

# Bursting the Bubble — Mobile Phone Etiquette on Public Transport

**As mobile phones become an increasing part of our lives, the etiquette of the way we communicate is changing rapidly. The speed of progression had made it hard to keep up with these developments, which has led to an increasing number of publications on etiquette, such as Debrett's Etiquette for Girls and the Sunday Times Style Magazine's recent feature on 'The Noughties Guide to Modern Etiquette', both of which feature several sections on mobile phone use. Even mobile phone operators now publish tips regarding mobile phone etiquette on their Web sites, notably O<sub>2</sub> and Orange. In order to assess the likely future etiquette 'rules' of such mobile phone use specifically looking at public transport, we have carried out qualitative research of mobile phone use by teenagers aged 16–18, the key mobile phone users of tomorrow, followed by a programme of observations to see how our perceived findings match observed reality.**

*etiquette is becoming an increasing topic of discussion in society in general*



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## Introduction

As a team of researchers working at Research International, the world's largest custom market research agency, we regularly carry out bespoke market research for major telcos both in the UK and abroad. In the course of our research projects we have recognised changes in the etiquette or 'rules' for the use of mobile phones. In addition, we have noticed such etiquette becoming an increasing topic of discussion in society in general, and illustrated by several recent publications on etiquette in general, which feature in particular that associated with mobile phone use, such as Debrett's Etiquette for Girls<sup>1</sup>, and the Sunday Times Style Magazine's recent feature on 'The Noughties Guide to Modern Etiquette'<sup>2</sup>. To explore these changes in etiquette in a little more detail we undertook a small independent study, with particular reference to public transport.

This article sets out how we approached this project and examines the findings in the context of current users as well as considering what impact this might have on

the etiquette of future communications users while travelling on public transport. In doing so it aims to contribute to the debate regarding the constantly changing etiquette of mobile phone communication.

## Methodology

Our team of researchers moderated two in-depth qualitative discussion groups, each lasting around two hours with six teenagers aged 16–18. We felt this age group to be relevant to the future as they are likely to embrace new technology most quickly. They are also old enough to currently have their own mobile phones, use them frequently, and carry them on public transport. The groups were split by gender, with one male group and one female group, to encourage openness with the moderator and also to observe any potential gender differences in opinions.

Following these discussion groups, we carried out a series of observations of actual mobile phone use on public transport including buses, underground tube trains and main line overground trains. We made 20 observations in total that were carried out at different times of day both during the week and on the weekend in September 2006. These were not just of the demographic group we interviewed, but also included older, business-focused users. This allowed us to gauge whether the teenagers' views of the mobile phone usage of others, and so likely future use, matched what we observed.

## Comfort Zones in Public Space

How some people act in public and interact with others often depends on where they are, and who they are with. A key element that is particularly relevant to public transport is personal body space – the zone or space within which each individual feels comfortable. When faced with the lack of our usual personal body space comfort

zone, our awareness of the behaviour of others is heightened – as is its impact. This makes mobile phone etiquette all the more important in such an environment, as the behaviour of others impinges on us to a greater extent. This article seeks to examine what is, and isn't, an acceptable use of mobile phones on public transport at present, and how this is likely to change as signal coverage is extended to the underground, such as in the tube network, and the air, for national and international air travel.

Teenagers acknowledge that there are certain unwritten 'rules' for using a mobile phone on public transport, indeed, in public in general. The difference is that given the increased proximity to others in tubes, trains and buses, our awareness of other people's mobile phone use is heightened, and so the 'rules' are somewhat more stringent. What these 'rules' are, and why, becomes clear when looked at in the context of why you are using a mobile phone in these situations in the first place.

Teenagers believe communication is the main reason to use their mobile phone on public transport – either being able to call or text if they are running late, or to reassure parents that they are safely on the bus. This usage is always deemed acceptable if certain conditions are observed, i.e. the call is brief and sticks to its purpose. Beyond this primary communication need, though, there are many further reasons for using your mobile phone, particularly the more advanced features.

When on public transport, people are usually in a not very pleasant environment. They have far less personal body space than is normally considered comfortable, and as a result are often hot, crowded and uncomfortable – especially when travelling at peak times. On the tube, the fact that you are underground and largely without seats again makes the unpleasantness more acute. In order to try to make this environment more hospitable, people set about creating a 'bubble' for themselves. This may be done by conversing with a friend who is with them, reading a book, listening to music, or, increasingly, using their mobile phone. The aim of this is to close themselves off from the world to a certain extent, thereby cushioning themselves from the reality of their journey. This 'bubble' allows them to feel more safe, secure and at ease. Part of the use of mobile phones is to 'kill time' while travelling, but often it seems to be about more than just this – we observed many people so immersed in their activity that they almost missed their stop. This too indicates the use of a mobile phone to create such a bubble, separating you from your environment.

