5. A Preliminary Report on Support and Requests for Gifts via Mobile Phones:
A Case Study of Rural Tonga People in the Southern Province of Zambia

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Abstract

In Zambia, the penetration and prevalence of mobile phone use has dramatically increased in recent years. This study focused on the mobile phone as a rapidly spreading tool for communication, and sought to clarify how rural Tonga people utilize mobile phones to receive support.

The results revealed several key findings regarding support and requests for gifts via mobile phones among Tonga people: 1) People with insufficient funds for making calls on their mobile phones often encourage others to call them by "paging" others' phones. 2) In cases where a household member has no mobile phone, they can often access the mobile phone of another household. 3) Cash and food are often requested via mobile phones. 4) Most requests are made over a long distance. 5) Many requests occur between parents and children boarding elsewhere, and between villagers and urban relatives.

5.1. Introduction

The prevalence and penetration of mobile phone use in Africa has rapidly increased in recent years. Figure 5-1 shows growth in the number of subscribers and penetration of mobile phones in Africa over the 6-year period from 2002 to 2007 (Blycroft Limited. 2008). The number of mobile phone subscribers grew from 49.10 million in 2002 to 280.69 million in 2007. A similar tendency has been seen in Zambia, a country in southern Africa.
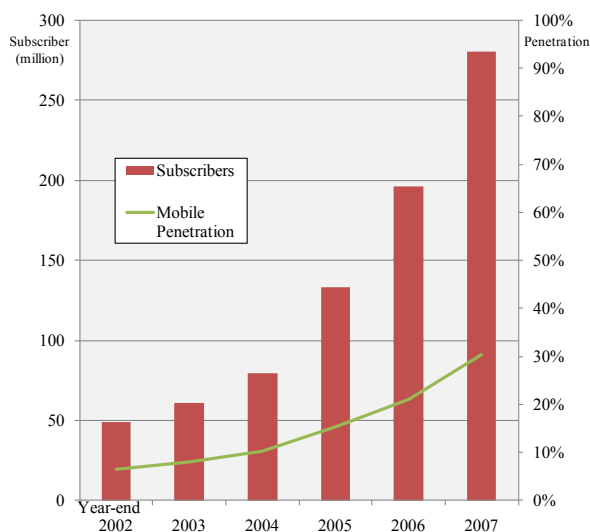

Figure 5-1 Mobile subscribers and penetration in Africa

Source: Blycroft Limited. (2008) *African Mobile Factbook 2008*, Blycroft Publishing, Craven Arms.

Figure 5-2. Tonga woman using a mobile phone

Ecological factors cause fluctuations in food production and income in rural villages in the semi-arid tropics (SAT). The Tonga people live in the SAT region in the Southern Province of Zambia. In addition to difficulties created by ecological factors, rural Tonga people have limited or no access to insurance markets or administrative social security.

If problems such as poor harvest occur in this context, they may be compensated via social networks, which function as a kind of insurance. The present study focused on the use of mobile phones as a rapidly spreading tool for communication, and sought to clarify how rural Tonga people utilize mobile phones to receive support. This preliminary report is part of an ongoing research project.

5.2. Research Outline

The research sites were located in areas of lower flat land ("Site A"), middle slope ("Site B"), and upper flat land ("Site C") in the Sinazongwe area, Southern Province, Zambia. Tonga people constitute the majority of residents at each of these sites.

Interviews were conducted through a questionnaire, administered on alternating weeks. The research period covered 168 days, from early August 2009 to early July 2010. The specific research topics of interest were the details of calls and short message service (SMS) messages, including the reason for contact, and information about the person contacted.

5.3. A Case Study of Household E at Site A

This section examines the mobile phone use of the householder of Household E (Householder E) at Site A, and discusses the features of cell phone use in the study area.

