Making Sense of the Technological Onslaught:
Observations on the Mobile Telephone in the Age of Constant Adaptation

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Synopsis

This thesis examines the mobile telephone and its role in everyday life from a consumer perspective. The aim is to examine the dynamics of its proliferation and adoption, discuss whether we as consumers are free to relate to mobile telephones according to our own inclination, and finally suggest our potential to influence the development of mobile telephone technology. I have adopted an Interdisciplinary approach, based on the principles of STS (Science and Technology in Society) studies. Using the "circuit of culture" approach from cultural studies as main framework, concepts from sociology, ethnography, media studies etc. are included in a conceptual toolbox.

In the analysis, mainstream images and themes from mobile telephone marketing discourses are critically interpreted through discourse analysis, and then compared to real life experiences of consumers, based on qualitative interviews and similar research findings. The discussion focuses on the dual nature of the mobile as technical artefact and signifier of values and identity with emphasis on the interaction in the field between consumers and production forces. The thesis seeks to reveal the diversity and complexity within this interaction, and the open-ended nature of the development, acknowledging the importance of individual interpretation, context and other non-material factors.

Keywords:

Mobile telephone, technology, mobiles, mobile telephone technology, circuit of culture, expressive equipment, lifestyling, consumption, representation, identity, user de-sign, cultural frame, negotiation, social shaping, flexible interpretation, user configuration.

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Chapter 1

Introduction, objectives and approach

"Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius -- and a lot of courage -- to move in the opposite direction."

Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

1.1   Background, competence and motivation

Over the past decade, the mobile telephone has developed from a curiosity in the hands of the few to a ubiquitous device owned by practically everyone, permeating the social and professional fabric of our society[1]. This explosive diffusion has undoubtedly changed our lives and the way we communicate with each other, along with the parameters of professional performance and concepts of distance and time. The mobile phone has come to be associated with trends, success and modernity, and is rapidly becoming the world's most widespread personal technology.

As a symbol of modernity, individuality, mobility and the elimination of time and space it is both loved and hated. Utopians see it as the ideal device facilitating the ancient ideal of unlimited communication, while pessimists claim it will corrupt the quality of human interaction and increase our dependency on machines. Nevertheless the mobile phone is a sign of our times and a dominating part of our social landscapes. As a personal communications device, the mobile phone is most probably here to stay, and considering the steady integration of other ICTs (Information and Communications Technology) and functions into the mobile

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[1] [1] This thesis focuses on the societies of Northern and Western Europe.

platform it is highly likely that its importance will continue to grow. Its presence already affects virtually all of us somehow: Whether we own a mobile phone, consider acquiring one, or decide to manage without, it is embedded in our physical, social and professional environment to such an extent that it is impossible *not* to relate to it. But how does it influence our lives, and why? Is the current development good or bad? Are we in control of events or are we at the mercy of the mobile telephone market? These are increasingly relevant issues that concern us all, yet they are sparingly addressed so far. Furthermore, the onset of mobile phone communication has brought unprecedented new challenges and situations that require a whole new approach to the concept of communication. Therefore it is important to take a closer look at what is happening, why and how we adopt the mobile the way we do.

My primary background is anthropology, and I have always been interested in social mechanisms that affect the way people relate to each other. Also, I regard my academic strengths to lie within my analytical abilities, and my understanding of how people behave and what their motivations are. Therefore it is natural for me to place people and their attitudes in the focus of research. Likewise I am very interested in technological advance and the expanded notion of technologies as socially and culturally embedded, and formed by choices. I have chosen to focus on the mobile phone because it is in many ways an embodiment of all these interests: It is both a personal technology in rapid development and an increasingly widespread means of interaction, which is assuming an integrated role in our modern culture.

For purposes of variation, I will sometimes refer to the mobile telephone as mobile phone, or simply the *mobile*. Please note that expressions like *mobile behaviour* or *mobile development* in this context are strictly related to aspects of the mobile telephone. Furthermore, it will be approached as an item of consumption, since its function requires electricity and caller credits generating constant expenses, and also because mobiles generally

have short life-spans that prompt a high turnover in a use-and-throw cycle. Therefore I will sometimes refer to users and non-users alike as consumers, be they actual or potential.

1.2 Main research question

The development of mobile telephone technology is characterised by an ever-accelerating pace, as new models and functions are introduced faster and faster, while old phones become obsolete in shorter amounts of time. Through media and advertising discourses, the mobile telephone is presented as an inherently benign device that facilitates personal freedom, self-realization and the freedom to communicate with anyone, anywhere, with a clear emphasis on the need to acquire the latest technology. On the other hand, everyday experience indicates the presence of confusion, challenges, dislocation and general downsides to the mobile technology. Despite the alleged benefits of mobile telephones, not everyone is equally suited to handle this state of constant dynamic and change, and indeed not everyone *wants* to. Thus, the promised potential of the latest technology is not equally available or desirable to all, leading to my main research question:

"**What are the consumers' abilities to reconfigure the meanings and practices associated with the mobile telephone according to their own inclinations, and how can they influence its technological development?"**

During the coursework, we have been introduced to the useful trick of establishing an "enemy" concerning the research; ideas and concepts we wish to argue against, or at least challenge. For my part, this enemy is comprised of the following:

- You are absolutely free to choose your mobile lifestyle
- The mobile telephone is an a-political & neutral device

- It is designed to suit *your* needs

- Having one is a must for self-realization and social success

- The mobile telephone improves the way we communicate, and brings us closer

These statements represent what I would call a one-sided and non-critical view of mobile technology, bordering on utopian attitudes. Nevertheless, I believe they are elements of a prominent contemporary discourse mainly supported by mobile manufacturers, marketers and currents in the general media that work to convince us of the necessity of the latest mobile technology. This in turn is part of an even larger discourse: The unconditional belief in technological progress, and that something new equals something better.

Using mobile telephone behaviour among students as a starting point, I would like to show a more complex picture; that individual freedom and benign effects are not something given with the availability of the latest mobile telephone technology. Rather, this is contingent on several factors, many of which are culturally and socially grounded. Thus I wish to show that the mobile telephone affects people differently, and that the appropriation process of the mobile telephone technology is not driven by necessity alone, but also factors like taste, personality, identity-communication and social pressures. Furthermore, mobile telephone technology does not just provide advantages to people; it places demands on them as well.

To approach our relationship to mobile telephone technology, we must adopt a critical view of the way it is normally perceived. STS (Science and Technology in Society) theory offers some potent angles in this respect. One of its cornerstones is the idea that the concept of technology encompasses more than just the artefacts themselves; its significance exceeds the physical nature of technical functions. Nor can the properties of technology be reduced to simple functions serving given purposes. Such a view of technology is referred to as *instrumentalism* (Shields 1997, p.190), where technology is strictly seen as the physical

means to achieve a given end, otherwise independent from the processes of the activity in question (ibid.).

Applied to the mobile phone, an instrumentalist view would imply that it is simply a tool by which to reach the end of establishing personal communication. The qualitative aspects of the communication itself would be governed by separate social and contextual factors to be found *outside* the technology. Once it has served its purpose, the mobile phone would have no impact on the nature of the communication beyond technical factors such as battery performance and network coverage. Accordingly, the qualities of the mobile phone are valued in purely technical terms, independent from context.

These are recurrent themes in what Bijker refers to as the "standard view of technology" (2001, p.21). He laments the traditional tendency to view technology as a separate, autonomous and value-free force in society, developing independently from human interaction and culture. Furthermore, understanding technology is seen as belonging to the realm of experts such as engineers and scientists, who view technology in terms of objective and quantifiable facts (Bijker 2001; Winner 1986). Shortcomings in existing technology are thought to be resolved when better technologies are invented. The truth is already out there, so to speak, waiting to be discovered and applied in terms of new technologies that will only be better, faster and more able. Accordingly, technological change is seen as driving social change (Wyatt 1998). Consequently the belief in technical progress as the only way to improve our quality of life has taken a firm hold in the 20th century (Winner 1986), and as I will demonstrate later, it is very much alive in the mainstream attitudes surrounding the mobile phone.

This perspective of "technological determinism" (Bijker 2001; Shields 1997; Wyatt 1998) presupposes that the quality of a technological artefact mirrors the level of scientific advance, and that the technological development can be accurately predicted, since it unfolds

independently from social, cultural and other non-material factors (Shields 1997). This would suggest a fully predictable impact of the mobile phone on society, since technology drives social change, and other aspects of society are irrelevant to this process. In other words, all we can do as consumers is to lean back and enjoy the increasing benefits of the mobile technology.

Another pervasive current in our society is that of reductionism or value-neutrality (Tiles & Oberdiek 1995; Wyatt 1998), the idea that technologies are nothing but assembled materials and that use alone determines its potential. In many ways it opposes determinism concerning the concepts of choice and direction, yet the two perspectives exist hand in hand within mobile telephone discourses. As we shall see below, the notion that mobiles enable the freedom to communicate wherever and whenever you want regardless of context is one of its major selling points. Reductionism also warrants the argument that negative effects of mobile communication is strictly the fault of users, and unrelated to technological potential.

STS-theory and other recent multi-disciplinary approaches challenge both these views by bringing technology together with the wider social and cultural processes in society, and emphasising the importance of context. Mobile telephone technology is not just about artefacts and physical infrastructure, it also includes the skills and education required to operate it, and the value-systems in which it is embedded (Tiles & Oberdiek 1995; de Wilde 2000, Wyatt 1998). Accordingly, the uptake and diffusion of mobile telephones are not uniform, rather contingent on restrictions and incentives present in the social context (Woolgar 2002). Therefore, failure to acknowledge the symbolic and cultural qualities of mobile telephone technology and its interconnectedness with other aspects of society excludes some core dynamics of technological development, especially human interaction. Calculating distribution, market shares, frequency of use etc. is interesting in its own right, but of limited value in understanding the attitudes, values and meanings shared or contested among mobile

users, and how these emerge and develop (du Gay et al. 1997). Nor can it explain the popularity of technically inferior mobile phones and the apparent diversity and changeability of attitudes and practices among ordinary people.

Furthermore, the mobile interacts with its surroundings to produce a multitude of potential meanings and effects, heavily dependent on immediate context and individual perception (Shields 1997; du Gay et al. 1997). Put simply, there is not an *a priori* set of meanings determining a persons relationship to the mobile i.e. "I am generally enthusiastic about my phone", or "I think mobile phones are a bother", meanings vary with different contexts. If your car breaks down on the highway it can be a literal life-saver, but when you're having an intimate conversation with a potential sweetheart, incoming calls can have devastating effects.

Thus, what is needed is a largely qualitative conceptual framework that encompasses both the material and non-material aspects of technology, with a primary focus on the dynamics of human perception, behaviour and interaction, and how cultural meanings and symbolic qualities are attached to the mobile phone through these processes.

1.3 Thesis objectives

In order to approach the main research question(s), I have set a twofold objective for this thesis. As the first part of the analysis (chapter 3), I aim to establish the major images and themes surrounding the mobile phone as propagated by manufacturers and providers through marketing and advertisement in the general media, to provide an insight to the mainstream rhetoric of ideas, images and assumptions surrounding the mobile phone employed to influence consumer choice and behaviour. I will then critically examine the main themes and messages, in order to highlight the tactics and rhetoric employed, and point to possible inconsistencies and paradoxes that open for alternative interpretations.

In the second part of the analysis (chapter 4), I will compare the images and themes of the marketing discourse to real-life consumer experience, based on empirical data collected among international students at Maastricht University, and research findings from contemporary authors on mobile telephone behaviour and consumption patterns. Through this juxtaposition I wish to outline some of the major dynamics that inform consumer attitudes and their relationship to the mobile phone, as well as the possibilities, constraints, incentives and pressures that govern consumer freedom and choice regarding mobile telephone adoption and use. On this basis I will discuss the contingencies of consumer potential to choose how they wish to relate to the mobile phone; the relation between individuals, producers, regulation, social context and other relevant factors, and finally outline the possibility for consumers to influence the direction of mobile telephone development.

My aim is not to make predictions of future outcomes, but instead to contribute to an understanding of the mechanisms and relations that constitute the *premises* of mobile telephone behaviour and the *potential* of its development.

1.4   Chapter outline

The following chapter 2 will entail a review of the chosen literature for my analysis, covering academic origin, main features and how it is relevant to my research. It will also explain the composition of my conceptual approach, which consists of a larger theoretical structure originating from culture studies, expanded with interaction theory from sociology, and further concepts from STS-studies, media theory, and others. I will also clarify where the different concepts will be applied, and describe their relative strengths.

Chapter 3 will revolve around the language and themes of mobile phone marketing. Using observation and discourse analysis, I wish to examine the above mentioned "uncritical" tendencies by critically reviewing advertising samples, marketing strategies etc. to show how

positive images of freedom and success are built up, and the methods by which potential consumers are being addressed. For practical reasons, the collection of empirical data and the method of discourse analysis will be described in the beginning of the chapter. As mentioned, the purpose is also to illustrate paradoxes and inconsistencies that will provide the issues for the ensuing discussion.

Chapter 4 is the general discussion part of my thesis. Based on the conceptual approach outlined in chapter 2, I will discuss how mobile phones are interpreted and incorporated in everyday activities from a consumer perspective, testing the themes and assumptions from the mobile telephone establishment as illustrated in chapter 3, against arguments and findings made by contemporary researchers and my own empirical material from interviews of international students at Maastricht University. Beside the obvious practicality of this choice, I wanted to approach issues of direct importance to myself and young people within a similar category. I also believe the diversity of backgrounds, attitudes, personalities and circulating impulses among international students constitutes a good reflection of the general population, and hopefully applicable feedback that many can identify with.

The aim of the discussion is to suggest the core dynamics of mobile behaviour and consumption along with the role of representation, in order to indicate the potential of consumers to relate to the mobile and employ it according to their own will, and ultimately how ordinary people might influence the development of mobile phones. Since I aim to explore people's personal experiences and perceptions, I rely on qualitative interviews rather than surveys and statistics as empirical data for my main analysis. Details of the interview process are described initially in the chapter. I have applied ethnographical tools of observation and participation to my general environment throughout my research; the embodiment and articulation of research themes is all around in everyday situations, and

being a mobile user myself, I am in a sense part of the object of study. Thus my own experiences and observations partly inform the focus of the interviews. Finally I will sum up the general arguments of the thesis, give a critical evaluation of my own work and suggest some steps for further research in the thesis conclusion.

Chapter 2

A review of literature and concepts

Abstract:

In this chapter I will present the literature and concepts I have found useful to my research, explain their relevance to my topic(s) and how they supplement each other. As stated in the previous chapter, the purpose of my research is a) to examine to what extent we really have freedom of choice when relating to the mobile telephone, and b) outline our possibility to influence the development of mobile telephone technology through use.

These questions have been approached through a set of related issues:

- What are the main characteristics of mobile telephone communication and diffusion?

- How are meanings associated with mobile phones?

- How are norms of mobile conduct worked out?

Using contemporary mobile telephone research as a starting point, I have put together a suitable melange of theories and concepts to best approach these questions, drawing on a range of disciplines including STS-theory, ethnography, sociology, cultural studies and media theory[2]. This composition can be compared to a toolbox for fixing a car; it is not sufficient to rely on any single perspective or discipline, any more than you can repair a broken engine with wrench alone. The research question should determine the conceptual framework, not the other way around. Various concepts and definitions are not seen as "right" or "wrong", but more or less fruitful depending on the purpose.

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[2] Some of which are partially method-related. For practical reasons method-related literature is dealt with in chapters 3 and 4.

