Design of multimode multiband antennas for MIMO terminals using characteristic mode analysis

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Published in:
IEEE International Symposium on Antennas and Propagation, 2014

DOI:
10.1109/APS.2014.6905040

2014

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version (aka post-print)

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

Total number of authors:
2

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Abstract—Characteristic mode analysis provides unparalleled insights into designing high performance multiple-input multiple-output (MIMO) terminal antennas at frequencies where the antenna elements are constrained to be electrically small. Conventionally, an electrically small single-antenna utilizes the fundamental characteristic mode of the terminal chassis to obtain sufficient bandwidth while maintaining high radiation efficiency. However, modern MIMO terminals require two or more antennas per frequency band, and they tend to excite the same fundamental chassis mode, resulting in severe coupling, correlation, and poor overall system performance. Recently, characteristic mode analysis of the chassis is proposed to design highly efficient multimode multiband MIMO antennas with significant bandwidth using electrically small feed elements. Two distinct and excitable characteristic modes were created at frequencies above and below 1 GHz, for a typical smartphone’s form factor. This paper provides an overview of the method and highlights its versatility for practical implementation in standard plastic cased smartphones as well as in the popular metal-bezeled smartphones, with only minor modifications to the chassis.

I. INTRODUCTION

To realize high data rates with multiple-input multiple-output (MIMO) technology, Long Term Evolution (LTE) mandates the implementation of two or more antennas in mobile terminals per operating frequency band. Moreover, optimal MIMO performance requires the multi-antennas to be highly efficient and uncorrelated with one another.

The Theory of Characteristic Modes (TCM) [1] presents unique insights into designing highly efficient and uncorrelated antennas on a single terminal chassis. Each individual characteristic mode as extracted from this theory can be defined as an independent uncorrelated antenna radiation mode. If any given mode has a low enough characteristic eigenvalue, a feed can be designed to excite that particular antenna mode on the given structure [2]. Often an electrically compact structure (e.g., a smartphone at LTE700) will not support the two resonant characteristic modes at frequencies above and below 1 GHz. The standard unmodified flat chassis only supports one resonant characteristic mode below 1 GHz, as can be seen in Fig. 1. In an effort to attain more than one resonant mode below 1 GHz, the structure must be modified. There are many ways to change a flat chassis which will result in different CMs. However, by analyzing the original characteristic currents, and near-fields, antenna matching techniques can be used to modify the chassis and increase the resonance of non-resonant modes. The chassis only supports two modes with a characteristic eigenvalue between ±15 below 1 GHz. \( \lambda_1 \) is the fundamental mode with dipole-like currents along the length of the chassis, \( \lambda_2 \) supports currents resembling those of a short, fat dipole along the width of the chassis. Based on standard antenna design techniques, it is reasonable to load the longer ends of the chassis with strips of metal to increase the capacitance of the \( \lambda_2 \) current distribution and thus bring this mode into resonance. The metal strips reduced the characteristic eigenvalue of the non-resonant dipole-like currents running along the width of the chassis. This minor modification changed the CMs of the structure to support the two resonant modes \( \lambda_1 \) and \( \lambda_2 \). The modified \( \lambda_1 \) and \( \lambda_2 \) were fed using a standard capacitive coupling element along the top end of the chassis and a direct current feed attached to one of the two capacitive loading strips, respectively (see Fig. 2(a)).
To create multiband operation using the low frequency excitation points, the currents around the low frequency feeds were correlated with the CMs at higher frequencies. The currents around Port 2 were highly correlated to a CM which was resonant near 1.6 GHz. By reducing the length of one section of the capacitive loading strips, the correlated CM shifted from 1.6 GHz to the desired second resonance at 1.85 GHz. This modification did not impact the low frequency mode of operation. Through the addition of the shortened capacitive loading strips, the new structure supports two uncorrelated excitable antennas covering LTE Bands 5, 6, and 19 below 1 GHz as well as LTE Band 2 above 1 GHz with an ECC of less than 0.1 and total efficiencies of greater than -2dB. The final design of this antenna is shown in Fig. 2(a).

When correlating the low frequency feeds with the currents and near-fields at higher frequencies, it was found that the two feeds were highly correlated and could not independently excite the structure without significant correlation while maintaining the feed placement required for the low frequency excitations. In order to enable dual-band operation in this structure, an additional characteristic mode was created through further chassis modification. It should be possible to independently feed this new characteristic mode by only one of the two low frequency feeds. This was achieved through the addition of a slot in the ground plane that could be excited through near-field coupling from the current feed of $\lambda_2$ Modified. With slight modifications to the width and the height offset of this feed, substantial near field coupling around the feed can be produced in the direction of the ground plane at 1.85 GHz. This coupling is capable of exciting a slot type antenna. The addition of a slot allowed for two independent modes to be fed, covering LTE Bands 5, 6, and 19 as well as LTE Band 2. The final structure can be seen in Fig. 2(b).

In [1], a bezeled mobile terminal chassis of the same dimensions and using the same design procedure as in [2] was developed. However, the design procedure did not appear to reduce the characteristic eigenvalue of any mode, but rather revealed it was possible to shift the frequency response of two different modes that were resonant at different frequencies. This created two excitable chassis modes that were resonant near the same frequency, i.e., $\lambda_2$ Modified and $\lambda_3$ Modified, as seen in Fig. 3. This was done by adjusting the gap and offset of the PCB from the bezel thus disrupting the characteristic currents around the bezel that were produce by a $\lambda_3$ feed in the unmodified chassis. $\lambda_2$ Modified produced a modal current distribution resembling that of a resonant loop antenna and $\lambda_3$ Modified produced a current distribution resembling that of a flat dipole antenna. As the gap is varied, $\lambda_2$ becomes resonant at higher frequencies whereas $\lambda_3$ becomes resonant at lower frequencies. $\lambda_2$ Modified was feed with a direct current feed between the bezel and the main PCB while $\lambda_3$ Modified was fed using a capacitive feed between the bezel and the PCB.

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