## **the 'rules' of mobile phone etiquette on public transport are not exclusively related to sound though, as the vibrations of other peoples' mobile phones, when calls or messages are received, are also disturbing**

These bubbles are not created by technology alone – talking to a friend on the tube creates one around both people while reading a book creates a solitary one. However, increasingly these bubbles are technology based. For teenagers, using a mobile phone is a top-of-mind activity on public transport. Even underground with no reception, they are likely to read old text messages, play games or take photos on their mobile phones. Part of this is due to the convenience – mobile phones are always carried with you, whereas bringing a book, or your MP3 player, requires advanced planning and more room. Increasing functionality is changing what we can do with mobile phones, and as such it seems that their use to create these bubbles will increase as we are capable of doing more and more with them.

### **Impinging on Others' Comfort Zones**

The issue of mobile phone etiquette on public transport arises when, by creating your own bubble, you burst someone else's. Bubbles can be burst by the physical presence of others, for example by someone invading your personal space, but also by the use of mobile phones. Again, the likelihood of one passenger's activity bursting another's bubble is increased on public transport, given the closer proximity. Any mobile phone activity which is imposed on others is felt by teenagers to be a breach of the 'rules', or poor etiquette. These included listening to music loudly without head-phones, having a loud conversation, and texting or gaming with the keypad tones on thereby creating noise. All of these have an impact on the other people present, as they are difficult to ignore, hence bursting their bubbles and bringing them back to the reality of their uncomfortable environment. There are alternative ways of doing the same thing with less intrusion which are deemed polite and acceptable etiquette – texting instead of talking, turning sounds off, and listening to music more quietly through headphones. In this way, it is acknowledged by the younger generation that using a mobile phone on public transport is acceptable, as long as the impact on others is minimal.

Loud music or tones can never be tuned out or ignored (although there was some

acknowledgement that '...I don't mind it if the music is good!'), but a conversation can, and it is interesting what teenagers are able to tune out and therefore find acceptable. The greatest objection was to 'unnecessary' conversations, with one young male commenting 'I don't want to hear that drivell about last night' referring to a gossipy conversation he had overheard. Many similarly feel that content drives the ability to tune out a conversation. Anything salacious demands to be listened to, and hence is not acceptable, and anything with raucous language is equally difficult to tune out. Interestingly, teenagers are not fazed by hearing one sided conversations. As a generation who have grown up with mobile phones, few commented that it is harder to block out a conversation when you only hear one side of it, something older generations often have trouble with. This indicates that in the future, everyone is likely to become used to this. However, this trouble with unfamiliar forms of conversation is unlikely to be eliminated, as it has been replaced by new, unfamiliar ways of conversing, for example talking on Bluetooth or with a hands-free set. This is not against the 'rules' as such, but makes it difficult for people to remain in their bubble as it seems odd – one needs to take time to sum up the situation to see if someone is being 'weird and talking to themselves' or if they are in fact having a hands-free conversation. In this way, it seems that in the future those on public transport are still likely to have difficulty in tuning out conversations. Although generations are quickly able to adapt to the changing ways in which we communicate, the speed at which technology is developing seems to indicate that what we get used to will merely be replaced by another system of talking which requires further adaptation on our part.

In terms of noise disturbance, the female respondents appeared to be far more sensitive to this. They commented to a greater extent on the annoyance: '... phone noises generally aren't good – they're always high pitched which is just irritating' – whereas males were less concerned. They felt it was more a fact of life that you just had to 'deal with' and so did not view it as something they actively noticed.

The 'rules' of mobile phone etiquette on public transport are not exclusively related to sound though, as the vibrations of other



peoples' mobile phones, when calls or messages are received, are also disturbing. While vibrations are not commonly considered poor etiquette, indeed it often shows consideration for others if it means the phone is not ringing, it is a factor which disturbs others and bursts their bubbles. Again, this seems to support the idea that the 'bubble' is not simply a sound barrier, but a full sensory cut-off from the environment in which we find ourselves.

Given the current state of what is considered to be acceptable mobile phone etiquette – quiet, quick and discreet phone use that shows awareness of others and tries to be brief – it leads us to wonder what is likely to happen in the future? Most teenagers seem to think that acceptable mobile phone usage essentially boils down to 'common sense' and 'consideration for others', based on an 'if you wouldn't like it, you shouldn't do it' mentality. However, will this be enough to ensure these unwritten 'rules' of etiquette are followed, especially as people admit that they will behave in ways that they find unacceptable in others?<sup>3</sup>

## Future Communications Users

Observations of mobile phone usage show that even when people are using their phone in a way that disturbs others, and other passengers are visibly affected by it, no-one says anything. Indeed, many of the male teenagers spoke of being intimidated by large groups of other teenagers behaving in this way yet would take no action. This indicates that there is a danger that future generations will become increasingly less sensitive to those around them, a possible side-effect of a culture in which people seem to be no longer willing to comment on the behaviour of others, or ask them to be more considerate. The implication here is that as we are able to take more and more technology out and about with us, we may become increasingly selfish in our use of it. Those we spoke to said that listening to music on a mobile phone is acceptable if

done with headphones at a reasonable volume – 'you've got to have headphones! And not listen too loudly as it's annoying when you can hear the bass' – but the observed instances where no-one took action were on those occasions when the loudspeaker was at a high volume. When mobile television becomes more commonplace, will we see loud viewing, with little respect or consideration for others, become the norm on public transport?