2.1   The current state of mobile telephone research

Authors evidently agree that research on mobile telephone behaviour and user experience is still in its infant stages, and that academic attention devoted to the mobile is surprisingly limited, given the immensity of its diffusion worldwide (Katz & Aakhus 2002; Plant 2002). ICTs research is often focussed on Internet and other technologies, yet mobile telephones differ from other ICTs in many respects. Their portability links their communication potential to persons rather than locations. While Internet terminals and fixed telephones are often shared by groups of people, the mobile telephone is primarily a *personal* communication device. Thus, understanding use and importance of mobile telephones require intimate knowledge concerning behaviour and interaction on an individual level.

Researchers on mobile telephone behaviour commonly employ ethnographic methods as a starting point. Using surveys, observation, interviews etc. they first establish the issues present "out there", and then decide on suitable concepts and explanatory frameworks, ranging over several different disciplines. As such, the dominating views concerning the mobile phone impact derive from opinions and experiences among ordinary people, or "folk frames" (Katz & Aakhus 2002, p. 7). So far, researchers have yet to agree upon a viable framework to explain the social impact of mobile telephones and the mechanisms of mobile behaviour.

Still, the work reviewed yields valuable clues concerning how to approach mobile behaviour. Expanding on classical terms of person to person communication, some authors argue that it should include the level of *symbolic interaction* (Ling 2001; Persson 2001; Basset et al.1997) as consumers apparently relate to the mobile telephone through the meanings, values and signifying practices that are negotiated, produced and reinforced through social encounters and mutual influence spheres between people. This places emphasis on user perception and experience, as well as the importance of situational context. Other

authors similarly emphasise the cultural aspects of mobile technology diffusion and adoption (Myerson 2001; Kotro & Pantzar, 2002): Mobile telephones are linked to communicating fashion and lifestyle, as signifiers of social belonging and identity (Katz & Aakhus 2002; Ling & Yttri 2002; Plant 2002). Therefore the nature of mobile phones transcends instrumental functions into the realm of aesthetics and self-awareness. The mobile is also related to perceptions of time and space, and psychological impacts of its tendency to blur traditional boundaries between private and public spheres of human communication (Ling 2001; Basset et al. 1997; Cooper et al. 2002).

However, mobile behaviour is not isolated from the technology itself, just as mobile technology development is determined by more than scientific progress. Although research on mobile behaviour largely contradicts any automatic correlation between technological potential and user reality, the aim of research should be to outline recurrences and consistencies that enable a conceptual approach capable of some level of prediction. Katz & Aakhus (2002) attempt to formulate something of a theory of mobile behaviour and development through their concept of "Apparatgeist". Due to place constraints I will only outline its major themes. The name implies an amalgamation of machine or apparatus and spirit, from German "Geist". It purports to combine material factors of mobile technology and human agency, presupposing that technology places constraints on possible behaviour, and that people act upon a limited rationality (ibid. p. 306). *Apparatgeist* indicates historical direction, in that it presumes identifiable general principles of reasoning underlying people's relation to technological advance.

The underlying principle is that our relation to PCTs (Personal Communication Technologies) is informed by the logic of "perpetual contact", or our directed efforts towards a communication ideal (ibid., p.307). This movement towards consistencies in the way people relate to mobile telephones is referred to as the "strain of the direction of change" (ibid., p.

303). It suggests the existence of universally similar premises, governing consumer behaviour and mobile development in a consistent fashion; not in the determinist sense that development is predictable, rather it means that the factors determining development are discernible. Admitting that technology is largely shaped by human behaviour, the authors argue that technologies assume a "life of their own" (ibid., p.316), interacting with users and environments within social contexts. Thereby mobile telephones raise similar paradoxes and challenges wherever they are diffused, suggesting key issues to investigate "the nature of social reality and change as adequately as possible" (ibid., p.312). This coincides with my aim to suggest points of departure for related research on mobile behaviour and adoption. Although I will draw upon the principles suggested, the *Apparatgeist*-approach still lacks a practical conceptual framework. For that I will apply more seasoned concepts from STS-studies, sociology, media- and cultural studies.

2.2   Negotiation in the field between production and consumption

The founding principles of my analysis derive from the framework of SCOT, or the *social construction of technology*. It has emerged as a reaction to shortcomings of technological determinist perspectives, and sees technological development as *socially shaped* through the negotiation between various actors in the form of relevant social groups (Bijker 2001; Shields 1997). Contrary to a unified perception of technological qualities as intrinsic to artefacts, social constructivist theory applies the concept of *interpretive flexibility* to demonstrate that given technologies have different meanings to different social groups, which attempt to influence the shaping of the technology by bringing their own perceptions to bear on the design process. Accordingly, technological development is seen as contingent of social and political power structures and the interaction between influential groups. Therefore, it is argued that technologies are not value-neutral, but infused with and shaped by the cultural,

political and social values dominant among the social actors that achieve influence on the design process (ibid.).

Social constructivist-approaches emphasise human interaction and view technological development as an open-ended and contingent process. They are essentially non-reductionist, with no *a-priori* constraints concerning factors governing human interaction. Furthermore, they focus on meanings attached to technologies, and the potential coexistence of conflicting perceptions. As a whole "they make it clear that technologies incorporate both material and nonmaterial, human and nonhuman elements simultaneously and seamlessly" (Shields 1997, p.198).

However, SCOT has been criticised for neglecting the role of users, focusing on design processes, and assuming relevant social groups as main actors (Shields 1997; Bingle & Weber 2002). The mobile is primarily an item of *personal* consumption, subject to individual tastes, attitudes and behaviour. Although peer-pressure, trends and other processes of socialization may conform users of certain categories, it is hard to discern groups with coherent attitudes that articulate specific interests and ambitions for mobile telephone development. Wyatt et al. (2002) argue against stereotyping ICT-users, and for non-use and technology resistance to be included when approaching user attitudes. Everyone relates to a technology somehow, since its diffusion shapes their physical environment. This point is crucial to understand the widespread impact of mobile telephone technology on society and popular concepts of communication. Therefore they suggest degrees of use along a continuum spanning from active resistance to total embracing of the technology: Individuals may embrace some aspects of a technology while rejecting others. Also, a user perspective must allow for *social and temporal change*, since attitudes towards technology may alter as people age, receive education, change their jobs, lifestyles, etc. (ibid.) This perspective counters

determinist images of consumers as predictable adopters of technology, and promotes

inclusion of actual users in descriptions of technological reality.

2.2.1   The circuit of culture

Drawing upon the broad tradition of *cultural studies*, du Gay et al. (1997) offer a framework

to examine mobile technologies as cultural artefacts. Contrary to sociological tendencies to

assume production as primary determinant for meanings and functions associated with a

product, they analyse its biography or development path through "the articulation of a number

of distinct processes whose interaction can and does lead to variable and contingent

outcomes" (ibid., p.3). The purpose is to demonstrate how a personal technology is given its

form, associations and functions through an interactive and culturally contingent process in

the field between manufacturers and consumers, or production and consumption. Using a

case-study of the Sony Walkman, the authors argue that the processes of attaching meaning to

a cultural artefact and situating it in our understanding of the world, or our "cultural

universe", should be examined through an integrated feedback-cycle termed the "circuit of

culture", or COC (Ibid.), consisting of 5 major cultural processes: Representation, Identity,

Production, Consumption and Regulation.
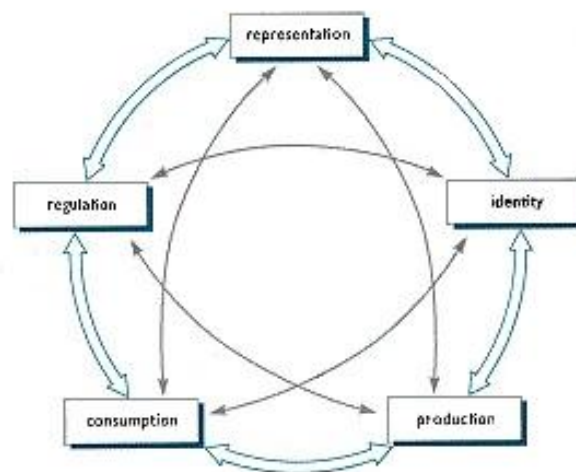
Figure 2.1: The circuit of culture

I find this model valuable to explore the potential role of consumers, how meanings are produced and attached to the mobile phone, and which mechanisms drive (or prevent) its diffusion and adoption. It adapts the holistic and qualitative-interpretative perspective necessary to understand the diversity and changeability of user attitudes, and expands the constructivist perspective of SCOT, encompassing both production and consumption processes. Also, it illuminates key processes of mobile behaviour similar to the *Apparatgeist* theory. The Walkman shares many important properties with the mobile phone: Both are portable and personal technologies, suggesting analytical emphasis on the individual rather than the social groups of SCOT. They share similar functions as extensions of the body, potentially serving to express and communicate personal identity and group membership (Weber 2002). Advertising targets individuals in both cases, employing similar associations of modernity, individualism, freedom and mobility. Both connect activities with public spaces, spurring similar controversies regarding disturbance, privacy invasion and communication barriers (du Gay et al. 1997; Ling 2001; Cooper et al. 2002).

Generally, the COC-model serves as an underlying platform for other concepts in my thesis. I will embellish on the concept of consumption of the mobile telephone using theories of social interaction by Goffman, while concepts regarding the political and value-oriented nature of technological artefacts by Winner, Tiles & Oberdiek will be added to my discussion of the appropriation/domestication process. Also, some *Apparatgeist* principles compatible with the COC-framework will be tied in throughout the analysis. Note that I will place emphasis on the consumer perspective in both parts of my analysis. Therefore processes of production and representation will be approached from the viewpoint of everyday consumer reality.

2.2.2 The cultural artefact

The COC-approach suggests that *culture* as a concept constitutes the way we make sense of things and order our experience of the world. Thus culture is intimately connected with the production and circulation of meaning in shared frameworks. This is not to say that meanings are uniformly shared, and culture cannot simply be "read off" society. Culture is seen as represented in language, not just verbally, but also through images, symbols and associations (du Gay et al. 1997). Like all forms of language, culture thus becomes subject to (flexible) interpretation and user manipulation.

How then, can portable technologies be seen as cultural artefacts, and how do they carry meaning? A basic assumption promoted is that production and consumption are interrelated. Following Karl Marx, the authors argue that there can be no consumption without production, and production makes no sense without the purpose of consumption. A railroad without trains is only a potential railroad, and a walkman without tapes is only a potential walkman. To have social meaning, production must be linked to consumption (Ibid. 52): Our relation to portable technologies incorporates the situations, places and contexts in which they are operated, the people associated with their use, the values they embody and what we think of them. Thus both the Walkman and the mobile phone are cultural artefacts since they are associated with certain social practices, groups of people and social identities; they are carriers of meanings (ibid. 10).

2.2.3 Representation

Representation refers to the practices of attaching meaning to products on behalf of the producers, including all forms of marketing, product information, press releases etc. Applying the language metaphor, marketing is the "cultural language" of a product; it speaks to potential buyers on behalf of the product, creating possible identifications between the buyers and the product (ibid. p.25). To illustrate, the Walkman was marketed with an enticing array

of imagery portraying beautiful young people listening to music while on the move, roller-skating or enjoying themselves at the pool etc. Thus the advertising linked the Walkman to certain lifestyles and activities associated with modern cultural ideals: Mobility, freedom, choice, leisure and youth (ibid.). The underlying message was that this product lets you become like these people, and participate in their way of life.

Du Gay et.al. refer to this as "lifestyling" a product, as meanings, images, ideas and trends from selected aspects of life originally unrelated with the product *per se* are actively encoded into it by designers and marketers (1997). The term "Hypermediation" was introduced to demonstrate how user experience is fore-structured through mediums of advertising (Bingle & Weber 2002, p.34). Using case-studies from Nokia's product development department Kotro & Pantzar (2002) argue that elements from advertising discourses of sports-gear, outdoor lifestyle products, fashion, the automobile industry etc., were incorporated into their product images to make them appeal to a greater range of consumers. This extended form of representation is also referred to as "cultural framing", meaning "the totality of cultural interpretations and meanings that are related to a specific product" (ibid., p.2). *Cultural framing*, *lifestyling* and *hypermediation* are guiding principles for my approach to contemporary mobile telephone representation in the following chapter.

2.2.4   Consumption

The COC approach challenges two basic ideas about consumption. First, that consumption is the satisfaction of "natural" needs, and second, that consumption follows the practices intended by producers. Beyond basic subsistence, our needs are not governed by a natural order, rather, they are shaped by frames of meaning in which we make sense of the world. Consequently, needs are socially, culturally and individually defined. Baudrillard and Bourdieu have argued that our needs are governed by the drive to make social meaning by standing out from the masses (du Gay et al. 1997). Therefore, material goods have identity

value, in the sense that specific patterns of consumption communicate social and cultural characteristics (ibid.). Accordingly, consumption is seen to constitute systems of signs and meaning, like a language communicating who we are (ibid.). These frameworks of meaning are not manifest in the artefacts themselves, but in our *practices of consumption*. To illustrate, flaunting a sophisticated mobile can communicate ability to follow technological development, and resistance towards the war in Iraq can be displayed by *not* consuming American products. These can be referred to as *signifying practices*, since they serve to connect products with certain meanings and values (ibid.).

Thus, meanings embodied in artefacts are interpreted differently by different people according to their norms, values, tastes and opinions. Consumption is not a passive process of accepting the terms of producers, but shaped and filtered by our individual and collective outlooks. Bourdieu (1991) uses the term "habitus" to explain the interpretive framework a person brings to bear on the material world, or "The set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways" (Ibid. p. 12) . It embodies a combination of the cultural and social values internalised in our behaviour through processes of acculturation, socialisation, training and learning, and our idiosyncratic mental and bodily dispositions. These processes are regarded as continuous; we are never fully "completed" as humans. Although certain characteristics become cemented over time, they are subject to outside influence, and potential reinterpretation in contexts different from those where they were originally acquired. Our perceptions and actions are not simply a product of our *habitus*, but results of relations between the *habitus* and the social context in which we bring it to bear (ibid.). *Habitus* underlies and shapes our conscious actions. It includes norms of conduct, material disposition, elements of upbringing, personal taste, and the sense of belonging to social categories of class, political attitudes and lifestyle. As such, the *habitus*-concept may help explain diversity among practices of consumption.

2.2.5 Appropriation, domestication and user de-sign.

To understand how we order mobile telephones into our understanding of the world, and simultaneously explain the shaping of our consumption practices, it can be useful to adopt the concepts of *appropriation* and *domestication* of technology (du Gay et al.1997; Bingle & Weber 2002; Katz & Aakhus 2002). Beyond the simple opposition of purchase/not purchase, these refer to the processes in which consumers determine their relation towards a technology over time, and what roles it will play in their daily lives. The attributes of a technology, its functions and what it appears to signify are interpreted through the user's own frameworks of meaning, and through the experience of use (or non-use), the individual orders the technology/artefact in relation to the other aspects of his or her *habitus*. In this sense, users may work out relations to a technology that differ from those suggested in the processes of representation. Such a perspective allows the subjective agency of users to create their own consumer identities by investing a technology with elements from different discourses. Weber (2002) uses the concept of "user de-sign" to analyse the potential of users to deconstruct and reconfigure preconceived associations and uses related to a product, "thereby creating individualised new meanings or practices, which in turn serve to shape their identities, to organise their lives, to support or subvert their cultural norms, etc." (p.2).

However, there is the danger of exaggerating the potential for user creativity by downplaying the importance of social context and ignoring external influences. Although many claim otherwise, we are in one way or another subject to the social pressures of conformity through laws, peer pressure, media trends and social obligations. Moreover, the general impact of product representation is considerable, although some are less susceptible than others. After all, the point is not to demonstrate a distinction between representation and consumption, but rather that these processes mutually influence each other.

