

“We will be reached”: The use of mobile telephony among Norwegian youth¹

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of mobile telephones by teens in Norway. The data for this study is based on two sources; first I draw on qualitative interviews with a sample of 12 families with teens in the greater Oslo area. In addition, I use a quantitative study of a national sample of 1000 randomly selected teens. This material was gathered in the summer and fall of 1997. The data shows that it is boys, most often those who work, that own mobile telephones. The qualitative analysis shows that the motifs for owning mobile telephones are accessibility, safety and micro-coordination. In addition, the mobile telephone serves as a symbol of emancipation. Metaphors surrounding the telephone allow for discussions of status construction and identification.

1 Introduction

The mobile telephone is being adopted by younger and younger Norwegian teens every day. Where ten years ago, the mobile telephone was a large device used only by well-heeled yuppies in their cars, today it is a small sleek device that has been adopted by many groups in society. The combination of increasing portability, falling traffic charges and subsidized subscriptions has meant that no sector of Norwegian society is immune from the mobile telephone culture. The arrival of pre-paid mobile telephones in which the user purchases a fixed amount of access beforehand – rather than the traditional system of paying for use after the fact – means that this penetration will increase.

While the technology is becoming mature, our social definition of it is still undergoing social interpretation and definition (Manning 1996). As its adoption continues and as its use creeps into more and more untraditional areas of life, one is forced to reinterpret and expand their notions of telephony. This is good stuff for sociologists. It allows us to peek behind the curtain and see the development of norm development.

This paper juxtaposes the introduction of ever more sophisticated and elegant mobile telephony against the backdrop of adolescence – that period of life in which there is perhaps the greatest redefinition of the self. One moves from the generally routinized family of orientation into the limbo of puberty and prepares themselves for participation in a family of procreation. The preparation includes

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the acquisition of an education, the establishment of a network of friends outside the family, the development of perspective and life experience, the understanding of personal economy. During this period seemingly everything is open for redefinition.

The rapid development of technology and its growing penetration into society combined with the uncertainty, puerility and vacillation of adolescence is a loaded situation. It is a recipe for interesting developments. The data here shows that it can bring out the worries of parents', the adolescents' striving for independence and adult status, use in inappropriate situations and episodes of economic stress. It is these issues that I will examine below.

The paper represents both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of mobile telephony among Norwegian youth. As outlined in the methods section, both the data from qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey are used to illuminate the issue at hand. After a short examination of methods and theory I will take up the ownership, use and motifs of mobile telephony.

2 The sociological examination of adolescents and method of the study

2.1 The sociological examination of adolescents and technology

In contemporary industrial society, much of adolescence is the process of the child's movement from the home of their parents to their eventual role as independent adults in society. The period is one in which they are allowed, and even encouraged to test out various identities.

In traditional societies there is often a rite of passage often involving segregation from the group, the acquisition of special knowledge and a ceremony of reemergence. It is in this way that the individual becomes recognized as an adult. As Gennep found, there is often little connection between such rituals and physical maturation (1960). He found that the actual rite of passage into adulthood could occur from 9 to 25 years of age.

By contrast, the rite of passage ceremony has been either extremely diluted or completely eliminated in industrialized societies. The transition here is much more diffuse in that one must go through an extended period as a type of apprentice adult. The child can not expect to simply take up the profession and life experience of their parents. Rather, as Hogan notes, the pressure for highly skilled laborers has meant the expansion of the educational system and the resulting expansion of the period of youth. A consequence of this is that significant portions of socialization are carried out in the school. The cohort grading of the school system means that one's peer group becomes relatively more important in the youth's activities and in their orientation. The sum of this is what we have come to know as adolescence (Hogan 1985, 2).

It is in this period that the child gains the pragmatic knowledge of how they should orient themselves as independent individuals. There is the need to acquire various types of technical and practical knowledge as well as information on the role set that they come to assume as an adult. The specific things they need to learn include management of one's personal economy, how to interact with various groups and individuals, the role of gender and sex in one's life, the expectations of employers and the working world, a sense of personal style and integrity, and recently, an understanding of how one interacts and uses interactive communications technology (ICT).

Another dimension of contemporary adolescence is that the rapid development of institutions and technology means that it is more difficult to rely on intergenerational knowledge. Where in traditional societies there is little difference between one generation and the next, in industrial society the life experience of the child is different from that of the parent. While technology means rapid shifts in the material culture, the non-material culture is less fluid (Ogburn 1950). This results in a cultural lag wherein the values are not always in synchronization with the material situation. Thus, we are always concerned about the work of developing norms that are appropriate for the current circumstances. In addition, neither the culture, nor one's socialization can be assumed to be received. The adolescent must be, in some ways, active in their own socialization. The degree to which the traditions are applicable versus the degree that they need to be replaced is a common theme. Adolescents may work to reject aspects of the culture that impinge on their sense of freedom while older generations may hold on to traditions for the sake of tradition. In this connection Glazer and Strauss talk of shaping transitions implying that both parties have a say and that the experience is interactive (1971, 57-88).