Over the entire study period, Householder E's mobile phone was utilized 355 times for calls, and eight times for SMS messages. Of these calls, 272 were received, while 83 were made from Householder E's phone. Of the SMS messages sent, seven of the messages were received from others, and only one was sent from Householder E's phone. Thus, Householder E's phone was predominantly used to receive calls and messages.

5.3.1. "Paging"

This section discusses the use of "paging" of mobile phones. Paging is a technique of mobile phone use, where a number is dialed but the phone is left to ring only once. In Zambia, most mobile phones are prepaid, meaning that it is not possible to make a call unless sufficient funds have been paid in advance. However, paging requires little phone credit, so can be used to alert another person that contact is desired. Paging thus allows a person with insufficient funds to encourage another phone user to call them.

Figure 5-3 shows the frequency of Householder E's phone calls involving conversations, in comparison with the number of calls used for paging. The monthly ratio of paging relative to calls ranged from 14.3-28.1% across months. A total of 281 calls involving conversations and 74 paging requests were made. Thus, the ratio of paging was 20.8% over the entire study period.
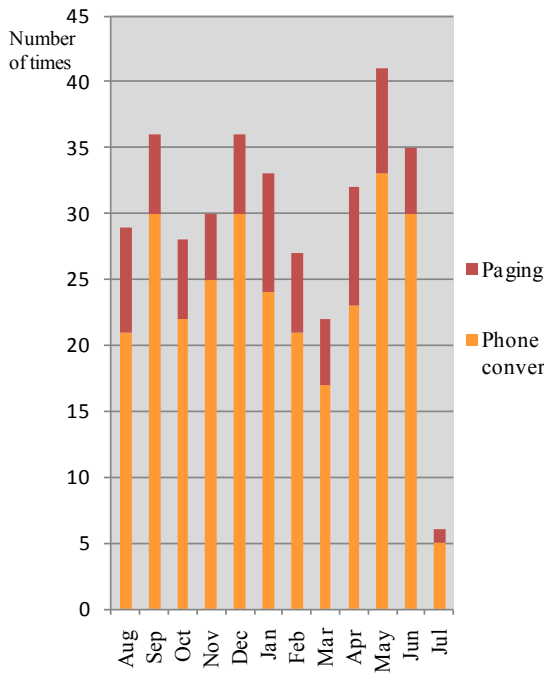
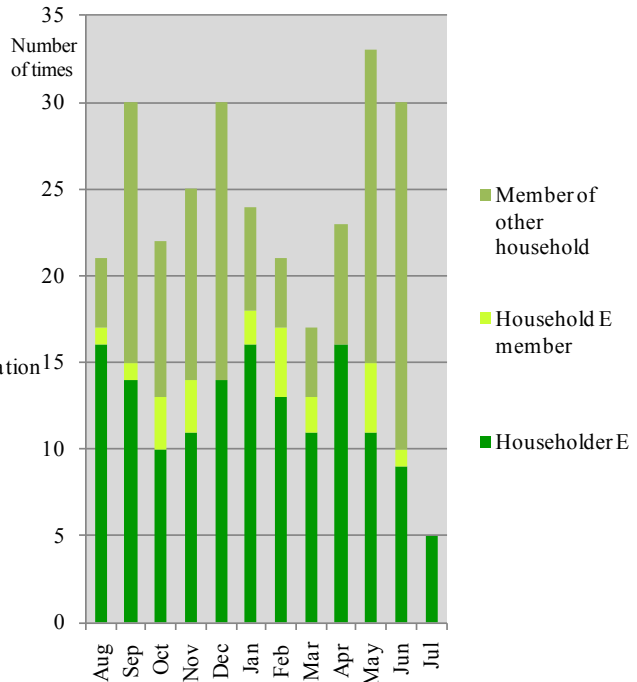Figure 5-3. Breakdown of phone calls

Figure 5-4. Breakdown of attribution for user of Householder E's phone conversations

5.3.2. Borrowing mobile phones

This section discusses the practice of borrowing mobile phones. Figure 5-4 shows the number phone conversations held by Householder E, Household E members and people who were not members of Household E, using Householder E's phone. Monthly ratios varied widely. Of 281 phone conversations, 146 were held by Householder E, 21 by other members of Household E, and 114 by people who were not members of Household E. The ratio of use by people who were not Household E members relative to all phone users was 40.5%. Thus, in cases where household members have no mobile phone, they are commonly able to access mobile phones of other households.