2.2.6 Who dictates who? The role of mediation

The representation of a product is not conceived independently from the outside world. And the practices of consumption are not determined by the users alone. Borrowing a term from Bourdieu, designers and marketers are seen as "Cultural Intermediaries" in that they encode artefacts with symbolic significance as well as technical functions (du Gay et al. 1997, p.62). Part of their job is to probe cultural values, norms and trends circulating in society, attempting to picture themselves in consumers' shoes to discern images and values they are likely to want to identify with (du Gay et al. 1997; Kotro & Pantzar 2002). The logic is that products without appeal to consumers in terms of identification, values and design will not sell.

This two-way negotiation between production and consumption is seen to result from the activities of various mediators conveying impulses and feedback in the continuum between the two domains. These include advertising, media, designers, retailers, polling institutions, fairs, consumer organizations etc. (Bingle & Weber 2002, p. 33) Thus meanings and consumer practices are not formed "outside" society, nor independently from production processes. It is an ongoing process of negotiation *within* society, in the field between production and consumption.

2.3   The influence of artefacts

The symbolic and cultural aspects of the mobile phone do not exist in an abstract vacuum, they are partially embedded in its physical features. Winner (1986) argues that technological artefacts are embedded with *political* qualities, as their functions embody certain characteristics that promote some aspects of use while limiting others. In the same vein, Tiles & Oberdiek (1995) argue that technologies are charged or *valenced* in that they act on their surroundings to impose certain values on their users, and influence the parameters for human interaction. A handgun will always carry the inherent potential of violence, no matter how we

attempt to apply it (ibid). Similarly, the mobile has certain characteristics that will constrain and guide its use potential. As mentioned earlier the *Apparatgeist* theory argue that technologies like the mobile have "a life of their own" (Katz & Aakhus 2002, p. 316) by virtue of their intrinsic potential to interrupt social environments, counteract established boundaries of individuality, time and place, alter the nature of interpersonal relationships etc. (ibid.). On the other hand, these characteristics do not fully determine actions; users may react differently to these influences, and values assigned to a technology may change if conditions change (Tiles & Oberdiek 1995).

The point I wish to make is *not* that users are powerless to influence use and development of technology, but that their ability to do so exists within a set of constraints that originate from the technology and its surrounding structures, and that these must be taken into account. These constraints may themselves be altered over time as values are reconfigured and design developed, but they exist in some form at any point in time to influence human behaviour.

2.4   Impression management and projection of identity

Mobile telephone use often takes place among other people in different social settings; on the bus, in the cafeteria, at the university campus etc. Hence mobile telephone interaction is not limited to the person on the other end of the phone, it includes the people co-present in the physical surroundings (Ling 2001). Similarly, meanings associated with mobile technology are articulated and negotiated in public (du Gay et al.1997), and because its functions and design largely emulate an extension of our body (Weber 2002), the mobile telephone potentially serves to communicate identity. My purpose is to examine our possibility to shape the meanings associated with the mobile through use, and to suggest our potential to

manoeuvre and relate to the mobile phone according to our own designs, thus outlining the possibilities and limitations that inform our mobile behaviour.

To this and similar ends, mobile telephone researchers often invoke theories of late sociologist Erwing Goffman (Ling 2001; Katz & Aakhus 2002; Persson 2001; Plant 2002). He approaches the motivations and mechanisms informing human interaction through a theatrical metaphor, where social setting and physical surroundings constitute the *stage*, where we present ourselves through conscious performances, acting out roles before the *audience* of co-present others, using techniques familiar to stagecraft and our skills of impression management (Goffman 1959). This approach does not deal with mobile telephone technology *per se*, but it is very useful to understand the social context in which we employ it, along with the motivations and constraints governing our mobile behaviour. Accordingly, Goffman's theories and their application by other authors within mobile telephone research have offered guidelines for my analysis and discussion of the empirical material in chapter 4.

2.4.1   Setting the scene, explanation of concepts

Goffman separates human behaviour into *frontstage* and *backstage* environments and activities. The Backstage represents a private domain where "true" emotions and attitudes circulate, where we indulge our human impulses relatively unconstrained by the influence of the outside world. It includes places, activities and social contexts associated with privacy and informal interaction, along with the aspects of our mental activities that we do not show in public. The *frontstage* constitutes the public realm where our social identities are displayed and presented through interaction with others. It is governed by shared norms of conduct, social pressures and expectations, and failure to act in accordance can result in embarrassment, social repercussions and stigma. Similarly, successful negotiation of these constraints can yield rewards in terms of approval and increased social status. Therefore, Goffman argues, we adopt specific patterns of behaviour to navigate the frontstage, using

techniques of impression management (ibid.). This makes his theories applicable to the question of how mobile communication blurs the boundaries between private and public. Ling (2001) argues that mobile phone users must negotiate a "double frontstage" in public (p. 4), simultaneously ordering performance (next paragraph) towards co-present listeners and a third party on the phone. This generates an unprecedented potential for confusion, as efforts of impression management must be juggled between private or backstage interaction on the one hand, and frontstage requirements on the other (Ling 2001; Persson 2001).

The concept of *performance* refers to all activity of individuals which takes place during the presence of on-lookers, potentially influencing them (Goffman 1959, p.22). The centre of all performing activity is the *stage* or any social setting, i.e. the workplace, a busy shopping street the interior of public transport carriers etc. (ibid., p.238) In this context, the performance concept applies to all mobile communication that happens in front of others. The *front* represents the part of the performance that is visible to others, or the general sum of impressions that meets observers (ibid., p.22). It is constituted by the variety of *expressive equipment* available to the performing individual: First the setting, or the physical features of the environment that can function as stage-props for the performance. Second, the individual features of the performer, both material and non-material in nature. These include obvious physical characteristics of age, gender, looks, clothing etc. but also intangible assets like body language, gestures, facial expression, tone of voice etc. (ibid., pp. 22-24). More than anything, it is the mobile telephone's potential role of as expressive equipment that makes this approach relevant for the thesis topic. Consequently, the structuring of social performances around the mobile phone is an important theme in my research that will be dealt with in chapter 4.

Fronts are changeable, and through different applications of the expressive equipment, a performer can add nuances or variety to his or her appearance. Potentially, he or she can play a number of different roles through manipulating the same social front. To simplify, a

person does not show identical sides of his character to his grandmother and his closest friend, and he will not behave like he is in a discotheque when attending a lecture. The roles of grandson, beer-buddy, serious student and party-goer are governed by different rules of interaction, and associated with different norms of behaviour. Accordingly, we tend to develop a certain set of abstract ideas and expectations that go together with each role. Goffman labels this our "collective representation" of the front (ibid. p. 27). Therefore, a person attempting to convey a certain character must to a certain degree follow the pre-established conventions attached to that role.

Persons entering a stage first establish a picture of the given situation and then adopt a suitable manner to go with the context and environment. As such, there is no universally valid description of a situation, rather, people infer their own understanding of a given social context (ibid., p.3). Performers will try to influence this understanding by expressing themselves in certain ways, *giving* impressions addressed to the audience. The audience's interpretation of these impressions, or the way impressions are *given off*, determines how they will respond, whether they choose to accept the performance and perhaps encourage it, or dismiss it as inappropriate, causing embarrassment for the performer (ibid.). This applies to mobile telephone behaviour in the sense that the public and relatively conspicuous nature of mobile interaction makes it prone to intrusion in other people's personal space, prompting social reaction. These range from subtle and non-verbal to explicit and violent in nature, and serve to influence behaviour by way of encouragement or demonstrating resentment. Negative response will prompt the user to adjust his/hers behaviour and vice versa. The perspective is very useful to understand how meanings and definitions concerning mobile telephone behaviour are negotiated. Since mobile telephone technology is relatively new, there are still grey areas of social conduct where norms have yet to be worked out –if they ever will be.

Therefore this negotiation through interaction constantly shapes the *collective representations* of mobile telephone activities.

2.4.2   The masks we wear

My discussion in chapter 4 is largely based on Goffman's principal argument, that social performances reflect desires to display idealized versions of oneself, rather than one's "true" nature. Employing the metaphor of social *masks*, he argues that Individuals emphasize aspects of their character that they consider to suit the desired presentation, simultaneously suppressing natural impulses distorting the attempted image. Accordingly, people constrain their behaviour to maintain expressive coherence with the roles they wish to play, while striving to appear "natural". Thus, facial expressions, body language and actions that appear casual, are often calculated, hidden efforts to manipulate impressions given to co-present onlookers (ibid., pp. 31-32). The conspicuous nature of the mobile telephone and its symbolic qualities render it particularly apt for this kind of manipulation. On the one hand it offers a large potential repertoire for different performances, on the other its tendency to attract unwanted attention often prompts additional performance efforts to avoid embarrassment and salvage the situation (Ling 2001).

2.5   Conclusive remarks

Through a review of current mobile telephone research and discussion of the technology concept, I have argued that a proper understanding of mobile phone technology and its role in human interaction requires an approach that focuses on its symbolic qualities as well as its technical aspects and the contingencies of social context and individual perception. Therefore I have adopted a perspective that emphasises the non-material processes of mobile phone development while connecting them with the physical processes of production in a *circuit of culture*, where meanings, values and practices surrounding the mobile phone are being

negotiated between consumers and mobile telephone companies in the field between production and consumption. This open-ended cycle includes the material aspects of the mobile in that their political qualities influence the premises of social interaction while simultaneously being shaped by the processes of human negotiation.

In the following chapter I will focus on the representation part of the mobile telephone *circuit of culture*, by examining the *cultural language* of the mobile phone's marketing industry, i.e. processes of *lifestyling* (du Gay 1997) the mobile and *fore-structuring* (Weber 2002) our user experience through ads, marketing, information releases etc. In line with the COC-framework, I will approach these as expanded forms of language. Therefore I will apply methods of Discourse Analysis (DA), deriving from linguistics and enhanced within media studies, since it offers the most potent approach to deconstruct and critically interpret applied language in all forms. As mentioned in my thesis outline, the detailed explanation of this method has been moved to the beginning of the next chapter.

In a similar vein, aspects of the consumption processes will largely be analysed as forms of communication in chapter 4. The mobile's role as an identity marker and impression management accessory will be scrutinized using Goffman's theories of interaction. Based on the conceptual approach outlined above, I will focus on the real experiences of consumer interaction, since it determines the realisation of technical potential, and constitutes the arena where meanings and practices are ultimately interpreted, diffused, reinforced and contested. Again, methods applied and collection of empirical data will be described at the beginning of the chapter.

Chapter 3

Deconstructing the mobile campaign: A critical look at the language of representation

"Advertising may be described as the science of arresting human intelligence long enough to get money from it."

Stephen Leacock

Abstract:

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the characteristics of current mobile telephone representation using discourse analysis (DA). My first aim is to illustrate how consumers are addressed by mobile telephone manufacturers and service providers, and describe major meanings and qualities attached to the mobile phone, along with the strategies and techniques employed to achieve this. Following the COC-approach, I reject the view that mobile telephone representation is merely a reflection of its "real" properties. Rather, it can be viewed as a large-scale attempt to persuade consumers to accept a constructed/fore-structured framework of meanings, potential and functions fostered by the forces of production. Thus the second aim is to deconstruct this framework by critically reviewing the concepts and rhetoric employed, placing them into context by comparing them to the (commercial) motivations they are fuelled by. At this point I will not draw any conclusions as to whether the representation is "accurate" or "misleading". However this chapter will suggest some paradoxes concerning some of the core values put forth in the representation process and these will serve as a backdrop for the ensuing discussion and analysis in chapter 4.

3.1 On discourses and perceived realities

As a method, DA implies a critical and interpretive approach towards the use of language in social contexts. In this case it is the "cultural language" of mobile telephone products articulated through media of representation that will be examined. It involves the affixing of social identities and suggested practices to the mobile phone, and the meanings and attitudes infused into it by the forces of production. In other words, language takes on a broader meaning, encompassing images, symbols and design, as well as social practices (du Gay et al. 1997; Mathisen 1997, Shields 1997; Tonkiss 1998). DA offers a window, or a metaphorical "set of goggles" through which we can uncover the general themes and vocabulary of mobile telephone representation.

Language is not seen as a neutral medium reflecting reality, but "as a domain in which our knowledge of the social world is actively shaped" (Tonkiss 1998, p.246). The use of language is both laden with meanings and ideas circulating among its authors, and simultaneously influencing our understanding of the world and shaping our identities. As such DA involves going "beyond" text, imagery etc. to uncover the motivations, intentions and attitudes of the authors (the social context), how they employ language to impose their own meanings on the subject (ibid., p. 249).

Similarly the type of language used limits what can be communicated. A "biased" vocabulary makes it easier to express some meanings than others, and limits available nuances. Therefore the analysis should cover possible expressions that are being omitted in order to highlight alternatives. Discursive systems tend to be mutually exclusive, operating with sets of binary opposition (Mathisen 1997; Tonkiss 1997). When the mobile telephone is associated with modernity and the future, it is simultaneously *dissociated* from notions like history and past. Consequently a text can convey a set of meanings explicitly, while implying others "between the lines".

To identify the major qualities promoted in mobile telephone representation, and show how these can be contested, I find the concept of "ideograph" quite useful. Ideographs are abstract notions of negotiable meaning that are poorly defined, but exert normative authority since they are associated with generally accepted human ideals that are hard to contest, such as "freedom" and "communication" (deWilde 2000, p.100). Since the meaning of these ideals is not fixed, they can be fitted to suit the intention of the authors and legitimize the product, by manipulating our default perception of them as something positive and desirable (ibid.). I will attempt to discern how such ideographs are employed in representation processes, and show how alternative understandings can be possible.

3.2   Creating a universe

We are constantly bombarded with ads, commercials, slogans and images of the mobile phone and the advantages of its use. On billboards, in magazines, on television, the Internet and in the general media, the large-scale representation of the mobile telephone surrounds us in our daily lives. Myerson (2001) sees these efforts as a ubiquitous worldwide campaign which he labels "Mobilisation" (ibid., p.7) referring to the shared motivations and strategies of mobile telephone companies and providers. This constitutes a helpful concept to approach mobile telephone representation without having to scrutinize different company strategies separately. Myerson argues that their primary aim is to mobilise us as potential (spot the wordplay) mobile users, making us *feel* that we need them (ibid.). Accordingly, Mobilisation is viewed mainly a cultural process, in that the crucial element of success lies in influencing consumer attitudes in a positive direction by weaving a cultural frame around mobile telephones that present them as the answers to our communicational needs, and means to cope with challenges of the 21st century (ibid.).

This process involves describing the settings and environment that renders the mobile phone indispensable. Manufacturers and providers alike must provide compelling arguments for the importance of mobile communication by emphasising certain aspects of our society and articulating credible visions of the near future. Moisander & Eriksson (2002) approaches the work of Nokia's marketing body in terms of a *narrative*, or story-telling. They assume that "Story is a basic form of representation through which people organize and interpret social reality" (ibid. p.3), and illustrate how Nokia invites users to share and participate in their vision of the development to come by integrating them as key characters in an ongoing account in which the most important chapters have yet to unfold. By reviewing the performative use of language in mission statements, articles and product information published on the Nokia company website, the authors describe Nokia's strategies to achieve authority over our perception by establishing the confines and settings for user roles as they see it. This perspective can provide a helpful perspective to establish the structure in which the language of representation operates. Central to this narrative is the notion that we are moving towards a new world order, where communication, mobility, speed and flexibility are the major values, and information is the most important capital. (Moisander & Eriksson 2002; Myerson 2001). I will indicate how this perspective is echoed in the general representation process, and how the mobile phone is legitimized as the ideal device, enabling us to thrive and participate in this "new" society and cope with its demands. Along with the concept of Mobilisation, this perspective of representation as a constructed narrative will inform my ensuing analysis.