The development of new ICTs has had ramifications for the experience of adolescence. While there is a small literature on adolescents and PSTN based telephony, (Aronsen 1977; Castelain-Meunier 1997; Claisse and Rowe 1987; Heinzman, et. al. 1997; Kellner 1977; Lohen 1997; Pratto and Rodman 1993;

Skelton 1989; Statistics Norway 1997) there is only the beginnings of a literature on adolescents and mobile telephony (see Manceron 1997). The process of adoption and embedding of ICTs is a new card in the deck. It changes the way in which the generations interact, the issues with which they are concerned with the symbolic meaning of electronic devices and it creates new styles of interactions. In this connection the work of Silverstone, Haddon, Bijker and those interested in the examination of ICT's impact on everyday life is of interest (see for example Bijker Hughes and Pinch 1987; Bijker 1987; Haddon 1992; Haddon and Skinner 1992; Manning 1996; Silverstone 1993; and Silverstone 1994)

2.2 Method

Using the approach of social triangulation, the data for this study was gathered from two sources. These were first, a set of 12 ethnographic interviews with families in which the oldest child was between 9 and 23 years of age. These families were located in and around the Oslo area. The interviews, in which both the children and the parents were included, focused on the family's use of telecommunications equipment and services. The interviews were carried out in the summer and fall of 1997. The interviewing was done in Norwegian. This material provided valuable and interesting insight into the functioning of their families. Sometimes one was provided unusually clear insight into the issues being dealt with in the family. At certain points in the interview the lack of social finesse on the part of the teens meant that one more easily obtained insight into the conflicts and issues within the home. In other situations, the interviewer can see a tendency towards overstatement. The need to assert status or identity on the part of the teen meant that things were overestimated and situations were overdramatized.

The material from this round of interviews was integral in both the development of this report but also in the development of a telephone based questionnaire, sent out to a random sample of teens in Norway. It is the database resulting from this second questionnaire that makes up the second source of data for this report. The data was gathered using telephone interviews with a random sample of 1000 Norwegian adolescents, aged 13-20. The interviews were carried out in November 1997.

The interview material was transcribed and analyzed using ethnographic analysis techniques (Lofland and Lofland 1984; Spradley 1979). The various speech acts were coded in terms of the type of technology being discussed, special issues related to the technology and attitudes and meanings that became obvious from the discussion. In addition, marginal notes and insights were added to the database as the coding of the material progressed. Relevant citations were translated into English for inclusion in this paper. The subjects of the ethnographic interviews are referred to as informants in this paper. Those who were interviewed in the questionnaire are referred to as interviewees.

The database resulting from the questionnaire was examined using standard statistical software. The issues of central interest, i.e. age and gender related differences, were generally examined using ANOVA. The data from both sources is examined in the following two sections.

3 Ownership and use of mobile telephones

In general, there is quite broad access to telephony among Norwegian adolescents. The data from the questionnaire shows that 21.5% of the sample had a standard telephone in their room, 17.3% had a mobile telephone and, only about 7 % had a pager¹. With regard to pagers, in a study of telecomm use in Germany, Italy, Switzerland and portions of the former Yugoslavia, Heinzman et al. find about the same penetration of pagers (1997). But where it has increasing popularity in other portions of Europe (Grolimund, Hügli and Schmidli 1997), it seems to be becoming the entrenched symbol of certain youth groups in Norway.

	Girls	Boys	f statistic	Significance	N
Normal telephone	16.5	26.0	F = 13.968 _{1,998}	0.001	504/496
Mobile telephone	10.1	24.4	F = 37.109 _{1,998}	0.001	504/496
Pager	5.6	8.1	F = 3.413 _{1,998}	0.121	504/496

Table 1 Percent of girls and boys who own various telephony equipment for teens in Norway, 1997

Table 1 shows that boys were significantly more likely to have a standard telephone in their rooms. They were also significantly more likely to own a mobile telephone and to own a pager. Girls could

often loan a mobile telephone and there is no significant difference between genders when it comes to general access to mobile telephones. I will take up this issue and examine it further below.

