

# Mobile Lives: The Quotidian Use of Mobile Phone

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## The Perspective

- What a technological device can do and what it signifies depend less on the technology itself.
- Crucial three things: User, social setting, and modes in which the device is at play
- Quotidian – Knowing the already known!

মামুলি, হরহামেশা (paramount sociological importance)

# Knowledge Stock



- Individual to collective ownership, use (De Silva et al 2011); “Wit is the diagram of innovative action” (Virno 2011); New devices, manners, anxieties, “mobile mania” (Srivastava 2005)
- Technical codes correspond with social codes; subordinate groups often challenge the technical codes (Feenberg 1991, 2005); lay public as catalyst of new demand and innovation (Bell 2006)
- Teens in Dhaka independently perform innovative actions using smartphone (Mozumder 2019)
- Young users of mobile phone in Bangladesh learn new things from the virtual world, educate themselves
- Girl users, especially, feel empowered (Huq 2021); non-owning users strategically employ device to save money and find employment



## The Queries

This study examines how the disadvantaged segments of the population—those with little or no formal educational qualification, those from poor socio-economic background—use mobile phone in their everyday life in Bangladesh.

Un(der)educated youth

- Little to no formal education
- 15-35 yrs old

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# Methodology (1)

## Qualitative Approach

Three main phases of data collection

1. Exploratory interview
2. In-depth interview
3. Follow-up interview

Record - Transcribe - Translate

About 800 pages of transcripts of selected interviews

## Methodology (2)

240 exploratory interviews from 8 administrative divisions; 64 from Dhaka

18 of them without any formal education, 83 grade 1 to five, 133 grade six to nine, and 6 unknown

130 female users - to ensure proper representation

In-depth interview of **ONLY** the users of analytical interest

At least two rounds of follow-up

Evidence - browsing history, profile, activity log, photo

# Limitations and Prospects

- Addiction (separate paper)
- Deviance, perhaps crime (too risky)
- Social isolation or social apathy (highly unlikely)
- Emerging norms/values, dispositions
- Familial relations (better to stay home with a phone than affiliate with gangs or addicts)

# Implications

- Learning for necessity and wit/fun
- Beyond any institutional arrangements
- Often unrecognized and underappreciated
- Consistent with the previous study findings on the SP use among elite, educated teens - unorthodox, extra-institutional
- মাছি নয় - মৌমাছি



# Findings

- Vital Skill: Learn, run business, (up)skill, entertain
- Communication: Transactions, networking, translation, norms and values
- Sociation: Identity, aesthetics, stress management, modesty, religiosity

## Vital Skill (1)



### Self-learning

#### ❖ Searching and Texting

V 2 T & T 2 V

“লিখে করতে পারিনে কিন্তু ভয়েস আছে  
ওখানে চেপে বললে পরেই সব চলে  
আসে।”

“Can’t do it by writing but there is  
voice [option]. Just press that that  
and everything pops up.” -- 34 year-  
old man, grade 8, businessman, Savar



## Vital Skill (2)



“whatever I can not write, I just say it. [I] say it and it shows up [in writing]. For example, I say a new Bangla song, it just shows up in writing, new Bangla song. Just need to say any singer, any singer’s name and just that.” [ibid]

- Reading and writing with prompts
- Pictorial use of language

“Even if I write one or half of a word, [the whole word] pops up. Also did that system [with the help of] a friend.” -- 24 year-old barber, Pabna



## Vital Skill (3)

“Watch YouTube to learn tailoring. Make Kameez, salwar, learned little bit.”  
-- 20 year-old married woman, Pabna, homemaker

- Learned mostly by themselves, often with the initial help from friends and relatives. Male partners also cooperated.
- Mostly self-help endeavor
- Up-skill, re-skill
- Customization – Novel design from online
- Take picture or sample and make a copy

Create opportunities, provide much needed support, and help realize the untapped potentials—otherwise unrecognized, even beyond imagination.