As empirical data I have selected and reviewed material from mobile telephone manufacturers and service providers including Vodafone, Samsung, Nokia, T-Mobile, Orange, Sony Ericsson and Siemens. This represents a collection of the major themes in current mobile telephone marketing, primarily in the Netherlands. Given the international

organisation of all these companies, the selection should be relevant for the selected group of interviewees. I have reviewed contemporary company brochures and navigated Dutch and international websites (per July 2003) with emphasis on T-Mobile, Vodafone, Orange and Nokia. I have reviewed ads from both international and Dutch popular magazines, particularly Wired (USA), Connect (Germany), Blvd., Elsevier and Premiere (Netherlands), while observing television commercials mainly in Dutch. I have not only examined the language used in the ads themselves, but also mission statements, background information, company visions and strategies.

3.3   Uncovering the major themes

Mobile companies often start their representation of themselves emphasizing the rapid growth of their user base, establishing a theme of sweeping growth and conquest of new territories (Myerson 2001).

> In 1997 we had 1 million clients in England. Since then there are 12 million. After England, other countries followed. From Switzerland to Thailand. Since 2003 we are also in the Netherlands. In addition to the 43 million clients in the rest of the world, we would like for you too to feel at home with Orange.

> (Translation J.A.H., Orange *Share* brochure 2003)

Similarly, Vodafone open their Dutch introductory leaflet by announcing that they are the world's largest mobile network with more than 200 million users per 2003, while T-Mobile claims to serve 46 million worldwide at the top of their Dutch website. As a user, you are invited to take part in an ever-growing community of mobile telephone subscribers, and the sheer scale of this development becomes an argument in itself. It seems to imply that this development is rolling forth anyway, and since everyone else is doing it, why not you?

There is a fundamental theme of optimism and expectation for the future echoed in the slogans that form the pillars of every company's outlook. Here are some examples: "The future's bright, the future's Orange", "Everyone's invited" (Samsung), "Get more from life" (T-Mobile), "Be inspired" (Siemens) and "The future is wireless" (Netcom). New technology isn't simply improvement on the past, it is the key to a new world. Nokia's familiar catchphrase indicates what this world is all about, "Connecting People".

Connectedness means potential of communication, but we are frequently reminded that communication goes beyond talk. Part of the Orange philosophy is "That communication between people is more than just calling. And that there will be new ways for us to communicate with each other in the future."[3] Mobilisation ushers an expanded perspective of communication where conversation is joined by the ability to exchange text and images, surf the Internet, play games, listen to music etc. New activities are constantly fitted under the umbrella of communication, altering it as a concept to encompass a growing array of appliances. The mobile phone is placed apart from other ICTs and particularly its predecessor, the fixed-line phone, by emphasising all the things you can do *besides* talking. In fact, actual conversation is gradually given a secondary focus in mobile telephone representation (Myerson 2001).

3.3.1 Promoting potential, and little else

Increasingly, the mobile phone is presented as a powerful all-purpose tool. A conspicuous feature of the language employed is its immodest use of superlatives and grand statements. You are offered the *latest* technology, the *coolest* games, the *most desired* information etc. The possibilities offered by the mobile phone are not just varied and numerous, but allegedly

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[3] Translated by J.A.H., Orange *Share* brochure, 2003

infinite and *endless*. Evidently, the vocabulary[4] used to describe mobile phones and related services is singularly positive, while concepts implying downsides or limitations are virtually non-existent. This point might be dismissed as self-evident sales techniques, yet it bears relevance to questions of validity concerning the representation process addressed in chapter 4. The language used presenting the mobile phone serves to suppress and conceal any critical perspective or negative associations by leaving out the means to express them (Mathisen 1997). This can be compared to describing a football match without the concepts of foul, offside, hands and free-kick –a significant part of the picture will be left out.

3.3.2 The meaning of freedom and choice

To illustrate the point above and support ensuing arguments I have chosen a magazine ad from Samsung Digit*all* for closer scrutiny (figure 3.1). It embodies many of the dominant themes and messages of Mobilisation and provides a good example of the persuasive use of form, imagery and associations. The most striking feature of this ad is the beautiful woman holding two foldable mobile phones. The warm colours of the background match the hue of her skin, nicely complemented by the colourful displays of the phones. The balanced composition is lifted by a trio of smooth lines, and along with the vitality of her expression and body language, the image makes for an aesthetically pleasing and sensually seductive experience. "Communication play" stands like a title, and the text below states that "Your communications are easier and more exciting than ever". Yet she's apparently not communicating in the ordinary sense of the word, but dancing in a blissful state of joy, clapping the phones as castanets, or music instruments.

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[4] In the expanded sense, including imagery, layout etc.

Figure 3.1: Communication play.

Communication is indicated by the phones themselves, while the sense of excitement and joy

is invoked by alluding to music and dance. The latter serve as metonyms to bring

communication and excitement together in a union, erasing apparent contrasts:

Communication devices vs. music instruments; serious business attire vs. unconstrained joy. The totality of the ad suggests that it is the mobile phones that enable her to transcend these boundaries, simultaneously they are the source of her happiness: "Samsung Telecommunications lets you do unimaginable things with your mobile phone". Thanks to the technology, the impossible becomes possible.

This use of metaphors and metonymic language form the cornerstones of mobile telephone representation techniques. By alluding to ideals of beauty, success, excitement, leisure and joy, mobile telephone advertisements play on our desires, promising not just a handy appliance, but access to a qualitatively better life where you are free to choose the mobile phone that suits you, personalise your mobile style, find the information you desire, talk to whomever you want and most importantly, *whenever you want, wherever you want*. This is possibly the mantra of Mobilisation, putting a clear emphasis on the individual freedom made possible by mobile telephone technology. The world is often portrayed as one of constraints and boundaries, and the mobile phone is presented as the solution to escape them. The message repeated over and over is that the mobile phone provides us with infinite *choice* and *freedom.*

These serve as *ideographs*, in that they infuse our attitudes towards the mobile phone with generally recognizable ideals in a taken-for-granted manner, without making these connections explicit (deWilde 2000). However, their use may be questioned when put properly into context. Freedom and choice implies free will and available alternatives of action, their opposites are coercion and limitation. Also, the rhetoric implies the technology itself as *value-neutral* (Wyatt 1998), since choice is presented as unconstrained by any factor beyond preference. By equating freedom with mobile communication, Mobilisation rhetoric implies that it is only achievable once you have acquired the proper technology; but what about the freedom *not* to adapt mobile technology? Following the logic of Mobilisation, this

choice disables freedom in the first place. Similarly, the emphasis on the latest technology disqualifies *not* upgrading your phone as an option. Paradoxically, freedom and choice become contingent on acquiring the latest mobile technology, thus limiting free will and alternative actions to apply within the constraints of the technology itself. Mobilisation rhetoric thereby employs freedom and choice to exclude a whole range of attitudes that are inconsistent with mobile product turnover. Being connected becomes the only alternative.

Furthermore, Mobilisation echoes a dominant trend of our modern society, promoting individual values at the expense of the larger community. As mentioned, the expanded view of communication does not always presuppose a human counterpart. The woman featured in figure 3.1 is *alone*, seemingly immersed in her own world. The only co-present entities are her mobile phones. This reflects a recurring theme of the relation between individual and mobile phone as the basis of communication. With the integration of games, MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service), MP3[5] and Internet technology, mobile phone communication is increasingly shown as interaction with the device itself: Possible conversation partners are often under-communicated or left out entirely. As such, the mobile is presented as a portal of infinite access; you communicate first and foremost with your phone, and it is always at the ready. Thus, external constraints and the intervention of others are seemingly assumed away, downplaying the importance of context and co-present others. Communication is thereby employed as an *ideograph*, in the sense that it promotes certain aspects at the expense of others. Myerson (2001) argues that Mobilisation moulds the notion of communication into an impersonal exchange of information, where the aspects of meaning and understanding between two human parties are gradually lost. This view may be overly pessimistic, but it illustrates a tendency of broadening communication to include more actions while decreasing its qualitative criteria. Mobile phones are claimed to bring people closer,

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[5] MPEG audio layer 3, The most common format for digital sound files.

connecting them across the world. Yet at the same time they produce communication *barriers* towards co-present people by drawing the caller's attention away (Ling 2001; Persson 2001, Fortunati 1997). This implies a dual nature of mobile communication that also counters the above mentioned notion of technological neutrality, which will be discussed further in chapter 4, along with the mentioned paradox of freedom and choice.

3.3.3   Lifestyling the mobile phone

A significant aspect of the mobile "narrative" is the *fore-structuring* of use, or suggesting the roles users can play. Marketing campaigns serve to weave a cultural frame around the products by situating them in recognisable contexts, infusing them with attractive meanings and associations, expanding our image of the mobile phone beyond that of a technical instrument. By connecting the mobile phone with certain lifestyles and identities, representation efforts promote it not just as a communications tool, but as a must for professional performance, a lifestyle accessory (du Gay et al, 1997; Moisander & Eriksson, 2002) and fashion item (Kotro & Pantzar, 2002).

Mobile communication is thus presented as crucial for our social and professional life, the emphasis on convenience, fun, leisure and entertainment is particularly common. Vodafone's "Live!" MMS-service is described as "A new, enriching and *most of all fun* way to communicate"[6]. Similarly, Orange assures you that "Now it's even more convenient for you to have contact with the world around you"[7]. The imagery in ads and commercials commonly depict happy, beautiful people enjoying themselves at the beach, in the disco, listening to music in the park, downloading and playing games etc. They are situated in contexts that reflect ideals of our society; independence, youthfulness, self-indulgence, social

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[6] Translation J.A.H., Vodafone *Live*! Brochure, 2003 (my emphasis).
[7] Translation J.A.H., Orange *Share* Brochure, 2003

and professional success. An attractive, exiting and aesthetically pleasing world is created and presented as reality, into which the mobile is fitted seamlessly and at the centre of events.

Figure 3.2: All three together.

Mobile ads illustrating business environments emphasise accessing needed information on the move, getting direct results and coordinating work through handheld devices.

Figure 3.3: On the move.

Fictional user quotes like "I benefit optimally" and "Always the right information wherever and whenever I want"[8] are accompanied by images of smart, young businessmen and –women using their mobile appliances in airports, business lunches and moving through office landscapes, handling their assignments on the fly thanks to mobile technology. Following du Gay et al. (1997), they represent ideal consumers and social identities ordinary people will

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[8] Translation J.A.H., Vodafone City Life magazine, #2, 2003

want to identify with. By presenting mobile phones as essential to sustain such lifestyles and performances, they are made symbolic carriers of these identities, offering association to the images of success and life-quality depicted in the representation.

In the same vein, celebrities, famous athletes and cultural "heroes" are employed as mobile-wielding role models, operating on our desire to resemble our idols: David Beckham, the world's most famous soccer player, recently signed a contract to promote Vodafone products; he's currently seen in commercials enjoying downloadable games on his new handset. T-Mobile hired actress Catherine Zeta-Jones, possibly one of the most beautiful women in the world to front a range of hand-held devices. Smiling at you from a magazine ad, she operates the featured device accompanied by the words "You knew you'd rule the world someday"[9], encouraging you to take part in her success and associate yourself with her beauty. In the recent years, Nokia and Samsung have bought into the astronomically successful movie franchise "The Matrix", offering us the same telephones the cyberheroes Neo and Morpheus wield in the movies with effortless cool and astonishing style. An ad for the new Samsung SGH-V200 has the form of a Matrix movie poster with the familiar green symbols from the film trickling downwards in the background. The phone itself "stars" in the centre, its technical features resemble movie credits at the bottom, and the title, like a film, is "Rotating realities"[10]. This produces a sense of being in the movie, metaphorically connecting the phone with the Matrix universe, illustrating mobile marketing's ability to incorporate elements from other commercial categories into their own. Similarly the Mobilisation campaign employs an expanded repertoire by connecting the mobile phone with themes from entertainment, lifestyles, sports and fashion.

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[9] T-Mobile ad, printed in Wired, March 2003
[10] Samsung SGH V200 ad, printed in Dutch Premiere Magazine, May 2003

3.3.4   Flexible design: Playing on different strings

Following Nokia, most manufacturers are now emphasising design and style when promoting their models, playing on the same chords as fashion and designer houses, encouraging you impress your surroundings:

> Be impressed: The [Siemens] SL55 is designed for desire. […] Smaller and lighter than ever before […] slide it open and discover the faceted keys. They flash like jewels in a treasure chest. […] You will love to display it and hang it around your neck. SL55 is too beautiful to disappear in your pocket.
>
> (www.siemens.co.uk)

The metaphorical allusion to jewellery is unmistakable, and technological functions are downplayed in favour of the expressive aesthetical qualities. The emphasis on style is not only symbolic, but also manifest in the *physical design* of the telephone. The SL55 mimics the shape of a ruby, with oval shapes and curves recurring in its buttons and frames (figure 3.4). Thus, the association is both tangible and allegoric.

Figure 3.4: A jewel among phones

Similarly, the design and functionality of mobile phones have been developed to cover a range of lifestyles, by embodying corresponding virtues. This relates to the designers' role as *cultural intermediaries*, in that they pick up on trends, attitudes and cultural segments, and

creatively work these into the product design (du Gay et al.1997). For example, the Nokia

9210 Communicator, aimed at businesspeople with professional requirements, sports a large

built-in keyboard and colour screen resembling a small pc, with a general emphasis on

technical capability at the expense of aesthetics (Figure 3.5). Compared to the SL55, the

difference in size[11], function and design becomes striking.

Figur 3.5:
Nokia 9210 for professionals.

The variety of design covers robust, waterproof phones for sports and wildlife, game-phones

fitted with large screens and joysticks, miniature foldable phones for optimal portability etc.

Hand in hand with the differences in design, mobile marketers also employ different jargons,

layouts and content to go with the different phones. While the SL55 emulates a jewel or

something from the realm of art, the language and style used to promote the 9210 is radically

different, note the business-oriented vocabulary emphasising productivity and success:

> In today's business world, mobility is a key ingredient for success. With the
> Nokia 9210 Communicator, you can constantly stay in touch with colleagues,
> suppliers, and customers. Therefore transforming your company's productivity,
> performance, and profitability, no matter what the size of your business.
>
> (www.nokia.com)

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[11] Siemens SL 55 has a volume of 63 cm3, compared to 239 cm3 of Nokia 9210.

Using segment-oriented design, rhetoric and layout, mobile telephone marketers attempt to offer a phone for every desire. By adopting languages to fit different user types, mobile representation employs the rhetorical manoeuvre of establishing authority by speaking a language familiar to the intended recipient (Mathisen 1997). In light of this, the role of consumers as inspiration for mobile design becomes evident. Furthermore, mobile representation employs conflicting messages to promote different products; some ads advocate a permanent connection to work, while others promote the mobile as a means of escaping everyday life and facilitating leisure. In total they serve to present the mobile as natural and necessary in every context, drawing on an all-encompassing range of images and messages belonging to a "phone-centric" world (Moisander & Ericsson 2002, p.12).