	Age group			f statistic	Significance	N
	13-14	15-18	19-20			
Normal telephone	10.2	20.8	34.3	f = 22.072 _{2,997}	0.001	1000
Mobile telephone	3.1	14.5	38.6	f = 63.517 _{2,997}	0.001	1000
Pager	4.7	8.3	6.4	f = 1.734 _{2,997}	0.117	1000

Table 2 Ownership of telephony equipment by age for teens in Norway, 1997

In table 2 we see that access to telephony devices generally increases with age. Again, this is particularly true when it comes to mobile telephony. The only device that goes against this trend, is the pager.

In Norway, more than 40 % of all the population own a mobile telephone (Mobile communications international 1998). Almost 18 % of all adolescents covered in the questionnaire sample owned a mobile telephone. This interview round was taken at the dawn of the pre-paid mobile phone era. In the time since this development, there has been a growth in the market of pre-paid cards among adolescents. Subsequent analysis shows that this payment form is particularly popular among those in the 15-17 year age group.

Other factors are gender and work status. The data here shows that the group with the greatest access to mobile telephones is the older males, particularly those who work (see also Bynner and Breakwell 1990, 13). In an interview with Per (19) – a person who fits this profile – he notes that most of his friends have a mobile telephone.

Interviewer: How many of your friends have mobile telephones today?

Per: Most of them.

Interviewer: If you think of ten friends then how many have one?

Per: Eight.

His estimate is not far off from the statistics for his age/work status group. The data from the questionnaire shows that almost 50% of all those who work have a mobile telephone (see Table 3). Almost 74 % of boys 16 years and older and who work have a mobile telephone. This compares to just over 26 % of girls in the same category.

	In school	Working	f statistic	Significance	N
Normal telephone	23.7	44.2	f = 17.332 _{1,556}	0.001	568
Pager	8.2	6.3	f = .403 _{1,556}	0.526	568
Mobile telephone	17.3	48.4	f = 47.280 _{1,556}	0.001	568

Table 3 Ownership of telephony equipment by school/work status for teens in Norway, 1997

The data also shows that there is a significant relationship between age and the adolescent's ability to loan a mobile telephone.² The relationship, however is curvilinear. Just fewer than 30% of 13 and 14-year olds reported loaning telephones. During the mid teen years this rose to over 58% and dropped again for the oldest age group such that only slightly less than 16% of the 19 and 20-year-olds had regular access to a loaned mobile telephone. Presumably, the older group either chose to purchase their own mobile telephone or, as seen in the following citation, were encouraged in this direction, as they moved into the later teen years.

Robert (father 47): He (his 19-year-old son) has borrowed the one [mobile] telephone from us earlier. In some periods. And suddenly we discovered that our telephone was gone and we thought that now it was time for him to get his own.

It is significant to note that there are no gender-based differences in loaned access to mobile telephones. While there was a significant difference between the genders when it came to ownership of a mobile telephone, the same was not true when considering the ability to borrow a device.³ This applies across all age groups.

While ownership of, and access to mobile telephones was widespread, their use was limited when compared to traditional telephony. The data from the questionnaire shows that the mean number of

calls per day to a normal telephone was 3.15, whereas the mean number of calls per day to a mobile telephone and a pager was 0.58 and 0.07 respectively. One can see from table 4 that the length of calls from mobile telephones went up in the later evening. This is probably due to the changes in tariffs that take effect during this time period. In addition, one can see that there were significant gender based differences in the length of calls.

One can also see in this data that during portions of the day the girls used the phone significantly longer than the boys, a finding that reflects the use patterns of traditional telephony.

Time of day	Mean minutes for boys	Mean minutes for girls	f statistic	Significance	N
9-15	3.65	8.36	f = 3.411 _{1,32}	0.074	33
15-19	5.47	19.29	f = 3.637 _{1,52}	0.062	53
19-23	9.00	15.59	f = 4.224 _{1,67}	0.044	68

Table 4 Mean conversation length in minutes reported for mobile telephone conversations by time of day

4 Motifs in the use of the mobile telephone

Moving away from the issues of ownership and telephone traffic, I will examine the motifs associated with the mobile telephone. Five of the main themes here were accessibility, emancipation, security, micro-coordination and the use of the mobile telephone as a crystallization symbol. These ran through the discussion of many informants and seem to summarize the role of mobile telephony for many adolescents. The concern with these motifs underscores the growing maturity of the teens. Many of them point to a shift in their focus away from the home. The telephone itself is a visible indication of one's interaction in a broader social network outside the purview of one's parents. It is also a visible and concrete indication of economic independence. None-the-less, like all symbolic relics, it is open to multiple interpretations. While some see it as an indication of independence, others see it as a false assertion of high status. While some see it as a way to mark their departure from the home, others use it symbolically to further integrate themselves with their parents.