## Vital Skill (4)

- New Apps : Snaptube, Snapchat, Hotstar, VidMate, InShot, Snap Camera, Lightroom, Bigo Live, Messenger, Likee, imo, Facebook, Telegram
  - Dictionary use – app
  - Good looking handwriting - YouTube
  - Video making – TikTok, Likee, CapCut (video editing)
  - Engagement ring over video call (no formal education, 45 yrs, domestic help in Barishal
  - Also use Snapchat for picture and Vidmate for listening to Waj and music), learned tailoring and cutting, news update on YouTube
- Select, install, and update apps
- Open accounts online - social media, email
  - Privacy - IMO is no good; WhatsApp is great – can't hack an ID

## Vital Skill (5)

- Learn new language – English, Tamil, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu,
- Watch Pakistani drama, Bengali, Madrasi film; listen to Ghazal
- Number and calculation (calculator app)
- Mechanic (i-Phone, light, fan, LED switch)
- Tailoring, culinary skill (Murir cutlet)
- Customer service (WhatsApp - price info)

“Now, I do a lot of things for my job. I need to share a design, when I design something, others need that. One calls me and asks, brother, do you have that design? Then, if I have that design, I share that via Telegram or imo or WhatsApp or when needed I exchange things with others.” — a 22-year-old CNG driver in Barishal

## Vital Skills (6)

bKash, Nagad, Rocket, MyCash accounts – children’s stipend, pay utility bill, insurance premium, purchase internet packages (MB), recharge, receive international remittances

Uncommon App – Lightroom, Light Motion App (animation), Picture Art, Bead 16 - Sholo Guti, Bead 12 – Apps, Tin Patti game

Pet birds for commercial use (e.g., Budgerigar bird on YouTube) – birds’ feed and disease

Learn dancing from YouTube (19-year old girl in Mymensingh, dance performer- member of a dance club), mason a 19-year-old male in Rangpur lip-synch (20-year-old male)

## Vital Skill (7)

- Seeking employment opportunities (overseas)
- Exchanging documents instantly
- Animation, Snapchat, CapCut, image and video editing (18 yrs, day labor, grade 5, Mymensingh)
- Learned to block the unwanted contents and contacts
- Profile lock, black list
- WTMP app (monitor use)
- Election campaign



## Vital Skill (conc.)

- The seemingly impossible becomes possible, at least temporarily
- Brought home the opportunities to provide for the self  
(small/temporary but significant)
- Uncharted territories, unknown allies, and novel subjectivation

# Communication (1)

- Networking (Transnational)

“সৌদিতে মোবাইল চালাতাম আমার সাথে যারা ছিল এখন ওদের সাথে কথা বলি কেউ শ্রীলঙ্কা, ইন্দোনেশিয়ায় ওখানেই পরিচয় কথা বলি। এখানে এসেও ওদের সাথে যোগাযোগ আছে।” -- 45 year-old lady, worked as domestic helper in the KSA

- (Accidental) friendship – KSA (D-82)

- Family beyond border

“আমার এক ভাই ওমান থাকে। ইমুতে কথা বলে মা-বাবার সাথে। ফোন বন্ধ থাকলে কথা না বললে আম্মা-আব্বা ভাইয়ের জন্য অনেক টেনশন করবে।

Q: আপনার যে ভাই ওমান থাকেন তিনি প্রতিদিন কল দেন? A: হুম। প্রতিদিন উনার ডিউটি শেষে কল দেন।”

- Customer Service, Business

“কাস্টমার আসলে কোনো জিনিসের আমার দরকার ওই দোকানে আছে মানে এই দোকানে নেই, সেইক্ষেত্রে ফোন দিয়া বলি যে এই জিনিসটা আমার লাগবে মানে নিয়ে আসার জন্যে। বা কোনো জিনিসের দাম আমার জানা নাই দেখা যাচ্ছে মহাজনকে ফোন দিয়ে শুনি।” – 23 year-old musical instrument mechanic, grade 2, Rangpur

## Communication (2)

- News – Tiktok, FB, BBC, YouTube (news channel- e.g., DBC, Al Jazeera)
- Notification from bank
- Learning religious rituals
- Norms-values (patriarchy) and Modesty
- “Bickering with him gives me pleasure” “unburdens me” [“ঝগড়া করলে হালকা লাগে”] - Therapeutic
- Transactions (social) - “collaboratively sense the market from mobile devices, enabling more informed financial decisions” -  
- Andrew Lippman et. al.