5.3.3. Requests for gifts via mobile phones

This section discusses the practice of requesting gifts using mobile phones. Figure 5-5 shows the frequency of phone conversations that were made to request a gift. Requested gifts commonly consisted of cash, food and other items. These requests were divided into cases where the user of Householder E's phone made the request, and cases where a gift was requested from them. The total frequency of phone conversations involving a request was 20 of 281. Requests for cash were the most common, occurring 14 times (70% of requests).
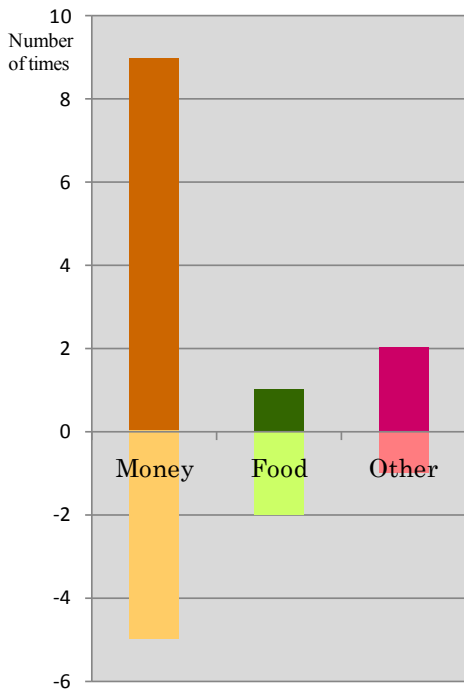
Figure 5-5. Types of gift items requested
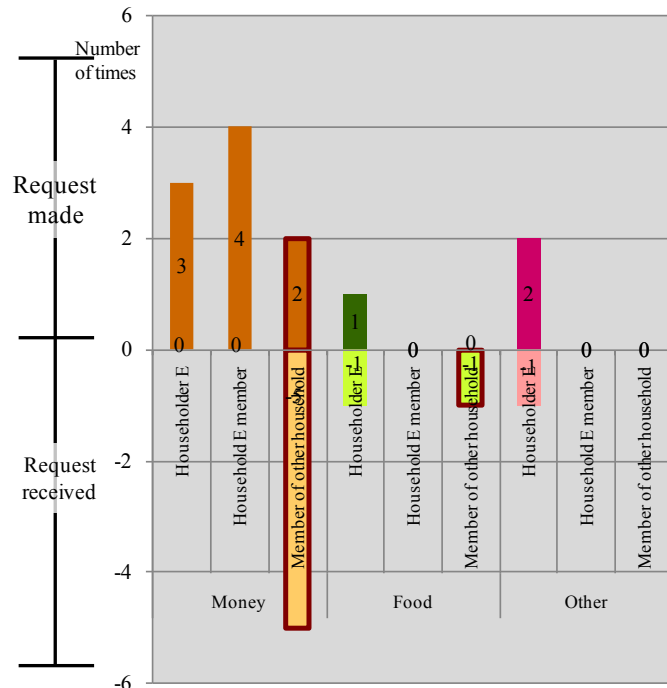via Householder E's mobile phone

Figure 5-6. Breakdown of requests made and received
by users of Householder E's mobile phone

Figure 5-6 shows a breakdown of for the requests made and received by users of Householder E's mobile phone. Requests for gifts occurred eight times in conversations involving Householder E, four times in conversations of other Household E members and eight times in conversations of people who were not members of Household E. Thus, 40% of requests involved phone users that were not Household E members, and seven of these were requests for cash.