The adoption of the mobile telephone and other advanced telecommunication can also have an impact on the "shaping" of the adolescence, to use the phrase of Glaser and Strauss (1971). One can, for example, use the device to organize one's social life beyond the reach of parents. Where parents could limit traditional telephone use through direct observation, the mobile telephone opens up a whole world of possibilities for covering up communication. Thus, the old rules and attitudes don't hold. While the adolescents interviewed here were often busy exploring their new freedom the parents were just as active in trying to reassert their control. In this interaction they were at the work of coining new norms for social interaction. It is these issues that I will examine in this section.

4.1 Availability

One of the most common motifs discussed vis-à-vis mobile telephony had to do with one's availability. While the themes of safety and micro-coordination also appeal to older users, availability to colleagues and friends was seen as important to many of the adolescents we interviewed (Ling 1995).

Anne (daughter 23): . . . Since I am not at home so much I think it is ok to be available. . . that people have the chance to get in touch with me. There are a lot of my friends and colleagues and my boss that often need to get in touch with me. . . . I think there is a difference between my parents' generation and my generation in that we will be reached. We will be available. We call home to the answering machine and see if somebody has called us and I think we are more . . . concerned with being reached and being together with friends. And that is, I don't know, it is the way that one maintains contact.

Anne sees the mobile telephone, perhaps somewhat over-dramatically, as a way to coordinate activities among a network of friends and colleagues. The fact that she is in demand by so many means that the device plays a useful role. Beyond that, it is also, as Håberg points out, an icon pointing to her position in society. It indicates her interest in being perceived of as an active, successful and sought after person as opposed to one who is lonely and without friends or social contact (1997, 69). These

same themes also come out in the comments of Erika who is somewhat younger but who has just started on her career as the owner of a mobile telephone.

Erika (daughter 15): Now I have gotten my own mobile. But every time I call out I use [my boy friend's]. So people can call to me but I call from his.

Interviewer: That is a lot of bother. We have to start from the beginning. When did you get this mobile telephone?

Erika: The day before yesterday.

Interviewer: The day before yesterday, so this is pretty new. What is the background for you're buying, or how did you get it?

Erika: It was a gift from my boy friend.⁴

Interviewer: A gift, so he pays. . . .

Erika: My boy friend and I.

Later she justifies the acquisition in that she was not generally available at her home as she spends a lot of time with her boyfriend.

Erika: It was that there were so many people that could not get in touch with me because I was never home. And there were a lot that thought it was dumb to call to my boy friend's house to get in touch with me so I got my own. And he couldn't get in touch with me either if I was not at home.

This rather young teen was quite versed in the argumentation regarding accessibility. The arrangement also brings out several other interesting aspects of mobile telephony's position among adolescents. For her the mobile telephone allows the remarkable combination of social accessibility with intimacy. She can be in touch with her social network even when she is in the more exclusive company of her boyfriend. The device also insures access between the young couple.

The arrangement described by Erika is also a careful step into the establishment of an individual identity in that she is not bounded by her geographic identity as with a traditional telephone. Rather she is generally available when and where she chooses to be. This goes beyond Meyrowitz' individualization that is, in many ways, geographically defined (1985, 236). It marks, in a small way, part of the transition away from the sphere of her parents into the less defined situation of the late adolescent. This type of gypsy situation will continue until she establishes a home, and a telephone number of her own.

In these possibilities one can see the stretching and reconfiguration of social boundaries. It seems to be the establishment of new rules as to when and how one is available. In this respect, Anne's suggestion that her generation is different from that of her parents is certainly true. The adoption of technologies that were unavailable a generation ago insures this. It is not clear however, that this type of use pattern is an adoption of adolescents to new technology that will subside as they mature, or if they are mapping out norms and rules that they will carry with them into their adulthood.

4.2 Emancipation

Turning away from accessibility to one's peers I now take up the theme of emancipation from one's parents. The mobile telephone is a device, and a symbol, with which one can mark of their growing emancipation. In general, having one's own telephone (mobile or otherwise) resolves many of the issues having to do with access to telephony.

Anna (23 daughter): . . . I would rather have my own telephone line and pay for that than always hear 'Don't use the telephone so much' and 'can you ask your friends not to call.'

The ability to pay for one's telephone use is a particularly salient issue. The demand that children pay for their telephony is one of the stations of maturation. In some cases, for example girls in their mid teens, this is a problematic issue. For others, however, it is a type of declaration of maturity.