3.3.5   The prediction of needs

Mobilisation rhetoric proposes that mobile products and services are developed as responses to articulated desires among users; *we* want to be connected and communicate around the clock, and we are constantly yearning for ways to communicate *better*. The ad in figure 3.1 states that "Your day starts and ends with communication" and that "Samsung Telecommunications offers the tools…" Samsung first establishes the importance of communication for us, and then present their offer to make our lives easier and more exciting. Vodafone describes their clients in the following manner:

> [They are] not just users: people. People with a shared need. They need other people. They want to live in a world without boundaries […] We predict these needs. With several new mobile adaptations. Thanks to this you can reach friends and relatives more and more efficiently. And organize your own life more conveniently.
>
> (Translation J.A.H, Vodafone[12])

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[12] Printed in "How Are You?" Dutch Vodafone introductory leaflet, 2003

Mobile providers and manufacturers claim to predict our needs and desires, presenting themselves as our helpers, enabling us to overcome the boundaries we perceive in our everyday lives. A common technique to achieve authenticity is to present short narratives in words and image describing how and why we need certain products. The need for integrated digital cameras in mobile phones might be unclear for some of us. Nokia explains that your real-life experiences sometimes can be too amazing to describe with words. That's why you need to show what you've experienced to others, and now Nokia offers the solution to overcome your lack of words. The camera is not just an extra gadget, it is an improvement upon our communicative repertoire. (Figure 3.6) By constantly asserting our needs for us, mobile marketers simultaneously present their own products indispensable.
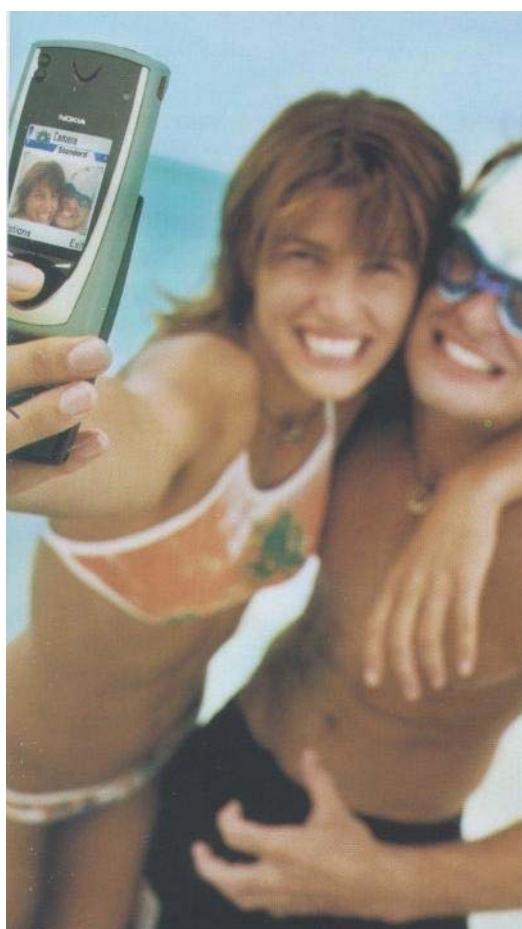

Figure 3.6: On the beach.

The claim to know the future is underscored by the use of assertive language: "We believe in the future and do our best to make your life more enjoyable and pleasant with our products and services" (Translation J.A.H., Orange[13]).

> Right now, we are introducing new mobile services that will make Vodafone an even more important part of our customers' lives. These services will enable everyone to communicate, manage, organise, pay, play and experience life on the move, as part of a full-colour, fun, mobile world.
>
> (www.vodafone.co.uk)

The latter example suggests an element of technological determinism in that it presents future development as linear and inevitable, and that technological progress is expected to change society to the better (Wyatt 1998). The possibility that people may reject the technology is not included, and the taken-for-granted certainty of the statement allows little room for discussion concerning the desirability of such a development and alternative future outcomes. This serves to fix the framework of the mobile narrative: The plot is based on answering our needs and desires. As the products improve in quality and performance, so will our ability to communicate, thus the story has the characteristics of a fairytale were all will end well.

3.4   Suggested paradoxes

Critical attention to the basic premises of the mobile narrative might allow alternative outcomes. One major inconsistency runs through the seam of mobile representation: On the one hand the determinist view of mobile technology as life-changing, constantly improving and inevitable serves to dismiss any diversity of consumer opinion, as desirability and benefit are presented as intrinsic to the products themselves. On the other, the pervasive rhetoric of choice and consumer freedom simultaneously implies that mobile products are inherently

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[13] Printed in *Welkom* leaflet -part of Orange Netherlands' introductory campaign 2003.

value-neutral, placing no constraints whatsoever on the users (ibid.). This curious balancing-act is hardly random, and apparently compatible with the motivation of profit. Consumers are persuaded to think that mobile products are indispensable for a good life, and that they exercise their freedom of choice and thereby their own interest by spending efforts and money to maintain a high turnover rate. This is not to say that mobile companies are evil. Rather, these are the rules of the game, and mobile telephone producers can hardly be expected to scorn their own products. Yet it is important to consumers to be aware of these and similar tactics, as a critical stance towards representation helps us evaluate the role of mobile phones on our own terms, as the assumptions of representation might not be equally applicable everywhere.

Asking the right questions might alter the answers in our favour. Do we necessarily want to communicate more, and are we equally able to? New technologies do not only offer potential, they also place new demands on people in terms of skills and capability, which can lead to increased levels of stress. Constantly adopting new products require proportionate efforts in terms of education, time and money (deWilde 2000). Even if we suppose that everyone shares the desire to keep up with the development, it is not a given fact that all are equally equipped to face the challenges it presents, given the different levels of income, available time and resources. Communication is not a one way street; constant connection means being constantly available to others. Accordingly we invite our work and daily chores into our personal sphere, potentially challenging our private space and control of the events. Instant contact requires instant response, which in turn consumes more of our energy that we might spend otherwise.

The potential co-presence of others gives rise to a proportionate potential for disruption, as our mobile behaviour spills over into their personal space therefore a view of the mobile as a strictly personal technology carries the danger of ignoring significant social

consequences. I will now turn my attention to these dilemmas as I move on to the discussion of user experiences.

Chapter 4

Adding perception, context and diversity:

A critical discussion of mobile phone experience

Abstract:

In this chapter I will start by outlining the method, criteria and approach applied when collecting my interview data. On the basis of these data and relevant research material, I will then address the relation between the major Mobilisation themes as outlined in chapter 3, and the everyday reality of consumers. By comparing consumer perceptions to the language of representation within the conceptual framework outlined in chapter 2, I wish to approach the concepts of freedom, needs and desires within a social context, in order to suggest the nature of potentials and limitations that influence the appropriation of mobile phones into the social fabric of people's lives. Hence I will follow up on the paradoxes of mobile behaviour and communication suggested in the previous chapter.

I will then continue to discuss how meanings are negotiated between consumers in relation to the influence of representation and the material constraints of mobile telephone use. The aim is to outline our potential to reconfigure the technology according to our own inclinations through different consumption practices. Finally, I will discuss the role of users in the development of mobile telephone technology, placing my research material within the COC-framework.

4.1   Interviewee profiles & general approach

Before starting the interviews I had a general idea of a student selection in mind. Since my idea was to interview people in a similar situation to that of myself, focussed on students at Maastricht University. I aimed to interview 10-12 people, which I regarded as suitable due to time and capacity constraints. Since I was not going to focus on differences in age, culture and gender, I sought a balance of males and females, a sample spread of west-European nationalities, and a certain diversity concerning fields of study.

The students were approached via an email forwarded on the Maastricht university server. It explained the purpose of the research and suitable interviewee profiles[14], asking those interested to include gender, age, nationality, discipline and a rough description of their attitudes towards the mobile phone. The selection of interviewees was then based on the responses. It would be too optimistic to aim for a truly representative group of interviewees, and it is obvious that a similar group consisting of other people could have provided quite different answers. However, I believe the sample will suffice to indicate general tendencies, main themes and major attitudes, and most importantly the existence of a diversity of attitudes. Furthermore, the data illustrates how factors such as personality, peer influence and situational contingency play important roles in mobile behaviour.

Given the limitations to actively select the most suitable interviewees, I am quite satisfied with the balance of and diversity within the group. The physical profile was as follows:

- 5 males (2 Dutch, 1, English, 1 Austrian, 1 French)
- 5 females (2 Dutch, 1 Italian, 1 German, 1 Belgian)
- Ages ranged from 18 – 27.

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[14] This included male and female students of European nationality between 18 and 30 who either owned a mobile phone, or were interested in sharing their views on mobile telephone behaviour.

- Courses / Disciplines represented: European Studies, Arts & Science, Finance Economics, Business Economics, Sociology, Science & Technology studies and Medicine.

Only one respondent did not have a mobile phone, however, several of the others expressed views that would normally be associated with non-users (see discussion of user characteristics in 4.2). As such, I found the individual attitudes to be quite diversified, and not necessarily internally consistent with certain user types.

The interviews were semi-structured, and conducted in locations throughout Maastricht between May 22nd and June 10th 2003. They were recorded on tape and minidisk with the interviewees' permission, and transcribed shortly after. Concerning my role as an interviewer, I had little ambition to achieve the part of the "neutral observer". Partly because I think it was more important to achieve confidence and comfort in order to encourage the interviewees to talk unrestrained and become interested, and reduce their tendency to alter their answers to become more "correct" or detached. On the other hand, it is clear that my relatively active participation did colour the response to a certain degree, and it certainly influenced the focus of the interview. Then again, I think close interaction is the best way to achieve honest, detailed responses, as long as the shortcomings of the approach are being accounted for.

Clive Seale (1998) discusses the Interview as *source* or *topic* –whether statements can be seen as straight data, or analysed in the context of speaker motivation. I adopt a similar conclusion to his, that you as an interviewer should be able to combine both approaches: Statements concerning history of mobile use and technical details are straightforward enough, whereas speculations on other people's attitudes and one's own person might be overly biased or influenced by the interviewee's wish to give positive impression. This is of course difficult

to determine with certainty, but I did get certain ideas about the basic attitudes underlying the various answers, along with obvious patterns and/or inconsistencies in the interviewee's responses.

4.2   Adoption and use: Questioning inevitability

In the previous chapter I illustrated how the sweeping language of the Mobilisation campaign implies that the diffusion of mobile telephones is rolling forward with an unstoppable pace, enabling more users to be a part of a new world of instant communication. Once adopted, the mobile telephone will imbue its users with an unlimited communication potential that will qualitatively change their lives. This rhetoric optimistically assumes that all users will follow similar patterns of adoption and use, thereby equating technological potential with user reality. "As a self-evidently useful technology, ICT points to itself" (Strathern 2002, p.308), thus saying nothing about the contingency and context of use. My findings support the attitude that reality is not so straightforward.

If diffusion was the only measure of the success, there would be little left to say about mobile telephone technology. At this point, the mobile phone is so widespread that people without are a minority at best. Among the interviewees, only one registered as a non-user at first contact, and ironically enough, it turned out that she too had purchased a mobile phone on the very day of the interview. On the other hand, the responses clearly indicate that the role of the mobile phone in the owner's life varies greatly. In fact, the diversity concerning frequency of use, knowledge and utilisation of functionalities was so striking that it is hardly possible to view the users in question as a homogenous group. While some carried their mobiles with them constantly, others used them reluctantly, and rarely in public.

Another conspicuous aspect was the apparent discrepancies between the mobile telephones' potential and actual patterns of use. Given the current state of the art functions

like MMS technology, MP3 facilities, integrated cameras, Internet connection etc., half of the interviewees had bought the cheapest phones they could get, emphasising practicality rather than sophistication. Despite the standard SMS (Short Message Service) ability, only four interviewees utilised it regularly. The rest found it too cumbersome, or saw no need to use it. Five of the interviewees had phones with integrated MP3 and WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) technology, yet only two of them used the phone to listen to music, and none used it to connect to the Internet. At the time of the interviews, none of the students asked had purchased phones with MMS capabilities. Four of them admitted to considering it, while none of the other six had plans to invest in such phones.

Although this brief statistic cannot claim to be representative for the general mass of consumers, it does illustrate a significant diversity of user habits and attitudes, and it also suggests that there is no automatic correlation between technological potential and user reality. Thus, acquisition of mobile phones says little in itself, it is the relationship that develops between the mobile phone and the owner through use that makes the difference. My impression is that the appropriation process is largely influenced by individual factors such as taste, interest and life-situation. This raises questions about the typical categorisation of users. A strict dichotomy between user and non-user is certainly too narrow, rather I have adopted the perspective of Wyatt et al. (2002), evaluating usage in terms of degrees along a continuum, arguing the difficulty of discern integrated user types, as people that share some habits and attitudes, may completely disagree on others (ibid.).

Along the same lines I found it difficult to categorise the interviewees. Some mobile users I talked to had initially been quite reluctant to acquire a mobile phone, stressing that they felt compelled by circumstances, while they otherwise expressed attitudes normally associated with non-use and technology resistance, as this example shows[15]:

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[15] Interview With Annika (21), conducted outside University (UM) Library, Maastricht May 27th 2003.

> ANNIKA (21): I think in general I rejected the mobile phone cause of the use of the people, but now I had to get one because I don't have a [fixed] phone.
> INTERVIEWER: You've chosen not to have one even if it's been quite common for a few years now.
> ANNIKA: In general right from the beginning I noticed that I didn't need it, and it always disturbed me, and I think when it was introduced I noticed many factors I didn't like about the cellphone, and it was like for example if I meet with a person to talk I don't like it if someone calls and they interrupt my sentence or they interrupt their sentence and just answer the phone, cause I don't think they need to talk to anyone else when I'm there. […]
> INTERVIEWER: Sure.
> ANNIKA: And I didn't like the control factor, that anyone can call you at each moment of your life. And I don't think I have to justify what I do at each moment of the day.

The interviewee did admit that the mobile telephone had some advantages, particularly the flexibility allowed by its portability, but in general she stressed that she would avoid using it as far as possible. This illustrates how adoption and use is not necessarily equivalent to wholehearted embracing of mobile technology, but contingent on context and interpretive frame or *habitus*. In this sense, the concept of mobile telephone use should include levels of resistance, and it is necessary to acknowledge the diversity and changeability within the concept of use that renders any summarised or fixed understanding too rigid (Woolgar 2002). Also, the notion of a macro-level "impact" of mobile phone technology on people's everyday lives cannot be generalised as equally valid for everyone, rather approaches to the adoption process should allow for specific context and idiosyncratic differences (ibid.), including different levels of reasoning. Katz & Aakhus suggest that decision-processes are governed by both *explicit* and *implicit* reasons, where the former include material factors like price, design and utility, and the latter refers to perceptions on the symbolic level; images associated with the mobile, the subject's attitudes towards technology etc. (2002).

4.3 The discussion of needs and desirability

On that note I will now discuss another assumption pervading mobile telephone representation: The idea that development of the mobile telephone and related services are derived from *our needs*. Mobilisation rhetoric argues that a) we want to stay connected, and b) we desire new and more advanced tools to communicate with each other. This apparently implies a uniformity of aspirations and attitudes towards mobile telephone innovations; yet given the apparent diversity in use patterns and general outlook we may question whose needs are indeed being met, and to which extent it is really a question of needs at all.

4.3.1 The contingency of need

The majority of mobile owners spoke of specific circumstances that made the mobile a viable option, like lack of fixed lines in the student dwelling, easier communication with work, and physical isolation in a boarding school or during civil service. Safety and general availability were also prominent factors. As suggested above, the level of enthusiasm concerning acquisition varied a great deal. Concerning ownership, all the interviewees recognized the convenience of having a functional mobile phone, but only four of them thought it important to upgrade their phone unless it was broken.

The need for constant integration of new functions like MMS technology currently promoted in massive marketing campaigns was questioned by all the respondents. It was generally not seen as a need in the basic sense, yet some of the subjects perceived the *convenience* of this development. Again the response was divided, ranging from one of the users who intended to acquire it as soon as her finances would allow it, to another that didn't see the relevance of these functions to mobile telephone communication in the first place[16]:

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[16] Interview with Marij (20) conducted in "Twee Heeren" bar, Maastricht, May 26th 2003.

> INTERVIEWER: […] Can you think of anything they tell you that you should be able to do with [the mobile phone], or what kind of uses they try to…
> MARIJ (20): Well the most amazing things, it's completely ridiculous I'd say, with the music, the Internet, the ring tones, the… whatever.
> INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that's ridiculous?
> MARIJ: Because it's a phone! (Laughs) It should be a phone.
> INTERVIEWER: It should be meant for calling and talking to people?
> MARIJ: Yeah, that's it.