## Mobile Phones Underground

The reaction to having mobile phone reception on the London Underground seems to be mixed. The benefits were clearly acknowledged – being able to communicate your whereabouts to others is of high importance when delayed underground. This also seems to be true empirically in terms of travelling in general; as compared to other European cities London has a larger number of phone calls in trains and stations, partly attributed to the higher prevalence of delays<sup>4</sup>. This ability to communicate was felt as a benefit in terms of safety, particularly among females – 'even if I do not use my phone to make a call, just knowing I can makes me feel less vulnerable'. In addition, teenagers feel mobile phone reception on the underground would give them more independence and freedom, as parents know they can contact them and so allow them to do more. However, most also feel it would be an irritation during busy times, with people talking and texting in the way they currently do on overground trains and buses. Generally speaking teenagers don't feel that this inconvenience outweighs the benefits of being constantly connected.

In terms of who would be most likely to make use of the availability of mobile phone signals underground, it was spontaneously thought by females to largely be the preserve of business people. This seemed to stem from the urgency of communication required – while people can wait to call their friends to catch up, or talk briefly to say when you will arrive, business conversations are assumed to be more urgent with the examples given of calling a secretary and discussions on the way to meetings. Male respondents, however, seem to think the profile of usage would remain the same. The concern of a less reliable reception suggests that people may shout to be heard, creating a greater degree of disturbance and so bursting more bubbles. They also felt that a captive public transport audience would increase the take-up and

popularity of services such as mobile TV, including watching movies on the go.

## Mobile Phones in the Air

As well as in the tube underground, plans are being prepared for mobile phone usage being allowed on aeroplanes. Reaction to this is mixed among teenagers.

Those we spoke to only seemed to consider mobile phone use in aeroplanes on long haul flights, as they talked of the nice in-flight environment: '... it's meant to be relaxing – people are trying to sleep, or read a book', and differences between economy and business class.

However, the no-frills budget airline experience seems to be more analogous to the other public transport scenarios outlined earlier. Although everyone has a seat, the planes tend to be packed. Seating is not allocated, so people travelling together are often separated. There is no entertainment, and, as the flights are shorter, the aeroplane is less comfortable. In this situation, it seems likely that people will use their mobile phones in the same way that they do on the train – to create a bubble, distancing themselves from the environment around them. In addition to this, it is likely that social consideration for others may be less on a budget airline than on a more luxurious one, given the shorter flight time, lower cost and general acceptance that it is not meant to be a particularly pleasant experience. As a result, people will be less concerned about breaking the unwritten 'rules' of mobile phone etiquette.

In contrast to taking the bus, tube and train the environment on long-haul aeroplane journeys is seen as far nicer – 'it's meant to be relaxing'. People are already used to a wide variety of entertainment on an aeroplane from the in-flight systems, reducing the need for mobile phone entertainment that people will use on the underground. The advantages of mobile phone usage on aeroplanes are in emergencies, as teenagers saw no other real reasons to make calls. With the perceived high cost of calling, again it was felt that only business people would regularly use the service.

So what of the etiquette 'rules' involved? The teenagers, assuming long-haul flights, all raised the issue that a great deal of time on aeroplanes is spent asleep. This means that noisy mobile phone usage will not just 'burst the bubble' but actually wake others up, and so it would be impolite and against the 'rules' to make or answer a phone call when someone is asleep next to

you. In addition, many felt there should be a separate area on a plane where people are able to make calls, perhaps by the toilets. However, this is unlikely to be realised given the high cost of space in the air. Others suggested that calls should not be allowed at all, but that texting could be allowed, provided it was done quietly and discreetly.

It remains to be seen if this picture of in-flight mobile phone usage will in fact materialise. We can hypothesise that the same trend will occur as has happened with mobile phone usage on buses, tubes and trains – increased penetration and usage over time – but it is not clear if this will be with less social awareness than currently. Due to factors such as prohibitive costs, there may actually be greater resistance to in-flight mobile phone usage than is displayed by the current generation of teenagers.

## Conclusions

Unwritten 'rules', in the form of an etiquette for mobile phone use on public transport, do currently exist. As we found from our research these are based around common courtesy for others and respecting personal space. Anything that disturbs this breaks the 'rules' and should be avoided. This includes intrusive and unnecessary phone calls, playing loud music or ring tones, and loud texting or gaming. We believe that this breach of etiquette breaks the 'bubbles' people create around themselves while travelling – encasing the comfort zone that they create in order to distance themselves from the environment in which they find themselves. However, even when these 'rules' are clearly broken, observation shows that no-one intervenes, and so, as mobile technology proliferates, it seems likely that usage will increase, despite breach of etiquette. When mobile phones can be used underground, and in the skies above us, what is considered acceptable etiquette today is likely to change. Most can imagine using their phone underground, but initially in-flight usage is assumed to be largely for business purposes. As the penetration of mobile phone technology increases though, usage in the air is likely to increase too, in line with mobile phone usage in general. The impact this will have on behaviour towards others in terms of etiquette is not yet clear and warrants further research.

## Biographies



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