We have already met 15-year old Erika. As the reader recalls, she had just recently received a mobile telephone subscription as a gift from her boyfriend. This is an interesting arrangement on many counts. One of the significant themes, however, was that the young couple was insistent on taking responsibility for payment. While Viggo, her father, suggests that he may need to contribute to the payment of the subscription, Erika is at pains to say that she and her boyfriend will take responsibility.

Viggo (45 father): You can say that we have, no but it is not, no, but it is clear that if we are in agreement that everybody has access to unrestricted telephone at home we also have to say that it is us that pay for the telephone, or that is my wife and I that pay. . . . But I have to say that if, like with the new mobile telephone subscription, if

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it is so expensive then I have to say that I could imagine that I will come with a contribution, that is obvious.

Erika (15 daughter): With the new mobile?

Viggo: Yea, if . . .

Erika: You are not going to pay for that regardless.

Viggo: Yea I hear what you are saying

Erika: Relax!

A little later the mother comes into the discussion:

Lill (43 mother): . . . I was very much against that she got a mobile telephone, but that didn't help much. . . .

Interviewer: Why were you against her getting a mobile telephone?

Lill: First, the uncritical use that she has carried on with before, it has been completely unbelievable and second it is misused in connection with school. She doesn't turn it off when she should.

This is followed again by another statement of economic independence on the part of the daughter.

Erika: The point is that it is not your problem. It is just your imagination that in the end you will pay. But that is not the way it is and, as a matter of fact, I call very little from my mobile. I mostly call from his and I don't have to pay for that.

Erika is on the cusp of emancipation. The possession of a mobile telephone is a symbolic step away from the home of her parents into another phase of her life. Nobody is sure, however, if her telephone experience will be a success or a fiasco. It serves, however, to illustrate just how the technology brings these issues to the front of the stage and forces one to take them into consideration.

The economic aspect of emancipation is part of the picture for Erika, her boyfriend and her parents. The data from the questionnaire shows that there is a gender-related aspect associated with purchase of a mobile telephone. The mobile telephone seems to be a particularly salient symbol for boys. The data shows that 71 % of the boys paid for the purchase of their mobile telephone while this was the case for only 56 % of the girls.⁵ In addition the data shows that those who work are statistically more likely to have purchased their subscription with their own money when compared with those who were in school, (84 % vs. 57 % respectively).⁶ When it comes to the adolescents paying for the use of the mobile telephone there was no statistical difference between the genders.

4.3 Safety and security

Another theme among the informants was the use of the mobile telephone in emergencies. The notion of a mobile telephone as a security device is one of the two major themes identified by Håberg in her investigation of the urban legends that have arisen surrounding the device, the other being its use as a status symbol. Her material included retellings of dramatic situations wherein, for example, the owner of the mobile telephone, calling from a treetop, was rescued from a bear attack in the forest (1997). Aside from issues of validity, the use of these urban legends functions to spread knowledge and confirm beliefs. In the case of mobile telephones they can help to legitimize the ownership as the legends point to one of their important perceived functions (Håberg 1997, 18).

On a somewhat less dramatic scale, it was common for informants to discuss the use of the mobile telephone in the case of car accidents. Here, Tor reports on some of the motivation for owning a mobile telephone.

Tor (18 son): The biggest advantage is that you are available, that people can always get in touch with you. And another thing, if you come across something, for example a traffic accident, then within 20 seconds you can get help. I was out in a traffic accident, not myself, earlier this summer and the first thing I did was to just take the mobile and run out to the scene to see what the situation was because then I could call 011 or whatever it is and get help. Because if I save a person's life with that mobile telephone then it is worth all the money. Even if it cost me 1000 kroner a year.

Many respondents reported experiences of either having used a mobile telephone in such a situation, or coming upon an accident wherein another person has used their mobile telephone to summon help. Later in the interview, Tor's father also brings up this theme.

Hans: (father 46): There was the time we saw that accident. I think that the front wheel of a truck had blowout and the truck had rolled over in the ditch

Interviewer: And was it good to have a mobile telephone?

Hans: Yea, but we didn't use it then since there were others that had come before us. This was on a highway, but there are long distances here and there are few houses to go into and it might be wintertime. The road can be drifted over and you can be stuck. You can say . . . There are some advantages to having one, simply based on safety in places like we live.

Those living in rural areas also took up the theme of safety when working alone in remote areas. This theme is often focused on situations in the forest or in areas that are more rural. For example, Tor discussed use of the device when he was out timbering.