## Communication (conc.)

- Viral connections: Beyond physical mobility
- Wave-Cloud mediated sensibilities
- Screen sponsored motility: News, alert, outburst

## Sociation (1)

- Mode of conversation – frequent use of English words – recovery, draw, try, update, control, two-factor code, verification, Facebook and Instagram connected, latest, database, voice changer, option, search, technical terms, (6<sup>th</sup> grade only – cunning and curious)
- “Sociability it’s the art or play form of association, related to the content and purposes of association in the same way as art is related to reality” (Simmel 1949:254); sociation (Wiese and Paul Becker 1932).
- Netflix, Toffee, watch and upload videos on TikTok, Likee, Starmaker

## Sociation (2)

- Free Fire game (addiction, obsession, frantic anxiety, conflict)
- Star Jalsha, serials (with subscription), comedy
- Waj – Mizanur Rahman Azhari, Syed Mukarram Bari, Saidi, Chormonai; Sura, prayer

“আগে ঈদে এসএমএস করতাম। একটা প্রেম করতাম। বাটন ফোনের যে মজা ছিল। আমি ঈদের সময় ১২-১৩শ এসএম কিনছি। এখন আমি একটা মুভি দেখমু ইউটিউব দেখি। ওয়াজ নসিয়ত” -- 28 Y, male, Mobile Load Business, Gazipur

- Budgerigar birds – disease prevention, raising
- Collective ownership of phone
- Music – bhawaia, ghazal, relaxing music at bedtime

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## Sociation (conc.)

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Known unknowns reign - the familiar world also re-appears in unfamiliar ways

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Exoticization of pleasure including religiosity/spirituality

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Search for solace in seemingly strange, eccentric realms

# Mobile Life : Documentary

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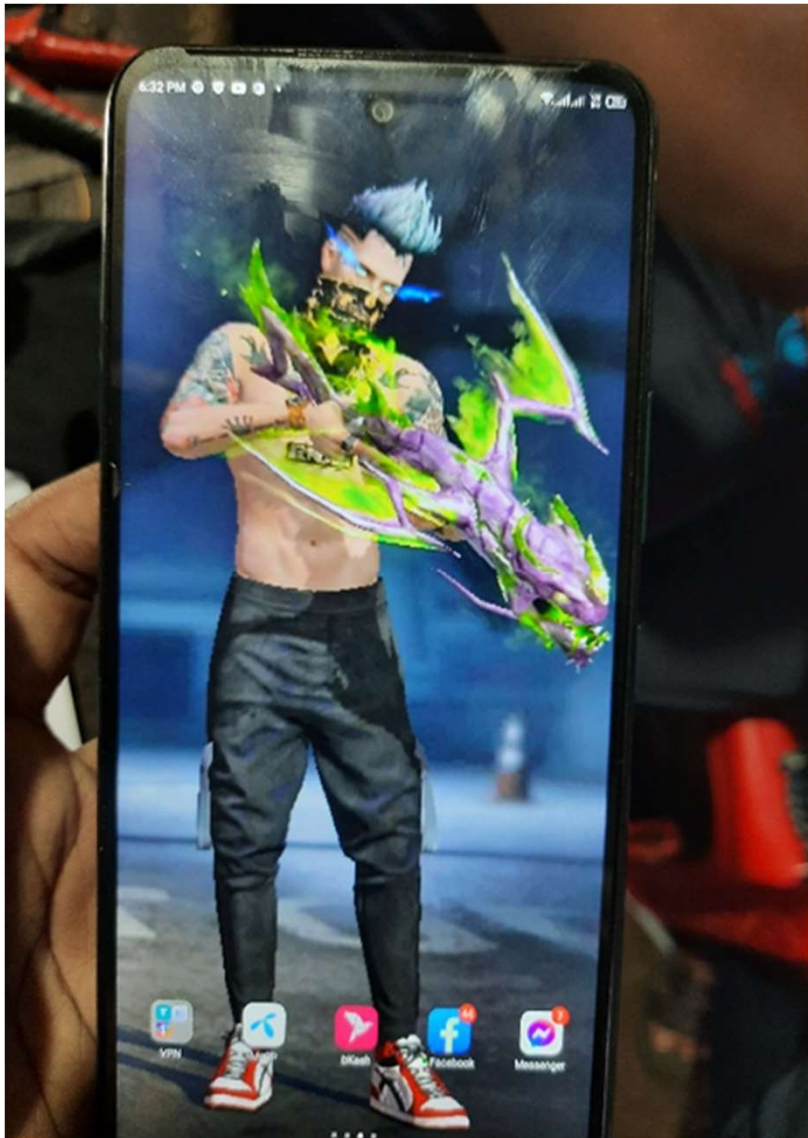
## Stretches the horizon

- Mobile makes bearable almost unbearable life
- Brought back friends deemed “lost”
- Turn toward the renewed importance of “absent presence” (Lisa Kleinman 2004)