Evidently, the integration of ever more functions was not uniformly desired. Similarly, there were different attitudes to the concept of being constantly connected. One of the respondents said that he felt very uncomfortable without the ability to reach and be reached, stressing the compatibility of the dislocated mobile phone with his dynamic lifestyle. Others felt that constant availability was too much of a disruption in their daily lives, and preferred to leave the mobile off much of the time. The main difference seemed to be the emphasis of urgency. Communication was important to all of them, but most felt that the need to stay instantly available at all times in case of an emergency or potentially pressing matters was exaggerated. Yet instant and constant availability remains one of the biggest selling points of mobile phones.

4.3.2   The reality of needs

Some authors argue that marketing designers are creating idealized and constructed consumer figures with no actual reference to reality, playing on our fantasies and desires by assembling images, contexts and values considered attractive to potential consumers and presenting them as needed. They originally serve as models to be imitated by consumers, or suggested ways to make use of the product. Accordingly, new products do not necessarily correspond to existing demands, rather, needs and desires are invented or constructed to fit the product (Weber 2002; Ainamo & Pantzar 1999; du Gay et al. 1997). This view was supported by the majority of interviewees, who felt the need for mobile phones was treated as self-evident in mobile marketing. Two of the interviewees made an analogy to drug-pushing, in the sense that

mobile companies initially offer their services for free or at reduced costs, to get consumers "addicted"[17].

> INTERVIEWER: You think media and the commercials follow up on the addiction theme?
> LOTTE (18): Oh definitely, yeah. Because they give you all this free money to call, just to make you addicted to calling. So they just want to create like a habit, like a mobile phone behaviour so, you'll just, buy more and more credits in the future. They give you free money as well, so they just want you to get used to it. Because I think I paid like 25 €and I think I got like 20 €free. I mean, how obvious is that? (laughs)

It is not difficult to substantiate this view: As I write this, Norwegian telecommunications companies Telenor and Netcom are currently providing MMS services for free over a period originally meant to last from June throughout August 2003, that has been extended to last out October. There is little doubt that this is intended to get people who otherwise would abstain from adopting MMS acquainted and comfortable with it, developing a stable habit for the two companies to profit from when they start charging fees later on.

This raises questions as to whose needs are met, and whether desires truly originate among the users themselves. Most of the interviewees agreed that the need for mobile phones was often exaggerated, pointing to the fact that everyone got along just fine before we had mobile phones. Yet does that mean that adopted user practices are "false"? Created or not, to the extent mobile a mobile telephone function gains popularity and consumers integrate it in their everyday life, the perceived "need" for it may become manifest and reinforced in consumer practices. Following Baudrillard, du Gay et al. (1997) argues against the distinction of needs as true or false: Needs are first and foremost cultural, or constructed according to what we *perceive* to be real (Dillof 2000). Accordingly, mobile telephone technologies may come to be perceived as necessary as they become part of the social environment, even

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[17] Interview with Lotte (18) conducted in the UM library, June 10th, 2003

though they are initially imposed. Several of the respondents admitted that they had changed

their attitudes towards the mobile after experiencing it as a convenient and flexible device.

This is *not* to say there is an automatic correlation between ideal user types of

Mobilisation and actual consumers. Rather, consumers interpret the importance of products

according to their own perception, and while some dismiss new technologies as unnecessary,

others may give them essential roles in their lives. This point was made by a female student

when discussing the "need" for mobile telephone small talk:

> ANONYMOUS[18]: They can be talking about something stupid like their cat or
> their dog, and I don't think it's important, but for them maybe it is.
> INTERVIEWER: But they're probably not gonna lose their jobs or fail their
> exams because they don't talk about their dogs?
> ANONYMOUS: I don't know.
> INTERVIEWER: Let's say it was important, for what?
> ANONYMOUS: Yeah for them, socially!
> INTERVIEWER: Just to keep up contact?
> ANONYMOUS: Yes.
> INTERVIEWER: So you think the mobile is important that way?
> ANONYMOUS: For some people, yes.

To conclude, my findings suggest that the Mobilisation assumptions that consumers by

default demand better mobile products and generally desire constant availability and access

are questionable, as many responses expressed opposing attitudes. The Mobilisation campaign

seems to have a considerable performative effect in the sense that suggested user types come

to be reflected in actual user practices, yet consumption practice are hardly predetermined by

representation: Rather the appropriation of new mobile technologies is contingent on the

consumers' perception of their benefit, which may or may not become apparent through the

experiences of actual use.

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[18] Interviewee requested anonymity, interview conducted in Maastricht city park, June 2nd 2003.

4.4   Revisiting ideographs: Free to choose in a world of fun?

The Mobilisation discourse presents a rather one-sided view of the mobile phone's benevolent potential, the inherent value of technological progress and individual freedom to organize leisure, social life and career according to personal choice. As I argued earlier, such a perspective assumes the relation between the individual and the mobile phone as existing in a vacuum separated from surroundings. Real life experiences show that mobile interaction is a negotiation of spaces, physical, mental and personal. I will attempt to demonstrate that freedom and choice are contingent on time, place and the presence of others, and that individual perceptions vary a great deal.

4.4.1   Constraints and pressure

The mobile can indeed be an invaluable asset, yet it can also be source of intrusion. It is not simply a neutral subject to our will, as suggested in the Mobilisation campaign, it influences us in return. By nature, it is an open portal to a network of friends, relatives colleagues etc. that does not discriminate regarding the sensitivity of surroundings. The presence of a mobile thus implies the constant potential for outside intervention. In a sense, the mobile is a third factor in a social setting, placing its own demands (Katz & Aakhus 2002; Plant 2002), that do not always coincide with our intentions. Following Winner (1986) the mobile is politically charged, in that it changes the terms of a social setting. That perception is reflected in this response:

> LOTTE (18): […] I was cycling this morning and I was very conscious of the mobile in my bag. I felt like a little antenna sitting on my head you know, like everyone knows where you are right now.

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Two others similarly remarked how they felt the constant availability potential inherent in the mobile as an encroachment. Contrary to the Mobilisation ideals, freedom for them included *not* being connected.

> INTERVIEWER: […] What is freedom to you?
> NIELS (22)[19]: Difficult question… Freedom with me is to set things aside for a moment. You work Monday to Friday, you study, and then in the weekends you can do totally different things. […]
> INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that you're not away from things if you have a mobile phone with you?
> NIELS: Yeah, then you're connected with the working society, with my studies, connected with that kind of stuff.
> INTERVIEWER: So it's also a kind of obligation with the mobile phone?
> NIELS: Yeah, yeah.

Unlike a walkman or a camera, the functions of a mobile telephone largely require that others possess compatible devices. Mobiles are connected in networks, and consequently their use-value increases in proportion to the number of other users available. This premise has implications for the concept of choice, manifest in different types of *social pressure*. Katz & Aakhus (2002) similarly point out the conforming nature of this aspect as one of the general principles within their *Apparatgeist* theory. First of all, the mobile tends to take precedence over other means of communication in social environments (Plant 2002), especially due to unique functions like SMS, its closeness to the body and the fact that people are not always available on fixed phones or other ICTs. The more communication is channelled through mobile phones, the risk of social exclusion looms over non-users, as the flexibility introduced pervades social organization. Last-minute arrangements, also labelled "approximeeting", have largely replaced fixed appointments, increasing the role of the mobile phone as a social anchor (Plant 2002; Haddon 2000) Accordingly, users may become frustrated when unable to reach the recipient at their leisure, thus exerting pressure on non-users. Some of the interviewees pointed out that non-use requires *active resistance*, rather than being a simple

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[19] Interview with Niels(22) conducted at Edd's Café, Maastricht, May 27th, 2003.

matter of preference. The constant availability made possible similarly leads to expectations of users to stay available. A common argument is that you can always switch the mobile off, yet this may cause negative reactions, as Mark (27)[20] came to realize:

> INTERVIEWER: What about the constant availability?
> MARK: I don't have a problem with that. Cause when I don't want people to call me I just switch my phone off or I don't answer it. I don't find it an intrusion in my life cause *I* switched it on. It's my choice to be open.
> INTERVIEWER: But when it's off people can't reach you. Ever get any hassle for that?
> MARK: No no. Well sometimes it can be a bit difficult when you're trying to reach somebody. It's very rare that someone has the phone switched off for two days. You're questioning what the fuck is going on? And you get annoyed by that, when you can't reach somebody. In a way you expect that people that have a phone keep it on so that you can call them whenever you want.

Thus the element of choice may present a conflict of interest; as mobile interaction involves situations where one action comes at the expense of another. So it is not simply a matter of choice, but *whose* choice.

4.4.2   Spaces and social friction

The mobile phone as a source of social friction is well documented in contemporary research (Ling 2001; Haddon 2000; Fortunati 1997; Basset et al. 1997; Katz & Aakhus 2002), yet it is conveniently overlooked in the Mobilisation campaign, with its emphasis on individual freedom. In spite of general diversity of attitudes, all the interviewees shared a clear and articulate distinction of private and public, based on negative experiences caused by the mobile's potential to bring the two together. In contrast to the popular slogan of "anywhere, any time", it was generally considered that certain spaces and situations were unsuitable for private conversations, and some did not allow mobile communication at all. Obvious examples are in cinemas during shows, lectures in session and expensive restaurants. These

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[20] Interview with Mark (27) conducted in his home in Maastricht, June 10th 2003

carry tacit norms of conduct linked to Goffman's concept of frontstage (1959), where the

pressure to keep up a social front is relatively higher than other places. The larger the

frontstage factor, the bigger the mobile's disruption potential becomes. Otherwise, public

spaces such as public transport, busy shopping streets etc. were also seen as generally

unsuitable for communication other than silent messaging and brief chats. Mobile chirps,

beeps and loud talk from others were often seen as an unwelcome intrusion into personal

space, linked to bad timing and inescapability (Fortunati 1997), sometimes likened to noise

pollution or smoking, prompting the same negative social responses. Likewise, unexpected

incoming calls can cause social embarrassment for the recipient as he or she is "caught out of

character" and the social front is disrupted (Ling 2001 p.8). As a consequence, the freedom to

communicate sometimes carries the danger of social repercussion, unless necessary measures

are taken.

Mobilisation rhetoric often promotes the mobile's ability to bring people closer, which

is certainly true in many cases. Yet simultaneously, mobile phones disrupting face to face

conversation were major sources of irritation among the interviewees. Again, the mobile

induces a clash between interests, where both cannot be indulged at the same time. Several

interviewees considered it rude if the recipient would simply switch his attention to the caller.

This was perceived as disrespectful behaviour, depending on the importance of the

conversation.

> ANONYMOUS: […] Most of the time when I walk in Maastricht and I see
> someone who calls and talks loudly, I think "don't you know there are other
> people around you that don't want to hear what you are saying?" And
> sometimes it's really annoying when I'm talking to a friend, and someone calls
> him, he picks up the phone, and I'm sitting there –nice. I thought I was talking
> to you, not waiting for you so that you can talk to others.

Although the mobile phone was praised for its convenience and flexibility, the lack of norms

concerning mobile behaviour was lamented as its biggest downside. This was attributed to the

variety of awkward situations that might occur if people didn't show each other proper courtesy. A recurring and most relevant point in the responses was that freedom and choice within mobile behaviour occasionally is exercised at the expense of others, and that freedom comes with responsibility:

> INTERVIEWER: Do you think people are […] more concerned with acting properly with the mobile phone?
> NIELS(22): A bit. […] It became an issue, just as smoking, I think. Because when you take that freedom, your freedom ends where the other one's begin, so. That's the main idea. You're interfering with other people's lives when you're talking loudly on the phone.

4.4.3   The need for mobile etiquette

All the respondents stressed the need for appropriate behaviour, or mobile etiquette, to alleviate the negative potential of the mobile phone and integrate it seamlessly into the physical environment.. Many were provoked by what they perceived as indiscreet and unnecessary flaunting of mobile phones in public. As mentioned in section 2.4, the scope of mobile interaction includes the entire local setting. Callers thus operate on a double frontstage (Ling 2001), which calls for new sets of communicational competence in order to avoid intrusion and negative social reactions (Plant 2002). As such, successful *impression management* (Goffman 1959) includes tacit sensibility towards the co-present environment, and the ability to properly situate oneself towards others while simultaneously operating the mobile.

> The use of the mobile phone in public means that one needs to develop a repertoire of gestures that will make the boundary between themselves and the other co-present individuals obvious. In a sense, they owe it to others who are present to make their status as a telephonist clear. This is done to avoid any undue embarrassment to either party.
>
> (Ling 2001, p. 5)

The interviewees suggested the value of gestures like a brief apology before answering a call, switching to silent mode for incoming calls etc. to alleviate the possible clash between the two levels of communication. However, the general consensus was that many still showed little regard for their surroundings, and that improper behaviour remains a common nuisance. Most respondents argued that mobile behaviour revealed clues about the user in question. Particularly, inappropriate behaviour would *give off* (Goffman 1959) a negative impression. Based on their observations, several interviewees suggested rough distinctions between those prone to public display and those more moderately inclined, like selfish vs. empathic, exhibitionist vs. embarrassed and attention seekers vs. normal people. Similarly, Plant (2002) generally distinguishes between "innies" and "outies" (p.32), where *outies* correspond to the less restrictive, outwardly active users, and *innies* the reserved ones averse to public attention. Apparently, the bulk of respondents would categorize themselves as *innies*, whereas conspicuous behaviour and perceived attempts to *give* (Goffman 1959) specific impressions were generally frowned upon.

> INTERVIEWER: Do you think people are conscious when using the phone?
> LUC (21)[21]: Well I think some people, of course that some people will answer their phone in a certain way or have their volume turned up so loud that everyone hears it and ah, but those are kind of shallow people who thinks that this is a status symbol, and most people will just go "ah God, go away", you know.

Mobile behaviour was often attributed to personality traits like level of empathy and social education (or lack thereof), suggesting the applicability of Bourdieu's habitus-concept (1991), in that diversity of mobile manners seems to derive from categories of personal character rather than belonging to a social group.

> INTERVIEWER: But do you think that everybody is as concerned with that as you are?

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[21] Interview with Luc (21) conducted in his home in Maastricht, May 22nd 2003.

> OLIVIER (25)[22]: No, because you have different educations, you will never…
> INTERVIEWER: What do you mean education?
> OLIVIER: More family education, the values that you get, the basic principles.
> INTERVIEWER: So you think it's a matter of individual character?
> OLIVIER: Yeah.

The apparent priority given to etiquette by the respondents might be due to the specific assembly of the interviewees, and their desire to present themselves favourably. The respondents typically testified to the presence of alternative motivations among peers, like desires to appear socially eligible, style-conscious and advanced, and then sought to distance themselves from them. Possibly, the proper behaviour outlined represents ideals that may or may not be followed consistently. As Lotte (18) justly noted, it is easier to observe others than oneself.

Still, people exert moral pressure on each other by responding to perceived inappropriate behaviour. Accordingly mobile conduct is largely shaped through experience, with the "Golden Rule" as guiding principle; most of the interviewees said they avoided activities they knew to be annoying from personal experience. The manner of response is often subtle in the form of gazes, modest exclamations or excluding body language, although some were not afraid to notify their peers directly. Several respondents described how breaking conventions would result in unwanted attention and embarrassment, like stares, sarcastic comments etc. Paola (22) commented on disruption of lectures, which is likely to provoke significant reactions:[23]

> INTERVIEWER: So it's sort of a social response, to tell that something's either cool or bad?
> PAOLA: Yeah. But it's like a rule. If you do it, then you did something wrong and you're embarrassed.
> INTERVIEWER: It's a rule you say, like a written rule?
> PAOLA: No, it's unwritten. But if you break it, you really notice it.

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[22] Interview with Olivier (25) conducted at the UM Library, Maastricht, June 6th 2003.
[23] Interview with Paola(22) conducted at Techiyo Guest house, Maastricht, June 8th, 2003.