Tor (son 18): When I am working in the forest in the winter and I am cutting trees, then I always have the mobile telephone in the tractor. If you are unlucky and cut yourself in your leg or something then I always manage to crawl in an call the necessary numbers. I might not manage to make it all the way home and if I didn't have it in the tractor.

Perhaps in response to these motivations, our data showed a significantly higher ownership of mobile telephones among adolescents living in the rural areas of the country. While slightly more than 15 % of the urban respondents to the questionnaire reported ownership of a mobile telephone just short of 25 % of the rural respondents had one.⁷ The use of the device also extended to vacation and free time use in rural areas.

Ragnar: (father 47) We have a mobile telephone for reserve for the two youngest. We have a cottage and they are out with the boat and things like that so we bought an extra telephone that they could take with them. So, we could know where they were and in case there was something, they could call and things like that.

While not particular for adolescents, the motif of safety and security was a part of the lore surrounding mobile telephones. It was cited by the informants and was often a portion of the justification for owning a mobile telephone.

4.4 Micro-coordination

The third motif that arose in the interviews was that of micro-coordination. The mobile telephone allows for a type of very precise adjustment of everyday activities. For example, rather than agreeing to meet at a specific time, people can agree to call each other when they are prepared to meet saving each partner from waiting for the other. If, for example, one is caught in traffic, they can call ahead and tell the day-care center that they will be delayed in picking up their children. If one is in the store and has forgotten if they were to buy whole milk or skim milk, the mobile telephone allows one to call home and find out. As with safety, this was not particular for adolescents, but none-the-less it was also a part of their telephony practice.

We see this motif, combined with that of safety, in the comments of Bente, a 13-year-old girl who was the youngest of the interviewees to report use of a mobile telephone.

Bente (daughter 13): I am the one that uses [the mobile telephone] the most because I ride [horses] in the forest and if I fall and break my leg or something like that and can't get out, then I can just call with it. That is what I use it for the most. . . .

Interviewer: Have you ever had to use it when you were out riding?

Bente: Yea, I have tried to call home when I need to be picked-up but I haven't hurt myself or anything like that. That has gone ok.

Interviewer: So you use it so you can call when you are done.

Bente: Yea, if I am going to go someplace or if want to be picked-up then I call home. Or if I am going to tell them something or ask a question.

Bente's access to the mobile provided a more effective coordination with her parents. Rather than one of them having to wait for the other when she was done riding, they could call and make a more precise agreement as to when they should meet. In another case, Fredrik reported the use of mobile telephones for micro-coordination with his peer group.

Fredrik: (son 16) I make, at any rate, one call to a mobile telephone each day. Now it is summer vacation and I am not calling as much, but I make a lot of calls to mobile telephones. Not so much to regular phones actually. That is only on Friday and Saturday night when I want to find out other things. Then I call everybody at home. But normally I call . . . There are just a few people I am together with. I am not with all of my friends every day. So then I call them and they have mobile telephones.

Interviewer: You call to find out where your friends are and where you will meet?

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Frederik: Yea.

Interviewer: Do you talk about things that have happened?

Frederik: No, not when I am calling a mobile telephone. I usually don't do that. I try to be a little quicker. Then I only ask about what is happening and maybe where we will meet.

The use of mobile telephony to glean information on where and when to meet friends describes a lifestyle wherein mobility and flexible scheduling and perhaps the desire for greater privacy in telephone communications are central (Gillard, Bow and Wale 1996). Manceron has described this lifestyle among an adolescent group in Paris (1997). In the case of Fredrik, the flexibility was on the part of those to whom he was calling as he was still tied to a traditional telephone. However, as we will see below he is agitating for the purchase of a pager, thus allowing him more flexibility and a certain freedom from parental control. His mother, however, is frustrating his purchase of the device, and by extension his ability to micro-coordinate with his friends. This was perhaps to retain oversight over his activities.

Frederik (son, 16): I don't have a pager but I am going to get one.

Interviewer: You will?

Frederik: Yea, I am going to.

Grete (mother, 45): There has been a lot of discussion about both a mobile telephone and a pager but we have said no.

Frederik: Now I have ordered a pager.

Interviewer: Why do you say no to a pager or a mobile telephone. Is it the expense or is it . . .

Grete: Yea, it is that, and of course I don't think that he is so important that he has to be reached right then and there.

Frederik: But a pager is not a businessman thing anymore. There were two pages about it in the newspaper about all the teens that had a pager. One of three teens had a pager.

Grete: Yea, but when you are in school you are in school and when you are home, you are home.

Frederik: Yea, but I don't have any plans to use my pager when I am in school.

