

**Title:**

The Cultural Connect: Mobile Phone Use and Identity

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates the social implications and cultural constructs related to the use of mobile phones, and it explores how this use interacts with, frames and grounds the user's identity and sense of personal agency. The mobile phone conveys an impression of independence – it delivers a sense of individual freedom, fluidity, and mobility. However our consent to the mobile phone's constant presence means that we are relentlessly contactable. A mobile phone is both personal and intimate. It offers us intimacy, yet this capacity for intimate communication may also be appropriated by others, making us unwilling objects of the intimate personal communication practices of other people. It can be used as a substitute for absent friends and it can be visually and technically embellished as a tool for self expression. This paper explores how the mobile phone shapes, and is shaped by, our personal experience.

**Keywords**

Mobile phone, identity, connection, interpersonal communication, discourse analysis

## Introduction

There are few people in Australia today without a mobile phone, or an opinion about them. It has become one of the most common objects that we carry on our person. “It’s always just keys, phone, wallet and then like anything else? Nup” (RP03, 2006, i/v). For this reason the mobile phone is uniquely positioned as a tool for framing and grounding the user’s identity and sense of personal agency. The mobile phone imparts feelings of independence, offering a sense of individual freedom, fluidity, and mobility. However our consent to its constant presence delivers a paradox. We are also very connected and relentlessly contactable. This paper explores how the mobile phone affects, and is affected by, our personal sense of identity.

### Grounding the Work within the Discipline of Communication

The assumption that grounds this research is that all communication takes place in, and requires, a context. Accordingly the project is located within the socio-cultural field of communication; hence relevant to this work are theories that explain, and relate to, ‘communication’ as the product (or process) of the culture and society in which the individual lives. This model of communication acknowledges that when an individual or group communicates they are contextualised within a society, its culture and its history. Therefore an understanding of communication as a complex and culturally contextualised process underpins this research.

### Outline

The Australian Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), in the report *The Social Impact of Mobile Phone Use in Australia: A Review of Data Sources* (DCITA, 2005), identifies a gap in the literature related to the social implications of mobile phones on young Australians in their everyday lives. While the report indicates that there has been some research conducted on the social impact of mobile phones in Australia, it identifies significant areas that

need further research. My research addresses (among other things) the significance of the mobile phone on shaping and validating identity.

The discursive practice of mobile phone use, and the rapid acceleration of meaning formulation associated with both the technology and the communicative possibilities associated with it, are shaping and being shaped by contemporary life. This paper briefly highlights some of the aspects from my research to date that reveal personal experiences and discursive effects of mobile phone use. It discusses how meaning is formed, and how personal identity, agency, style and social behaviour are affected by the use of a mobile phone. By tracking the formation of the discourse of the mobile phone it is possible to unpack the cultural and historical perceptions that structure and affect our daily communication practices and shape our sense of who we are. In this way I aim to show how mobile phone use is personalised by the individual and contextualised by the culture.

I have used the term 'mobile' and 'mobile phone' interchangeably within this paper and my operational definition of 'the discourse of the mobile phone' entails both the object itself and the use of the object by individuals within a specific cultural context. My research involves 18 to 35 year olds in the Hunter region of New South Wales, Australia.

I have taken a qualitative approach (Griffin, 2000; Mason, 1996; Neuman, 2000; Priest, 1996; Travers, 2001), using conventional ethnographic methods of data collection and analysis to investigate the processes of communication that manifest in the existing phenomena of everyday life (Davies, 1999; Flick, 2002; Jensen and Jankowski, 1991). The multiple sources of evidence that have been employed in this project have involved fieldwork and data collection using techniques that include semi-structured interviews, communication diaries, participant observation (via Research Observation Diary), discourse analysis, and observation and analysis of material culture.

Discourse analysis provides a qualitative interpretive approach for analysing the data and in this paper I have used this form of cultural analysis to interpret ‘socially produced meanings’ (Howarth, 2000, p.128). In considering how we make sense of things through the discursive frames encoded within a culture, it is useful to look closely at the discourses, institutions, rules and effects that relate to our use of mobile phones. These boarder concerns are ongoing issues for my research. For this paper however I have confined my discussion to my findings to date that relate to the use of mobile phones to maintain social connection; the use as a substitute for absent friends; and some of the aspects of personal choice that involves self expression and fashion.