Contrary to the view of the mobile as facilitating individual freedom and escaping constraints, the responses generally comply with significant prior research (Ling 2001; Fortunati 1997; Plant 2002; Katz & Aakhus 2002) that advocate the *need* for rules, norms and etiquette to circumvent the potential for conflict and disruption connected to mobile phones. However, consensus on which norms should apply where might be inherently difficult to achieve, as people of different character, age and disposition will have different standards of behaviour.

4.5   The negotiation of meanings in social spaces

On that note, I will continue to discuss the parameters for mobile telephone conduct, and suggest possible relations between personal motivation, social context and the interpretive flexibility of norms and values.

4.5.1   The setting of social negotiation

The mobile telephone is still a relatively recent addition to the social scene, and though people are becoming accustomed to its presence, the meanings attached to it and concepts of acceptable behaviour are still contested. The mobile phone has opened for a confusion of private and public spheres, and new situations for which no prior reference exists. This unpredictable potential is expanded by the steady integration of new functions into mobile devices. In this sense, *collective representations* (Goffman 1959) of the mobile phone behaviour are continuously shaped through interaction processes of trial and error within user experience. Conflicting interpretations are brought to bear on the nature of mobile behaviour, and various actors are locked in symbolic struggles to gain authority to impose their definition on the given situations. In this context, my focus will be on interaction between users.

The interviewees often gave accounts describing diversity of attitudes, and the absence of commonly accepted norms. Luc (21) described such a morality-clash with his former girlfriend:

> LUC: [She] was always on the telephone, even when I was there for the weekend, and she would just constantly be on the mobile phone.
> INTERVIEWER: Did you talk about that?
> LUC: Yeah I called her (laughter).
> INTERVIEWER: And how did she respond to that?
> LUC: Not very well! (Laughter)
> INTERVIEWER: Why is that, do you think?
> LUC: Cause she was being very self-important.
> INTERVIEWER: So she didn't see it the same way?
> LUC: -She didn't realise that she was being very rude and basically ignoring me.

This situation could possibly be attributed to aspects of their particular relationship; however they clearly advocated conflicting perceptions of the same situation. Olivier (25) recalled how he attempted to exercise moral pressure on a nearby caller by staring indignantly at him, to no avail as the caller simply ignored him and continued talking. Thus public spaces and interpersonal relations are sometimes the stage for symbolic struggles between different interpretations of context and courtesy. Yet this negotiation is not always direct, public spaces harbour a multitude of coexisting mobile behaviours and practices that mutually influence each other.

4.5.2   Mobile phones and the notion of selfhood

Through the Mobilisation campaign, user experiences and the compatibility of the mobile with certain activities, different identities, values and discourses become attached to the mobile phone. Gradually it has become a symbol of modernity, urbanism, business performance, and recently a fashion and lifestyle accessory (Myerson 2001; Kotro & Pantzar 2002), as people have picked up on the potential of its *wearability*[24]. Its role as an integrated part of people's physical features has become more complex, both as a result of modified design and user awareness of its expressive features. The emphasis on look, feel and sound,

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[24] Defined as "The interaction between the human body and the wearable object" (www.ices.cmu.edu/design/wearability/).

and the mobile's ability to embody both sophisticated functions and recognizable identities has made it one of the most potent parts of our expressive equipment in frontstage environments, ubiquitously employed in social performances as part of our impression management (Goffman 1959; Ling 2001; Persson 2001).

What is communicated on the symbolic level is social belonging, status, personal qualities, or facets of identity and character. Following Goffman, these identities are *performed*, as users emphasise the aspects perceived as consistent with their desired image of self. Studies conducted show that people often employ their mobiles in signifying practices to make circulating associations work for them. Examples are communicating social viability and personal success through frequent calling, full phone-lists and message inboxes (Ling & Yttri 2002). Similarly, modern "just in time"-lifestyles, busy schedules and successful membership in modern society may be implied by emphasising lack of time, communicating on the run, manipulating the mobile phone's compatibility with movement and brevity (Fortunati 1997). Several of the interviewees confirmed the tendency for some people to engage in what Max (23)[25] coined as "living out the ads", by actively associating themselves with the user images from representation. Accordingly users may adopt and reinforce images, identity and styles they perceive as enhancing their appearance, or compatible with their personality. As such, the mobile's symbolic importance varies with levels of fashion consciousness, desire to be noticed, the drive to exhibit technological aptitude etc. People may acquire the latest mobile gadgets to boost their social *front*, without necessarily intending to exploit their technical functions. Hence mobile phones may be trendy, or old-fashioned and outdated, assuming the characteristics of fashion. Accordingly, several interviewees related how old phones would be ridiculed with remarks like "Come on, are you going out with a remote control?" (Paola, 22).

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[25] Interview with Max (23) Conducted at the UM library, Maastricht, May 24th 2003.

On the other hand, user images and practices are flexibly interpreted by different people and potentially reconfigured according to the norms, identity and intention(s) of the actor. Following Weber's concept of *user de-sign* (2002), people attach their own meanings to mobile telephone use that may differ from those of others. Mark (27) said he avoided SMS-messaging his mates, since he regarded it a feminine activity, whereas "masculine" contact preferably was maintained by calling. While some social actors apparently emulate status- lifestyle- and fashion oriented stereotypes, several interviewees actively *dissociated* themselves from these, averse to giving off impressions associated with the "wrong" character. Niels (22) said he avoided visible use because of the association with modern, dynamic and less empathic urban citizens, arguably to give off an image of the relaxed, alternative, down to earth individual he thought himself to be.

> NIELS: […]You have people that wear it on their belts, then it's some kind of status symbol, they want to show off. For me, I never put it on the table, I'm always a little ashamed of it. […]
> INTERVIEWER: Any thing else you can think about?
> NIELS: that's the main image. It's connected with images of work, the city, of businessmen, the whole machinery of the modern society I think.
> INTERVIEWER: So you don't really feel that it's part of your thing?
> NIELS: No.

Another resented what she perceived as redundant and "wasteful" use of the mobile, like coordinating upcoming meals from the train, and constantly communicating without specific purposes:

> PAOLA (22): Uh… I mean it's kind of, like my friend who uses his mobile only for stupid things, using a lot of money just for stupid stuff […]
> INTERVIEWER: And you don't want to be associated with that kind of thing?
> PAOLA: No.
> INTERVIEWER: But can you say that you are in a way conscious, in that you avoid being seen by others in certain ways?
> PAOLA: I try at least.
> INTERVIEWER: What kind of things do you want to avoid people thinking about you?

> PAOLA: That I'm just a 'Figetta' -in Italian that's a person who's always spending a lot on dresses, using a lot of unnecessary things, so, just using more things than what's useful.

Apparently, these interviewees are by no means *backstage* in front of other people. On the contrary they seem to act according to certain standards of behaviour, while actively dissociating themselves from others. Arguably, these students are every bit as conscious of their social persona as more "flamboyant" users, as they are equally aware of the mobile's role in their structuring of social performance. Thus the main difference appears to be the kind of performance and the identity displayed, not the performance itself. This suggests that variations of mobile phone behaviour are closely linked with the presentation of self, as people embrace or reject practices according to their perception of whom and what they are.

Finally, the social pressure/incentive to uphold certain fronts varies with the social context. Research among teenagers indicates high levels of conformity, fashion consciousness and eagerness to adopt the latest mobile technologies, in contrast to the diverse student responses I received. Several interviewees admitted that they were more impressionable in earlier stages of adolescence, while they were now more self-aware and critical. This notion might be somewhat biased but nevertheless interesting, as it highlights the temporal aspect of user perception (Wyatt et al. 2002); that attitudes change with stages of life. Similarly, it was suggested that emphasis of self-presentation varied with context, i.e. the importance of being presentable is higher during a job-interview than during a study-break at the campus. The conscious performance of identity and employment of the mobile as expressive equipment can therefore be seen in relation to the perceived rewards and requirements of the given context.

4.5.3   Individual manoeuvrability and adaptation to context

Potential for flexible interpretation and related user *de-signs* are also evident in the way users may employ the functions and features of the mobile phone to manipulate the parameters of conduct and interaction.

Although modest at this point, institutionalized regulation of mobile phones is catching up to experiences, as attempts are made to ban mobile use in classrooms, buses and other public spaces. However, as I have observed together with all respondents, rules are often bent, ignored and interpreted flexibly by individuals according to their perception of context and place. The mobile's smallness, silent modes and SMS enable concealed use and the potential of creating one's own little *backstage-environment* undetected by others (Ling & Yttri 2002). This renders explicit rules inherently difficult to enforce.

Similarly, users exploit the features of the mobile phone to assume different roles, or social masks. Incoming call displays and the factor of mobility enables people to adapt to the call by changing location and adopting the suitable *front* before answering. Hence users may choose how they come across according to the priority of the call. It also enables them to screen unwanted calls (ibid.); the mobile thus facilitates manipulation and dishonesty:

> INTERVIEWER: So you always adapt to the call.
> OLIVIER (25): Yeah I think so.
> INTERVIEWER: You think this is common among people?
> OLIVIER: I think most people do it, react like this. And they usually lie, it teaches you how to lie.
> INTERVIEWER: How's that?
> OLIVIER: Well because after you meet your friend and he asks why you didn't pick up the phone, you say that you couldn't, but maybe you could. You'll never know, I will call it a white lie.
> INTERVIEWER: So it gives you the option to make your own little story?
> OLIVIER: Yeah.

The mobile is sometimes linked to a means of control for parents, lovers, employers etc. who want to check on the whereabouts of the person in question (Fortunati 1997; Ling & Yttri

2002). Yet the mobile may give a false sense of security, as the ability to creatively "fill in the blanks" concerning location and activity enabled by its dislocated nature may be employed to distort the picture conveyed to callers on the other end, to escape control and limit one's availability. Similarly, the fact that mobile communication ranges from partly to wholly inaccessible to co-present listeners, gives the user the ability to display information about him- or herself, staging exciting phone calls or consciously emphasising parts of conversations "To inform the audience that this is a person with a life, a person of the mobile world" (Plant 2002, p.49).

In this section I have argued that the lack of established conventions leaves room for a symbolic negotiation through which people may seek authority for their own interpretation of mobile behaviour through interaction. Beside its instrumental functions, its symbolic qualities renders the mobile a potent signifier, thus it is widely employed to communicate individual characteristics. Furthermore, uses of the mobile change with conditions and context. Lastly, its features may be employed to manipulate appearance and availability.

4.6   The role of consumers in the circuit of development

Above I have suggested that the diversity of user practices and attitudes towards mobile telephone behaviour largely derives from non-material factors like identity, norms, morality and individual perception, and that the codes of mobile telephone conduct is negotiated on a symbolic level between people in everyday experiences. How then, are these processes connected to the physical realities of mobile telephone development? I will attempt to point out some guidelines, drawing upon the COC (Circuit Of Culture) approach.

The explosive proliferation of mobile phones might seem to support Winner's concept of *technological somnambulism* (1986); the idea that we are accepting new technology as progress without reflection. Yet in its crudest form, it would do injustice to the evident levels

of consciousness among consumers, and fail to explain the negotiation processes between different attitudes and interpretations described above. Production and representation may constrain and influence our choices, but the existing diversity in consumer practices proves that they are not the only deciding factors (du Gay et al. 1997). Nor are social interaction and user agency. Winner's concept is certainly relevant, when applied in specific contexts:

As I have argued in chapter 3, mobile telephone representation largely encourages uncritical consumption, advocating the view that mobile innovation is by default for the better. In this sense, technological somnambulism on behalf of potential consumers is actively promoted. And there is little doubt that mobile marketing campaigns have a considerable influence. To the extent the constructed cultural frames and promises of technologically facilitated happiness prevail in the eyes of some consumers, and the designers and marketers believe in the unbridled potential they propose, one might say technological somnambulism is alive in both representation and consumption.

Also, individuals who indulge in degrees of conspicuous consumption, that is, acquiring the latest mobile technology with the motivation of display, self-promotion and social status might not be particularly aware of potentially profound effects on their way of life and social organization. Yet the presence of conscious motivation, albeit non-instrumental in nature, might prove a counterargument against somnambulism in the original sense of the word. Perhaps "voluntary somnambulism" is more suitable, as these users make the cultural language of representation serve their own purposes, and willingly submit themselves to the demands of constant adaptation without pausing to reflect, as the perceived social gains outweigh fears of losing control and technological dependency. This would partially de-victimise the users in question compared to Winner's standard view, and also allow for a higher degree of user consciousness in relation to mobile phone technology.

However, the evidence of articulate and well-reflected views, attitudes and observations concerning mobile telephone use, the impact of technology, marketing strategies etc. among the interviewees goes against any general application of technological somnambulism, and supports the notion of conscious consumer agency, the potential for user de-sign and active participation in the social shaping of mobile technology. Also, my findings suggest that interaction with others, social pressures and encouragement in everyday situations has the biggest influence on how we perceive the mobile phone. Other users' behaviour may serve to taint the perception of mobile technology, but it may also influence people's preconceptions in a positive way, as Niels (22) asserted:

> NIELS: I think my girlfriend showed me that you can also use the mobile phone in a normal way, without irritating other people. When she first bought it I thought "oh no, stupid thing", but she didn't irritate me so now I'm convinced that I could have one.

Relations to friends, family and peers are typically the arenas for more intimate acquaintance with mobile technologies, where one is introduced to new gadgets and practices. It is also the stage for *direct* and continuous interaction and feedback concerning meanings and practices of mobile telephony, whereas mobile representation exerts more static and unilateral influences.

> INTERVIEWER: Have you been influenced by other people would you say, in the way you look at the mobile phone?
> LOTTE (18): Oh definitely. I wouldn't see any other way that you're influenced about the mobile phone. You see your friends using it all the time, um, you see the relevance of it and the irrelevance as well…

Mobile telephone marketers appear to have realized this, and attempt to make the dynamics of human interaction work for them indirectly by stimulating our desires to stand out, impress and initiate trends. As demonstrated in chapter 3, efforts to articulate the symbolic value of mobile telephones and their expressive potency vis-à-vis other people often overshadow the

emphasis on technical performance in mobile representation. While claiming to predict our needs, marketers are more concerned with predicting *trends*: To foresee what will catch on in the symbolic and cultural universe of consumers, and provide consumers with symbolic "ammunition" they can apply to their social environment (du Gay 1997; Myerson 2001; Moisander & Ericsson 2002).

Yet the final word lies with consumers. Their response to products and marketing campaigns through consumption drives the wheels of production; no sale, no product. Furthermore, consumers may discover and utilize potential neglected by designers. This is illustrated by two examples from recent mobile history: The launch of WAP technology in Western Europe in early 2000 was preceded by a massive marketing hype heralding it as a wireless Internet revolution, boosting expectations of great potential. However, it did not catch on among users as anticipated, as user experience failed to match these expectations. WAP proved too cumbersome and prone to network failure, and the technical interface was vastly inferior to readily available computer alternatives (McGinity 2000). Consequently it became associated with failure, and gained a bad reputation that caused users to dismiss it. Paola (22) confirmed disregarding WAP after hearing about bad experiences from her friends. Although people bought WAP-telephones in the millions, they rarely used them for Internet connection (ibid.) This caused a huge setback in mobile Internet development in Western Europe, and forced a much more sober approach to the concept on the production side, who had fallen victim of their own hype (McGinity 2000; Zaret 2000).