Figure 5-7 shows the spatial distribution of people who made requests via Householder E's mobile phone. The left section of the figure shows a neighborhood map around Household E, while the right section shows a large-scale map. These maps indicate that most requests were made over long distances.

Finally, the details of distant requests were analyzed. In all cases where something was requested of the person using Householder E's phone, an item was requested from parents living within the study area by children who were boarding elsewhere. In cases where requests were made by the person using Householder E's phone, an item was requested of an urban relative by a person living in the study site. These requests usually involved close relatives such as brothers, sisters, parents and children.
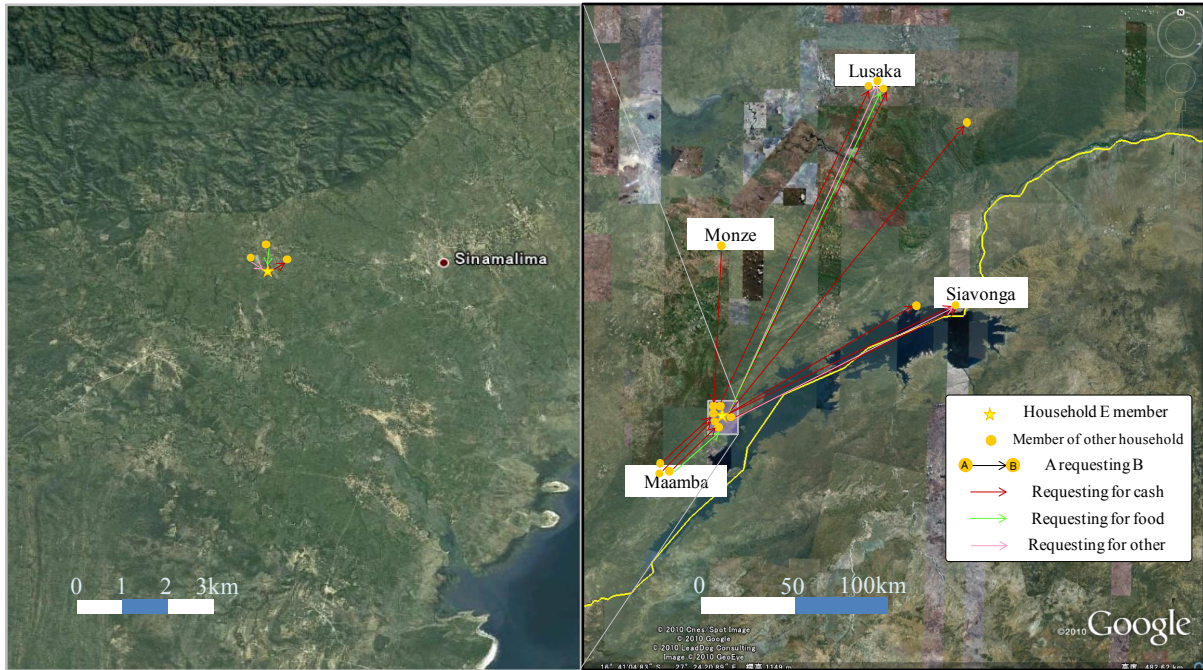
Figure 5-7. Spatial distribution of people requesting and being requested gifts via Householder E's mobile phone

5.4. Key Findings

The current study revealed several key findings regarding support and requests for gifts via mobile phones among Tonga people:

1) People with insufficient mobile phone funds can encourage others to call them using the paging technique.

2) In cases where household members have no mobile phone, they can often access the mobile phone of another household.

3) Cash and food are often requested via mobile phones.

4) Most requests occur over a long distance.

5) Many requests are made between children boarding elsewhere and their parents in the village, and between villagers and urban relatives.

Reference

Blycroft Limited. 2008. African Mobile Factbook 2008. Blycroft Publishing. Craven Arms.