Grete: Then they can get in touch with you when you are home and I think it is a bad thing with these mobile telephones on busses and at school and, If you are home then they can reach you, and if you are not home so, ok then, you are not so important that they can't wait to call. They can call later.

Frederik: Uff.

Grete: I think it is a bad thing

Interviewer: Have you talked about if he pays some himself, then you will go along?

Grete: Niks.

Interviewer: No, What do you think about this (to Fredrik)? Do you think that your mother is being unjust?

Frederik: Yeeea, a mobile telephone, that is something I have absolutely no desire to get one. I have no desire at all. But a pager would be nice.

Grete: We have talked about this a lot because he wanted one for Christmas and for his birthday and I don't know what else, but we have said "no" now for a couple of years at any rate. He has not gotten one and it is exactly because I think it is [a bad development] (*en uting*).

This is a quite vigorous exchange between the two. The fact that it takes place before people from outside the home is evidence as to the intensity of the disagreement. One can feel the tension in the dialogue between the two and see the rehearsal of well thought out strategies. What is at stake is Fredrik's participation and identity vis-à-vis his peer group vs. his mother's control over her son's social interaction.

The other striking thing about the interaction is the sense that the argumentation is well honed and has been built up over a longer period of discussion. The son's rejection of mobile telephones in favor of a pager and the mother's consistent points of argumentation underscore this. In many ways, this disagreement has been institutionalized within this family. It fulfills Burger and Luckmann's definition of an institution in that it is the reciprocal typification of habitualized action. (1967, 54). The mother knows that when the son starts to talk about pagers she needs to resort to a certain set of arguments just as the son knows that he needs to carefully focus on the pager and not a mobile telephone etc. There are certain tactical maneuvers from both sides such as the son's declaration that he has ordered one, but in general, one gets the sense that it is a well institutionalized *pas de deux* between the two.

The analysis shows that the use of the mobile telephone to micro-coordinate was not exclusively a social activity. One informant reported its use in his job, indeed his employer, a construction firm, paid for all job-related calls.

Tor (18 son): [I have a mobile telephone] for my job because there is always something that you need to know. You can do things twice but it is often one way that is better than another. So if you call to one of these bigwigs you can find out how it should be done. Then instead of them coming around once a week to talk with us it is ok to call a number and you get a clear idea. There is so much to think about because there is some expensive equipment among other things. Like all of the trucks that are not standard trucks for the firm. Then we have to call to the others and find out if the equipment is available and when it is going to be used [in other locations] or if we can use it, for example earlier in the day and they can use it later in the afternoon. It is that type of thing. . . . When we sit in front of some blueprints. . . . and the boss sits in front of some blueprints then you know, it is the same as if we all were sitting at a table. He is sitting there with the same blueprints that we are sitting with, and then he can say, like, maybe move his finger over to look at that line. So we are sitting, maybe 50 kilometers away and do exactly the same thing with that line. And you are talking about the same theme so it goes ok.

This talk is about the use of telephones in the work situations. The citation is interesting in that it goes into the way in which access to a mobile telephone allows a tighter coordination with the phasing of projects. Thus, it is an advantage for the firm in that they can make better use of resources.

4.5 The mobile telephone as a crystallization symbol

Like any symbolic item, the mobile telephone is open to multiple interpretations. While many discussed the positive motifs of availability, emancipation, safety and micro-coordination, others saw the device in more indeterminate terms. For some it crystallized notions of false status display and was used by some as a type of ideological antipode with which they could build portions of their familial ideology.

4.5.1 Status and status display

As we have noted, the mobile telephone is encrusted with symbolic meaning. It allows the adolescent user to assert status, perhaps beyond their years. By doing this one enters into dangerous waters. An important aspect of one's navigation through adolescence has to do with the development of one's own sense of dress and personal display. Notions of style and taste are under development in this period. The increasing sophistication in selecting that which is appropriate as opposed to that which is ostentatious or that which is vulgar is a part of this work. Acquisition of poise and *savoir faire* is indeed a signification of maturity and sophistication (Goffman 1967, 8-9, 40).

The successful mastery of personal display is, almost by definition, a slippery issue (Ling 1996). Fashion is at the same time the marking of one's individuality and a way in which one signifies union with others in, for example, a peer group. It is also a phenomenon that is by definition under constant development. To be effective it must balance on the edge of the acceptable and acceptability is in the eye of the beholder (Simmel 1971, 296-303; see also Veblen 1899). In addition, notions of acceptability almost never cross generational boundaries. Indeed, to successfully negotiate the transition from child to adult in modern society, one most often needs to identify themselves as something other than their parents. Thus, a mother's sense of the absolute perfectly coordinated display is her daughter's definition of vulgarity.