In analysing the perceptions and practices described in the data collected to date it is clear that a dynamic discourse surrounds the ownership and use of a mobile phone and that this discourse (or discourses) affects personal identity and has social consequences.

#### Personal and Intimate: the ‘Users’ Sense of Identity’

The mobile phone is not only a practical object with which one communicates but also an object invested with a high degree of symbolic significance and a large factor in the constitution of one’s personal identity (Lobet-Maris, 2003, p. 87).

Many of our autonomous choices about mobile phone use are connected to our identity. There are multiple dimensions to the way people construct a sense of themselves (Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney, 1998; Mansfield, 2000). The mobile phone has evolved as a tool for forming and expressing self-identity. It has become one of the most personal and intimate objects we carry on our person in daily life. It is “the only other device apart from the wristwatch, that we carry with us every day everywhere” (Ahonen, 2004, para 6).

My research reveals many instances where the mobile phone is used as a personal and intimate object which interacts with the user's sense of identity. A simple but clear example from the research is that the mobile phone is always kept in close proximity to the owner. Commonly participants state that they keep their mobile phones within their personal space. One participant when asked 'Where do you keep it?' responded,

If I'm out and about, either in my bag or in my pocket. If I'm at home, next to me, on the desk, or on the kitchen counter if I'm working at the kitchen. At night, either it sits on my desk if it's charging, or it sits on the bed head so I can grab it if it goes off [whilst sleeping] (starts to chuckle) (RP04, 2006, i/v).

Keeping the mobile phone physically close both illustrates and reinforces the psychological closeness and strong affinity we have with our mobile phones. Participants often suggest that they need or want to be contactable, to be available to possible connections. Several respondents said that they were accustomed to receiving texts or calls regularly. One respondent said,

The phone very rarely gets turned off. If I go to the movies it gets turned down. If I go to work it gets turned down and put in my pocket. Yeah I don't ever really turn it off. It stays on me or near me, myself, all the time (RP04, 2006, i/v).

This participant feels the need to keep her mobile phone always on, reinforcing researcher Anthony Lambert's observations in *I connect therefore I am*. He says, "Connection is about people and meanings... connection is from the outset a defining feature of what it means to exist, to develop, to grow and to survive" (Lambert, 2005, para 1-4). This participant is willing to negotiate other discursive rules (professional and entertainment discourses) to ensure that she is available to all possible connections 'all the time'.

Always having a mobile on or near us is just one way we use the mobile to feel connected to others (our social identity) and to reinforce our sense of self. According to Lambert "from the personal to the social, economic and the political, our networks of connection are often the most valuable things

we possess” (Lambert, 2005, para 14). Therefore it is conceivable that without these connections we can feel ‘depressed’ and ‘worried’. This is because the process of connecting with others significantly assists in the production of our sense of self and generates, or extends the options for personal and professional engagement. This is clearly evident in the following participant’s comments. He said the only place he would not take his mobile phone was,

... to the shower. If I was swimming. Like if you are going to get wet I wouldn’t have it, and that’s about it... I was walking around on the weekend and I think all I had on was thongs and my undies and I had my phone tucked down the side of my undies (laughs). So I take it everywhere and if it’s not with me I would be checking it every half an hour or hour. I hate to do that, cause it gets me depressed when I check it and there’s no messages. But if it is in your pocket then at least you don’t have to check it, so you don’t get as worried (RP02, 2006, i/v).

Paradoxically having the mobile phone in such close proximity is on the one hand about *mobility* and not being attached to the one physical place. It is about having a sense of independence, individual freedom and fluidity. However on the other hand, having the mobile phone attached to our person is about being *connected* to people and having intimacy. So in addition to the mobile phone quite literally always being either on, or very close to, the user it often becomes their main tool of communication with their closest family and friends (Communication Diaries and Interviews, 2006). For example one participant highlights this when asked to describe how his life would be different without a mobile phone. The participant described that the mobile phone is often his main tool for maintaining his connection with and relationships to his family and friends. He said without it he felt,

Restricted. Really restricted. Just because... not all my family live in the same state. I’ve got family in Queensland and in Western Australia so it is actually cheaper for me to call from

the mobile than it is to from the land line, so I use that, and they know that they can use that [the mobile phone] to contact me as well (RP01, 2006, i/v).