In contrast, the emergence of SMS-messaging as one of the world's dominant forms of communication was not predicted by mobile manufacturers. It was created in 1992 as part of the first GSM (Global System for Mobile communications) standard, intended for data exchange from network to user (Escolar 2002). Shortly after, the SMS potential was discovered by devoted users who configured it for personal messaging. Being relatively

convenient and a cheap alternative, its popularity grew among cost-aware users by word of

mouth, and then skyrocketed with the introduction of prepaid credits. From March 1999 to

March 2002 the number of SMS messages sent worldwide went from 1,5 billion to 250 billion

(Poninghaus 2003). Users have even developed their own abbreviated grammars, i.e. "brb, cu

l8r" = "be right back, see you later". It was only *after* the success was a fact that

manufacturers and providers caught up, offering related services and adjusted design towards

large, SMS-friendly displays, inbuilt auto-spelling etc. (Escolar 2002; Poninghaus 2003) This

is a prime example of user *de-sign*, and how consumers may spawn new directions in product

development by reconfiguring technological potential in new ways.

Similarly, the success and development of new technologies and functions currently

promoted such as MMS, and the upcoming 3G (3rd Generation) phones with increased

memory and bandwidth will depend on consumer response. This is why current mobile

marketing and design attempts to emulate human experience as closely as possible by

scrutinizing user trends and responses to existing products, and basing their campaigns on

formulas, narratives, trends and currents they know to be popular among most people (Kotro

& Pantzar 2002).

Yet the consumer response and thus the realisation of this potential ultimately depends

on how they are perceived and appropriated among consumers, which in turn is contingent on

the symbolic negotiation of images, meanings and practices among ordinary people. So how

do negotiation processes become manifest in technological change? Their outcomes seem to

lean towards whatever is accepted by a perceived majority of people. As discussed earlier, the

importance of a mobile technology is proportionate to its proliferation in the surrounding

environment, due to its networked nature (Katz & Aakhus 2002), and the tendency for people

to look to each other to work out their norms and attitudes. The more a practice, function or

type of behaviour is adopted and reinforced, the more it becomes accepted as normal among

consumers and vice versa. This notion was supported by most of the interviewees, including those who did not endorse many of the widespread practices.

> INTERVIEWER: Who decides what's ok and what's not?
> MARK (27): I think it's just the force of the numbers. The more people do it, the more accepted it gets. Say four years ago when somebody was phoning on the streets, everybody hated it "oh look he's phoning in the street", -it was not done. And now everybody does it! [I] didn't see it a lot a few years ago. But now I see more and more and more. And then, also my opinion changes. When I see everybody do it, then you know I would more easily do it myself.

This coincides with the constructivist argument that technologies "work" not on their technical merits, but to the extent they are accepted by a wider part of the community (Bijker 1995; Wyatt 1998). The success of a mobile technology or practice can thus be likened to a snowball effect, in that increasing popularity adds to its *momentum* (Katz & Aakhus 1998; Wyatt 1998), making it even more viable in the eyes of potential users. This effect is illustrated by the development of SMS messaging. Likewise, popular scepticism and rejection can cause a negative spiral that deflates promotional efforts and renders the technology/practice in question invalid or undesirable, as was the case with WAP. The same principle largely applies to mobile phone behaviour, as people will adapt according to what is considered normal. Persson (2001) describes how the threshold of acceptable talk in public spaces has been moved due to the increased frequency of intimate mobile conversations, and Ling (2001) shows how callers and co-present listeners develop new strategies to deal with the disruptive elements of mobile communication in public transports.

To recapitulate, I have argued that consumers cannot be generalised as passive receivers of mobile technology. The development of mobile technology is not proportional to scientific advance as suggested in the Mobilisation campaign, rather it is contingent on the processes of negotiation in the field between production and consumption, where users affect the efforts of mobile production to the extent they accept the cultural frames of new products,

reject them, or invent new uses that in turn become integrated in mobile designs. It is thus my suggestion that the deciding factor of mobile telephone development is the outcome of symbolic negotiation of values, identities, norms and practices among consumers themselves. This does not exclude the importance of representation, material constraints and efforts to regulate mobile phone use. Rather these constitute a set of factors that continuously influence, and are influenced by consumer interaction; whether the marketing is convincing enough, how the products correspond to perceived needs, whether price, availability and regulation is worth the effort of acquisition etc. Potentially, a successful marketing campaign can change consumer attitudes, and regulations can limit the frequency of certain practices. My point is that none of these factors determine use *a priori*, one must always look to the reality of consumer experience.

The interplay between the various factors in the circuit of mobile telephone development may render future events hard to predict. Still, consistencies within and potential for development are revealed by identifying the most relevant influences and relations that govern the processes shaping mobile telephone technology. I have attempted to highlight the potential role of consumers in this respect, an endeavour obscured by the apparent lack of concerted efforts and motivations in the form of relevant social groups as outlined in SCOT (Social Construction Of Technology). However, there is clear evidence of symbolic and moral negotiation between individuals. I have previously suggested the importance of mobiles in social performances and the expression of identity within socio-technical constraints. Thus our employment of the mobile as expressive equipment may influence the stabilisation of norms, mobile etiquette and patterns of consumption. We may not have a direct say in the design and promotion of new technology, but we can influence it by making our attitudes and morals manifest in our consumer practices, influencing each other.

Conclusion

There and back again:

Tentative conclusions and thoughts for the future

In light of the diffusion and success of the mobile phone in Western Europe, I have attempted to demonstrate a considerable diversity in practices and attitudes concerning the mobile phone, which the diffusion itself does not explain. I have examined the constraints and dynamics of mobile telephone behaviour, and thereby the potential for consumer choice and freedom, by comparing the rather one-dimensional language of mobile telephone representation with the attitudes and everyday experiences of ordinary people. In the process I have found that our relations to mobile phones largely derive from qualitative factors like identity, context, images and associations, negotiated through social experience. This calls for a qualitative and holistic approach to mobile behaviour and development that includes micro-level human interaction and social context. Given the scope of this research and the limited empirical material, my findings are by no means exhaustive. It is also possible that my close and informal style of interviewing has affected the emphasis of arguments. However, my aim was never to establish a scientific theory, but to show how mobile telephone behaviour and development constitute complex and open-ended processes subject to perception, interaction and creativity, rather than facts, causality and predictability.

The symbolic shaping of the mobile

The mobile telephone is more than a value-neutral instrument or a purely technical artefact. It is a multi-faceted entity of ambiguous nature with political qualities that carries influence on the surrounding environment, while being moulded and shaped through its roles in our social and cultural world. As I hope to have shown, the mobile phone constitutes a powerful symbol and signifier, a carrier of meanings and identities, the fluid nature of which allows for parallel interpretations. As such mobile communication is partly exercised on a symbolic level, making it a significant facet of our presentation of who we are. Meanings and images connected to the mobile phone are not fixed, rather they are contested by different actors attempting to gain authority of definition.

As illustrated in chapter 3, manufacturers and service providers try to persuade consumers to accept their *cultural frames* through massive efforts collectively termed the Mobilisation campaign, promoting the mobile phone in its ever changing forms as essential for our modern lifestyle, along with the benefits of unrestricted use. Similarly, the conspicuous presence of the mobile in social environments drives an ongoing negotiation among consumers to define its role in the social environment and suitable norms of conduct. Rather than clearly defined and relevant social groups, I have suggested that actors in this negotiation are informed by individual interpretations contingent on personal education and character that crosscut divisions of age, gender and social origin.

The symbolic nature of the mobile phone is also embodied in the design processes, which are very much about capturing currents, trends and images from society and making them manifest in form and function. Thus, mobile telephone design is intended to appeal to our sense of aesthetics, desires and notions of identity as well as our instrumental needs. As such, "experts" on mobile phones are not singly recruited among engineers and scientists, but

also anthropologists, trend-analytics, artists and the like. Far from being a mere reflection of scientific progress, mobile telephone development entails heavy elements of creativity and contingency. It is also *socially shaped* in the sense that it is the result of an ongoing dynamic interaction between production and consumption, where the designers attempt to emulate and foresee potential users as closely as possible, thereby influencing consumers while at the same time being influenced by them –indeed, mobile designers, marketers and producers *are* users themselves. Also, mobile telephone development hinges on favourable consumer response, a factor made more crucial by the relative importance of non-material factors like style and identity. Thus development of mobile telephone development is hardly linear, but contingent on a host of factors only partly accessible to designers, and ultimately depending on consumers.

The interplay of mobile telephone development

However, there is no doubt that the forces of production and representation have a great influence on consumption, and our ability to actively use, shape and reconfigure the meanings, practices and functions of the mobile phone exist within a set of *technical and social constraints*: As discussed in chapter 4, its inherent political qualities constitute a set of premises that influence interaction settings much like a third party. The permeation of mobile communication into the personal spaces of co-present others prompt social reactions in the form of moral pressure or encouragement, placing new demands of mobile etiquette and communicational competence on users to avoid social embarrassment. Therefore, concepts of freedom and choice should be attached to the questions "for whom?" and "when?" These are consistencies in what Katz & Aakhus refer to as the *strain of direction of change* (2002), or generally stable premises that have a compelling effect on mobile behaviour.

Likewise, we are not merely uncritical recipients of mobile phone technology, as we bring our personal interpretive frames to bear on the technical and symbolic potential proposed through the Mobilisation campaign. People are not perfectly rational towards new technologies, nor is everyone equally adept or motivated to tackle the efforts to integrate new functions and devices in their lives. This in turn influences their range of choices in addition to taste and perceived needs. The diversity of attitudes and motivations among consumers gives rise to a *symbolic negotiation* of meanings and practices. In this process we may gain authority for our own perception of acceptable behaviour and the identities we attach to mobile telephones through our signifying practices involved in the presentation of self towards others, and moral influence exerted through our interaction in public spaces. Likewise, technological potential and possible modes of consumption are not predetermined by the forces of production and representation. Through practices of *user de-sign*, users may employ and reconfigure existing functions in new and unanticipated ways that differ from standard or intended practices.

Representation and regulation of mobile phones, along with the afore mentioned socio-technical constraints constitute a set of symbolic and material processes that interact with each other in an open-ended feedback cycle or a *circuit of culture*, within which consumer interaction takes place. Several factors influence and are influenced by human interaction, but it is my contention that the symbolic negotiation between consumers is the key process to the development of the mobile phone. This argument is based on two underlying principles: First, meanings, values and practices associated with the mobile phone are only articulated and realised through actual use, and can not be accurately predicted outside human experience. Second, the importance of the mobile as a piece of our expressive equipment and carrier of meanings and values, has exceeded that of technical performance. This is evident both in the massive focus on non-material aspects in the Mobilisation

campaign, and the accounts from ordinary people concerning the role of mobile phones in their lives. Hence, the concept of the mobile telephone *can not* be separated from human behaviour and perception. It should be viewed as an amalgamation between material artefact and symbolic qualities, similar to Katz & Aakhus' *Apparatgeist* (2002). To make the connection explicit, symbolic negotiation unfolds through use and experience, and human behaviour, identity and meanings are always worked out in relations between people.

This leads to the conclusion that we as consumers ultimately look to each other. We evaluate our presentation of self by the social responses to our mobile behaviour, and we estimate the usefulness of new functions by their proliferation in our social circle or perhaps their perceived ability to gain peer approval. Mobiles with sophisticated exchange functions are of limited practical use if nobody else has them, discouraging investment. Yet people wanting to attract attention may buy them *because* they are rare. It follows that the choices we make and the habits we form are shaped by our relations to others. As I argued in chapter 4, functions and practices are either rejected, normalised or manipulated through the outcome of the symbolic negotiation among people, which is in turn manifest in the increasing or deflating momentum concerning consumer adoption of these. What is perceived as normal and widespread gains foothold and vice versa. This does not mean that everyone eventually conforms, rather, the general directions of mobile phone development and formation of conventions are contingent on power relations and influence among consumers.

I have argued that consumer trends, attitudes and practices are the main inspiration for mobile telephone design and that we as consumers are the ultimate judges of mobile product viability by our responses to them. In light of this, my overall conclusion is twofold: First, we have the potential to configure meanings and practices of mobile phone behaviour according to our own minds by bringing our own interpretive frames to bear on the symbolic and material properties of the mobile phone. Our ability to do so is not unlimited however, but

existing within a set of socio-technical constraints, contingent on social context. Second, since important aspects of the mobile phone are largely of a symbolic nature, and that these are contingent on human interaction, we shape the development of the mobile phone indirectly, by influencing and being influenced by others through our practices of consumption.

Some thoughts for the road

I have not tried to assess mobile phone technology in terms of good or bad, rather I have attempted to demonstrate that it entails ambiguous qualities, and that its potential is contingent on time, place, context and the flexible interpretation of users. Constituting a potential lifesaver, great professional advantage and indispensable social anchor on the one hand, it is also a source of constant interruption, stress and a reminder of the working life obligations on the other. Considering the explosive development of mobile phone communication in the past decade, the danger of losing touch with the essence of interpersonal communication and control over our own private space seems imminent. However, the young men and women I interviewed displayed a significant level of reflection and critical awareness of the issues surrounding the mobile phone, which bodes well for their ability to cope with change.

Whether we like it or not, mobile telephone technology is a part of our lives unlikely to become irrelevant in coming years. The rate of technological change will hardly slow down in the future, more likely, it will continue to accelerate. However, the course of the technological development is far from set, and we are all part of the social and cultural environment it derives from, since our relation to the mobile phone forms the basis for its functions and design. Therefore it is of crucial importance for us to maintain a critical sense of reflection and acknowledge the downsides of mobile telephone communication, as well as its benefits. The point is not to *avoid* change or try to reverse it, but to ensure that we appropriate

the mobile telephone technology in a manner that is in the best possible interest to ourselves and the people around us.

It is to this end I have hoped to contribute by writing this thesis, as a tentative guideline concerning how we may approach what is possibly the largest technological phenomenon of our times. Concerning further research with similar aims, I have suggested that notions of causality and prediction should be revised in favour of holistic models of interaction like the COC-approach, with focus on the processes themselves instead of their outcome. In line with the *Apparatgeist*-theory of Katz & Aakhus (2002), I view the concept of mobile telephone technology as inseparable from human behaviour and interaction. Therefore we may understand it better through knowing ourselves, which means including concepts of identity, image, diversity, social context and individual perception from disciplines like sociology, ethnography and psychology into our conceptual toolbox. Consequently, the emphasis should be on real-life experience rather than potential. By refining conceptual approaches upon such principles, we may never be able to predict the future. However we might prepare for possible outcomes, and more importantly comprehend the development that is here and now. In this sense we can still find our way through the waters of social and technological change by fixing lighthouses of insight and understanding.

Appendix

List of interviews:

Anonymous, student of Arts & Culture at the UM, interview conducted in Edd's Café
Maastricht, Monday June 2nd 2003.

Luc Delany (21), Male British student of European Studies at University of Maastricht (UM),
interview conducted at his home in Maastricht, Thursday May 22nd 2003.

Marij Dunk (20) Female Dutch student of European Studies at UM, interview conducted at
Twee Heeren Café, Maastricht, Monday May 26th 2003.

Paola Ferrari (22), Female Italian student of Economics at UM, interview conducted at
Teychio Student Guesthouse, Maastricht, June 8th 2003.

Max Fochler (23), Male Austrian student of Sociology at UM, interview conducted at UM
library, Saturday May 24th 2003.

Niels Schoorlemmer (22), Male student of Science and Technology in Society studies
(Bachelor level) at UM, interview conducted in Edd's Café, Maastricht, Tuesday May
27th 2003.

Annika Schuettler (21), Female German student of European Studies at UM, interview
conducted in Maastricht city park, Tuesday May 27th 2003.

Lotte Van Boxem (18) Female Belgian student of Arts & Culture at UM, interview conducted
at UM library, Maastricht, Tuesday June 10th 2003.

Olivier Vincens (25) Male French student of Business and Finance at UM, interview
conducted at UM library, Friday June 6th 2003.

Mark Willemsen (27), Dutch student of Medicine at UM, interview conducted at his home in
Maastricht, Tuesday June10th 2003.

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