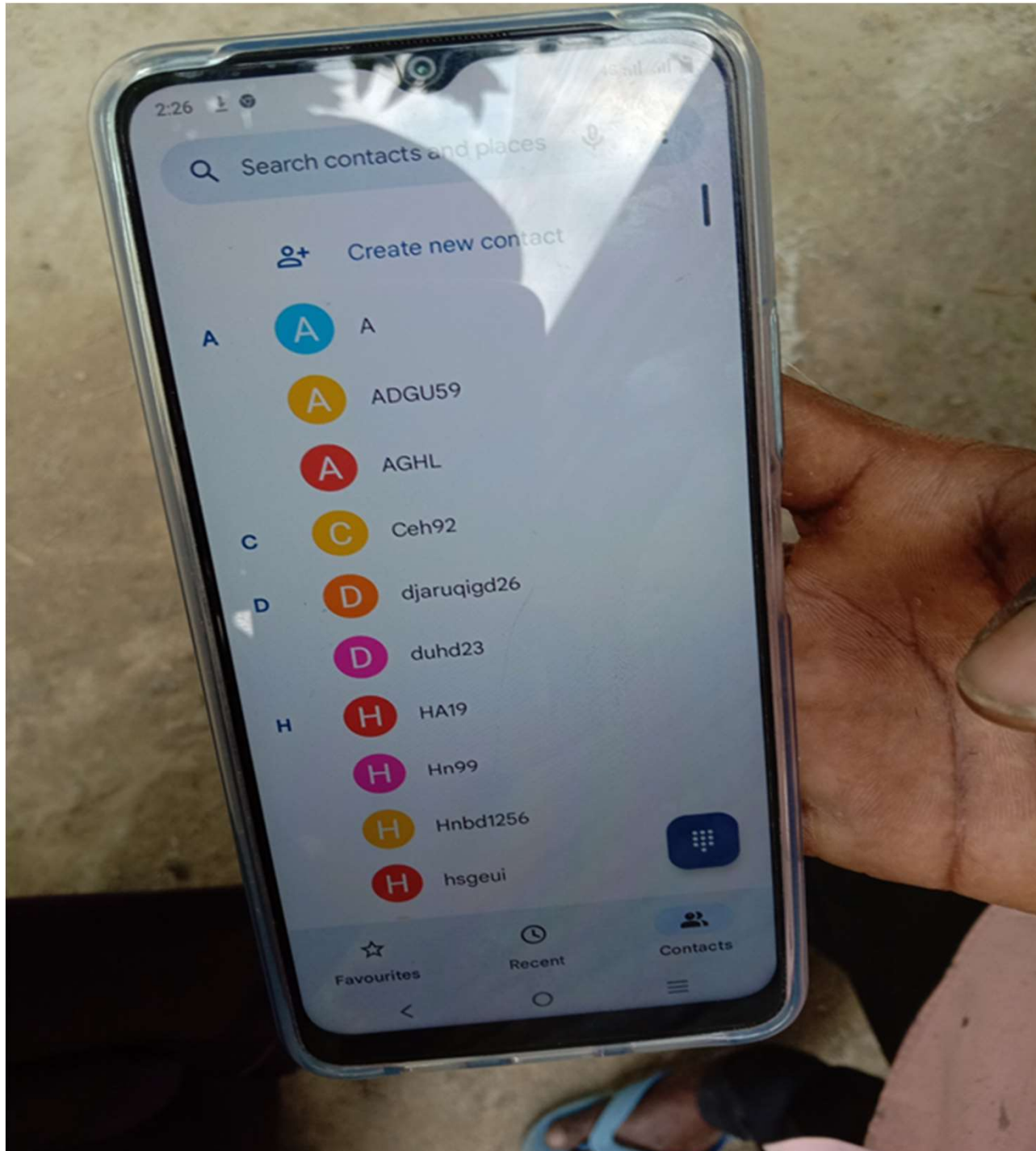
## Redefining the device

- Mobile phone takes a new meaning and significance: “কলিজা” – vital connection
- The beat of the heart
- The great educator
- The savior
- For the underprivileged groups the key is the device itself, whereas for the affluent it is mainly the acquaintance