Consequently the use of the mobile phone as a main tool for connecting and communicating with leaves various traces of intimacy. For example text messages sent and received (including photos via MMS), calls received and dialled in the call register, and voice messages left continue to maintain a connection until they are deleted. The way these traces become meaningful is different for each individual, however a recent British survey for the Science of Spying exhibition found that the most popular choice for keeping track of a partner was by “checking their text messages, with more than half (53 per cent) of those questioned admitting sneaking a peek” (Ninemsn, 2007, para 2). This jumped up to 77 per cent in the 25 to 34 age range (Ninemsn, 2007, para 2). These traces of intimacy (or range of evidence to some), can have serious consequences, as Australian cricketer Shane Warne can attest (The Daily Telegraph, 2005, p. 5). However these text messages, or traces, can also have positive effects. Some users will retain their text messages to refer to later because these messages produce a sense of being connected and cared for. They provide occasions for strong personal connection and leave a lingering trace of intimacy. According to Taylor and Harper this is because these traces embody ‘something of ourselves; the material offering makes tangible something of us as givers and our relationship with the recipient’ (Taylor and Harper, 2003, pp.272-3). The traces are concrete representations of the people they come from; they act or serve in place of the absent person. The mobile phones role of substitution for people is significant because we desire, or have to establish communication and connect with, someone who is absent.

In some exchanges the mobile phone embodies both a sense of self, the other and “becomes an offering of commitment to the relationship” (Taylor and Harper, 2003, p.275). For example, during this research I noticed that I use my mobile phone as an object of intimacy. This was observed and recorded in my own Research Observation Diary (ROD) during a trip in 2006. During this one

week away, the mobile phone was regularly used in bed late at night to connect and communicate with my partner who was approximately 1500kms away. Sleepily we would speak or text via our mobile phones until our final goodnights, with the mobile often being placed either on, or next to the bed (ROD, 2006). This example highlights how the mobile phone does not only leave traces of intimacy, but also how it becomes a substitute for a person when it is the object that connects the user with an intimate other; it becomes an object of intimacy.

The connecting, embodying and substituting aspects of mobile phone use was clearly important in the television series *Jamie's Great Italian Escape* when celebrity chef Jamie Oliver takes his mobile phone to bed with him under the bed covers after talking with his wife (Jamie's Great Italian Escape, 2005). Clearly Jamie Oliver was not just interested in the mobile's functional aspects and the traces that it leaves. There was also 'embodied meaning and ritual' (Taylor and Harper, 2003) in the act of calling his absent wife, whilst he was also substituting the mobile for her absent presence.

This intimate use of the mobile phone is also observed by Kasesniemi in *Mobile messages: Young people and a new communication culture* (2003). Kasesniemi illustrates that in some instances the mobile phone moves from being an 'object of intimacy' to being a substitute for a friend (2003). According to Kasesniemi, "the mobile phone is becoming a very central device that appears almost to be transcending its status as an object to become an instrument for something more important or even a 'companion'" (Kasesniemi, 2003, p229).

The individual, personal and intimate choices that users make have clear consequences for the 'users' sense of identity'. This range of possible embodied meanings are negotiated by personal choice, self expression, and individual style. In this way the personalisation of the object itself also reveals the complex negotiation of self-expression and style.



Personalisation: 'Validation of Users' Identity'

*En masse* we go about defining ourselves through it [our mobile phone], competing with friends or even strangers over the models we use. Which is the coolest? Which is me? Nokia or Ericsson? Vodafone or Motorola? [emphasis in original] (Hassan, 2006, p. 82).

