DOMESTICATING THE MOBILE PHONE IN KIBERA:
HOW NAIROBI'S URBAN POOR ARE INTEGRATING THE MOBILE PHONE INTO THEIR EVERYDAY LIVES

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Certificate of authorship

I certify that the work presented in this dissertation has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged in the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Date: 21/01/2016

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Abstract

Although the mobile phone is a very recent technology, its role in everyday life and its social, cultural, political and economic implications have already received substantial scholarly attention. It has been found to alter the way people interact, present themselves, coordinate their daily activities and establish and maintain relationships. In turn, users have been shown to actively shape the meaning of the mobile phone in their lives.

However, as scholars have noted, these impacts are context-specific, with most studies exploring mobile phone behavior among affluent western populations. This study focuses on the urban poor living in the Kibera slum in Nairobi. Drawing on domestication theory's concepts of technological appropriation, incorporation, objectification and conversion, the study explores how and why Kibera residents are appropriating mobile phones and incorporating them into everyday lives that are characterised by extreme poverty, collective social relations and limited social agency.

The study adopted an interpretivist approach using three qualitative data collection methods: in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and photovoice. In photovoice, the study respondents used cameras provided by the researcher to take photos in response to jointly negotiated themes. Participants selected, discussed and interpreted their photographs within a group setting, their interpretations then serving as triggers for further group discussion.

Analysis of the interview, discussion group and photovoice data shows that Kibera residents are domesticating the mobile phone in a manner that reflects both their agency and their unique context. Three key findings

augment existing literature on mobile phone practices. First, participants are actively capitalising on the mobile phone's usefulness to sustain existing socio-cultural values, in particular to maintain and nurture close relationships within and outside Kibera. Second, participants are choosing how and when to use their mobile phones in light of the economic and insecurity implications of their context. Third, participants are jointly constructing and enforcing unwritten rules about appropriate mobile phone usage according to local understandings of public and private space. Finally, rather than using the mobile phone in social display practices, the particular pressures of Kibera are leading residents to develop a repertoire of concealment practices.

More broadly, the study gives credence to the value of user agency in shaping the nature, scope and functions of communication technologies. Such studies provide rich insights into participants' motivations for acquiring technology despite financial difficulties and the practices through which they negotiate the technology's value, uses and non-uses within their socio-cultural context. ❖