to by calling back. The possibility to reply is assured by choosing unobtrusive alerting modes instead of switching the device off, since reachability is an elementary desire to maintain social contacts. Mobile phone users want to be assured that they do not miss any incoming contacts. Ignoring incoming calls on purpose is considered to be rude, due to

the very personal nature of the mobile phone compared to the landline telephone. Also, people get remarkably confused when they can not reach the telephone of a close friend for a longer time, which is another strong indicator for the existence of widespread guiding principles on how to interact in the mobile phone society.

In conclusion, this research proves that general rules do exist and that they are affecting the life-world of the users, influencing their own behaviour as well as their expectations concerning the action of others. Often these norms are subconscious, the individual does not even recognise them as a norm and refers to them as habits. But, even though mobile phone users are facing prevalent expectations concerning their availability, the decision of staying connected to the network is in most cases not based on normative pressure but on the rational demand to receive the benefits of network communication.