A mobile phone interacts with the user's sense of identity through the user's choice of mobile, and their personalisation of it. Who we are, and how we would like to be understood, can be seen in the mobile we choose and the personal changes we make (or do not make) to the material object itself. Choosing a mobile reveals something about how we understand our place in the world and our sense of self. Do we prefer a 'flip' or a 'candy stick'? What technical features of the mobile phone do we need or want? Furthermore, there are elements of the mobile phone which we may personalise. The process of personalisation in our choice of coloured phone case, ring tone, wallpaper and screensaver all manifest as a sign of our own personal style, a reflection of our agency. The mobile phone is a mass produced artefact of culture. Daniel Miller says that,

Culture is derived as a historical force prior to the existence of any individual subject, but is only realisable through agency. It is therefore the means by which the individual is socialized as a member of a given society, and is, in turn the form of all individual and social creativity (Miller, 1987, p. 81).

Each choice in the decision-making process has a bearing on, and is simultaneously informed by, contemporary cultural trends and already established discourses such as fashion, advertising, friendship, family, entertainment, commerce, community and technology. The selections that users' make about their mobile phones reflect and shape the user's sense of self.

There are many examples from across the globe, of users personalising their mobile phones. For example, researcher Larissa Hjorth investigates the 'distinctly Japanese use of the Keitai' (Hjorth, 2006, 31), in *Fast-forwarding present: The rise of personalisation and customisation in mobile*

*technologies in Japan*. She considers social and cultural aspects of the mobile phone and how active personal customisation is an important part of the mobile technologies history. And researcher Tomoyki Okada discusses Japanese youth's personalisation of mobile media such as ring tones, short messages and cameras, and 'adoption and transformation' of the mobile media landscape in Japan. These things are affected by both individual use and personalisation, as well as 'policy and market conditions' (Okada, 2005). Heather Horst and Daniel Miller's have examined the possession, use and perceptions of the mobile phone in the developing world, in Jamaica. In particular in their discussion of 'possession' they reveal how Jamaicans use fascias, ring tones and screen savers to individualise and personalise their mobile phones (Horst and Miller, 2006).

Here in Australia, users' personalisation of their mobile phones can be seen in often clear but subtle ways. For example, one male participant in my research who was a full-time worker, said he intentionally chose not to physically change the exterior of his mobile with stickers, skins or any other additions, "No, no, I like it to look as it is; I like it to look professional" (RP01, 2006, i/v). Additionally, he made a considered choice when selecting his new handset, "I've had this phone now for about 2 months now, cause it's only a very new model, so I was saving up for it and when it finally became available I bought it (RP01, 2006, i/v).

Here the discursive effects of fashion and professional behaviour combine with the value for making a strong, individualised statement to create a potent link between the mobile phone and the person's sense of self. Whether a user is technologically savvy or a technophobe, the object of the mobile and the technology associated with it reinforce a discursive message, and thus enhance and validate the user's identity and authority. The concept and definition of what it means to be a mobile phone user are socially and culturally constructed. The mobile phone is an artefact of the culture. In many parts of the world the idea of having and using a mobile phone can be seen to be technologically savvy, in the loop and up with the times.

In my research feminine discourse and gendered personalisation was observed as one way to validate a user's identity. For one participant the key reason she chose her mobile was "because it was pink" (RP03, 2006, i/v). This participant had also changed the shell of a previous model to pink and she also used a pink bag, indicating how socio-cultural tools in material form are used to construct identity. In the same way another female participant chose a colour for her mobile that she liked and connected with, "I chose red as soon as I saw the red one [the phone skin]. I was like, oh great I love red. So yeah, yeah I did, just to make it, to pretty it up, yeah" (RP05, 2006, i/v).

The discourse of the mobile phone does not exist in isolation. It is shaped by surrounding discourses such as those related to fashion, technology, community, friendship, professionalism, commerce and gender. The forgoing examples from my research highlight how the discourse of the mobile phone interacts with other already established discourses of professionalism, intimacy, gender and fashion and reveal how meaning has gathered around the object of the mobile phone and its use.