# Creative Expression

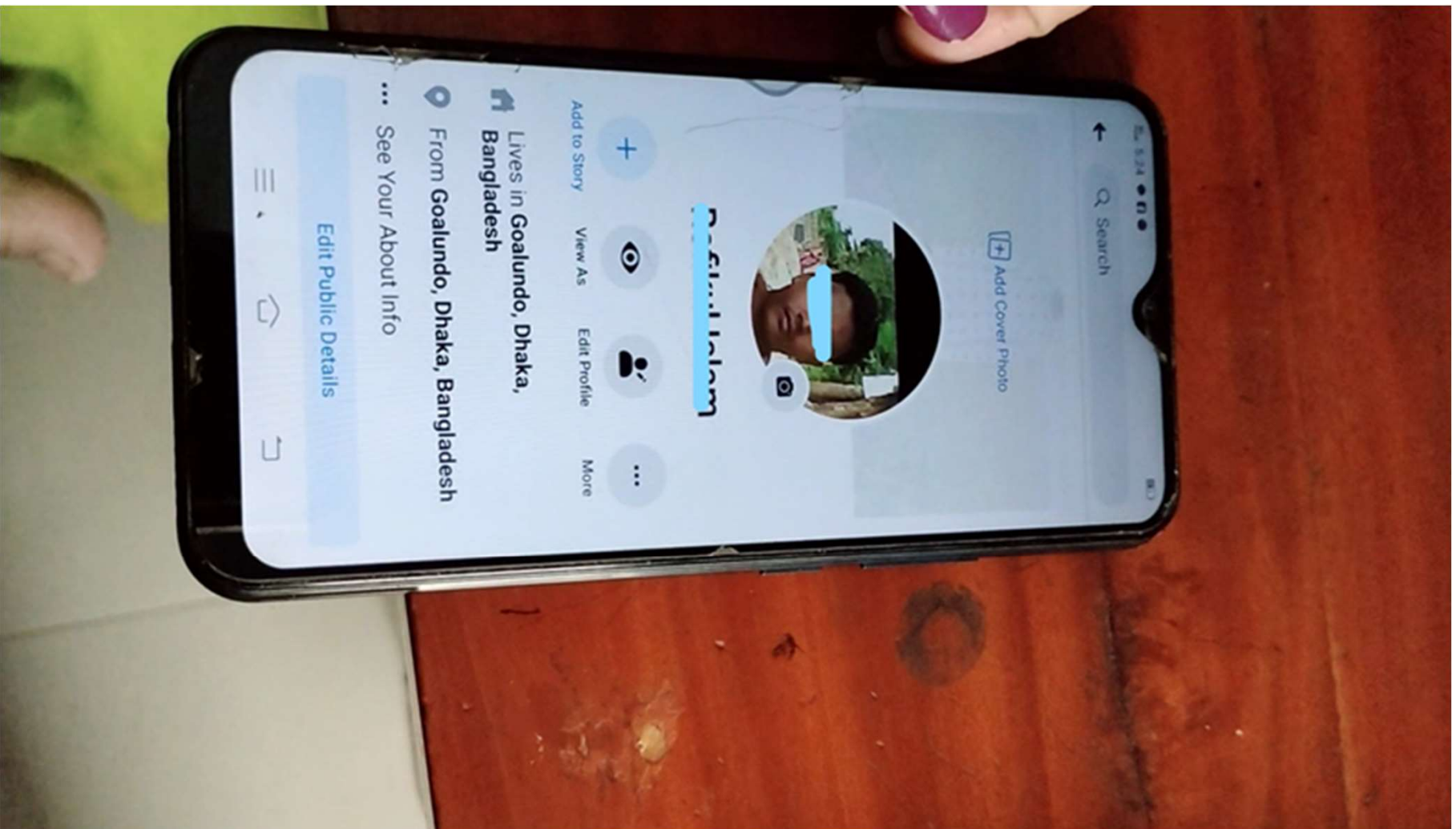


# Vernacular Innovation



Not just laymen consumers but innovators

# Collective Ownership



FB mother-son operate jointly

# Mobile *is* Life!

“Expanded people’s geographies” and help them  
“reclaim public spaces” (Pain et al. 2005:815)

Nascent yet unbound sociation, unlike “bounded solidarity” (Ling 2008); not “tele-cocoons” (Kobayashi & Boase 2014) but I call them some sort of  
“domestic alien”

The device that comes to life with the social actuation of human bodies turns out to be key in materializing the vitality of a social being.

# Mobile *is* Life!

Mobile as social machine (Wong and Ling 2011)

“mesh connections” are still central; but, nowadays, for those it’s vital. Mobile is life!

Invisible yet unavoidable connection. It “fills the empty moments of everyday life” Oksman and Turtiaine (2004: 327); “represents the community to which they belong” (ibid 336)

“Technology is society made durable” (Latour 1990); society is technology made invisible.

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# Invitation for Reflection!

Imagine spending a whole day without the phone! Would your fingertips tingle? What would they miss? Like someone missing the actual fingers?

“মোবাইল ছাড়া আপনি থাকতে পারবেন? চলতে পারবেন?”

Can you imagine life without a mobile phone?