How users make use of the features of a mobile phone is revealing on two levels: (1) it makes a personal statement that relates to the formation and validation of identity on a personal level, and (2) it demonstrates how complex discursive exchange contributes to the generation of a new, emerging discourse on a cultural level.

Ring tones users choose are also illustrative examples of discursive practices. Mark Brennan recently stated, "In the 1990s there was a lot of young people walking around in t-shirts with band names printed on them. So it was a very kind of public performance... of identity. I think mobile phones are the new public performance of someone's musical tastes" (Brennan, 2007, RN). This is also clear from my own research. When participants were asked, 'what ring tone do you use?' the

response was varied. They ranged from, “Destiny’s Child, *Jumpin, Jumpin*” (chuckles) (RP05 2006, i/v). To,

I’ve got a George Gershwin, and it’s just a standard one that came with the phone. But the only reason that I got that is because it doesn’t have my ring tone that I had on my last phone which was ‘Pachelbel’s Canon’, which I really like. Yeah I was kinda mad when I found out this one didn’t have it on it (RP04 2006, i/v).

These comments highlight how making particular choices about ring tones on their mobile phones is a common way for users’ to validate and communicate their identity.

How a mobile phone functions in the generative process of identity formation was clearly suggested by one of the participants in the following comment:

If you meet someone new or, you know, to get someone to know you better, I show them through all the photos, cause it sort of tells a story of my last year, ‘oh this is us at that’, and ‘that’s my friend’, and ‘that’s my cousin’. So you know by explaining all the photos, you can sort of explain yourself a bit better (RP02, 2006, i/v).

This method of self introduction, using the mobile phone as the preface to a friendship demonstrates the significant role that the mobile phone is able to play in the validation and formulation of a user’s identity.

Another participant said that the mobile phone, via text messages, was a great way to share, express and validate herself,

I consider myself to be a good friend, and a good partner... I call it sending people some sunshine... often I will just text to say, ‘Hi hope you have a great day’ to my girlfriend, to my partner, to my family. Just as a way so they know. In case they are having a bad day or something, and I like, I try and be creative, so I try put something in there like, you know,

like, 'the future's so bright it's going to blind me' or something corny like that so they go, 'ohhhh'. So yeah I call that sending people a little bit of sunshine (RP05, 2006, i/v).

She uses her mobile phone to tell people that she does care about them in what she describes as a 'nice way'.

"My mobile phone is an extension of myself," another participant said.

Firstly because it's so much a part of my every day that to take it away, like I think you would take a part of my life away. So in that sense it is an extension of myself, but socially too the way I interact with others. A lot of that interaction is through mobile phones, so to take my mobile phone away from me, it would [take away the way I] interact with them, in the ways that I do, like texting something funny" (RP02, 2006, i/v).

This participant said that he likes his friends to think "oh he always sends me funny messages', or 'he's always good for a chat' or 'I can always rely on him to talk to when I need to'" (RP02, 2006, i/v). Without this, he said "that social bit of me would be gone" (RP02, 2006, i/v). The foregoing observations highlight that how we use a mobile phone connects with our sense of self and our social identity within our cultural context.

This empirical data demonstrates just a few of the many discourses that are being negotiated and challenged by the everyday use of the mobile phone. The research to date has illuminated just some of the ways users adopt and individualise the mobile phone. It demonstrates that there are clearly links between the ownership and use of a mobile phone and the user's 'sense of identity', and the 'validation of their identity' (DCITA, 2005, p. 32). These elements of how the mobile is displayed or worn as fashion, and how it links with the presentation of the self in daily life are often both ritualised and naturalised behaviours, which contribute to the emerging but highly fluid discourse that surrounds mobile phones.

## Conclusion

This paper reveals how meaning is being made of both the physical object, and the social practices associated with its use, and considers how new discourses are emerging which affect us in every aspect of our lives – our work, our relationships, our social and personal constructions of who we might (can) be. The generative processes involved are more complex and nuanced than simple technological determinism. The mobile phone affects, and is affected by, our personal experience. This analysis of mobile phones, as physical and social tools, reveals how individuals communicate and make sense of themselves. “The mobile phone mediates our way of being” (Arnold and Klugman, 2003, p. 74).

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