Mobile telephony and pagers play out various aspects of this theme. They can be defined as a display of one's participation in a network. Thus, these objects can be and often are encrusted with significance. Looking at the pager for a moment, the analysis indicates that it has its highest penetration among certain urban-based sub-groups. It is predominately used by those in their middle teen years and has a "skateboard" urban image (see table 2). It seems to be a type of identity badge wherein those who are a part of the appropriate sub-cultures display them in the approved fashion. Their slightly rebellious profile means that the device can provide the adolescent with an independent identity. Parents, however, feel that the child is not yet mature enough for such independence (Ling 1998).

Turning again to the mobile telephone, it is also a device that takes on dimensions of being either in or out of fashion.

“We will be reached” Rich Ling

Bente (13 daughter): Now it has become “in” to have a mobile telephone so now there are a lot of my friends that have gotten a mobile telephone so they are at school just to show them off.

A bit later Bente puts the phenomenon into style related terms: when she notes that “I think it is dumb (*teit*) to have one. I don’t want one because I think it is a little tacky (*harry*) to carry one around but a lot of people think it is cool.” The issue here is not functionality, rather the telephone as a part of one’s display. While not wanting to carry one herself, Bente was not opposed to the use of the mobile telephone. Quite the opposite. She used it when riding her horse in the forest and when her family was at their cottage she held contact with her friends through the use of the device.

She also displayed an astute understanding of the style associated with the device. It was not enough to simply have a mobile telephone or a pager. As with other forms of decoration it was important to consume the appropriate type of device. With regards to pagers the design of choice at the time of the interview was “the square one with the, what is it called? Like, the little screen on it and it is transparent and is yellow or green, a lot of different colors and that lights up.” In relation to mobile telephones, the currently popular style was “The Ericsson, the new little one, or the next oldest Nokia, the little yellow one that is backlit.” So, even though she disapproved of the display of the device, she had a nuanced understanding of the various alternatives available.

Bente’s ambivalence towards mobile telephones is not evident in the comments of others. While the mobile telephone has become increasingly normalized in Norwegian society, its use among adolescents plays on these themes. As outlined above it can be used as a concrete assertion of emancipation. It also retains vestiges of its yuppie identity as a way to assert, and perhaps over extend, one’s claim on status. This type of status display is easily lampooned and not surprisingly, informants voiced this theme.

Martin (17 son): Yea, there are a lot of them that use them. If you go places where there are a lot of people and you can go sort of “Yea, hello!” Like yell loud. [You] can almost hold your hand up pointing at the mobile telephone. Like, ‘I have a mobile telephone.’ It is the same thing. Scream out to show that he has a mobile telephone. That is what a lot of them do. . . . Actually I think it is pretty idiotic. It is only a status symbol. . . . I don’t understand the point with it . . . Maybe it is that we are not dependent on having a status symbol here in the family like other people do. We don’t understand the point with mobile telephones if you don’t actually need it. But maybe it is something for others.

The comments of Martin are interesting in that they point to an ideology opposed to the mobile. This revulsion to the mobile telephone seems to be an effect of the middle teen years. In the questionnaire the group of teens aged 15-18 were significantly more likely to agree with the statement “I think it looks dumb to go around with a mobile telephone.”⁸ The development here is curvilinear in that the youngest and oldest respondents were more likely to disagree with the statement but those between 15 and 18 agreed with it.

4.5.2 Identification

A last point, that builds on the skepticism noted above, is that while on the one hand the mobile telephone is a way to identify oneself as important, sought after and accessible, it can also be used as a way to intensify one’s identification with their parents. This can be seen in the following citation from Martin who we met above.

Interviewer: What about mobile telephones. Do you . . .

Martin (17 son): Nobody in our family has a mobile telephone. **We are very opposed to mobile telephones.** (emphasis added)

Beyond his words, the staging of this citation is very interesting. In it Martin takes on the role as the spokesperson for the family. The interviewer was not even able to finish the question before he responded with the family’s “party line” in regards to mobile telephone. Immediately after Martin’s comments the parents both provide various examples of the inappropriate use of mobile telephone, i.e. in different social situations and in traffic. They have several reasons for their opposition to mobile telephones quickly at hand and are all ready to lay them out on demand. The general opposition is along three lines. The first is that a mobile telephone is a disturbance and the second is that they are dangerous when driving. The third point – that is a version of the first – is that one should occasionally not be available. Based on these points they have built up a repertoire of examples to support them. At the time of the interview the family had several fresh examples indicating that the process of supporting the ideology was still quite active.

Within this family it is clear that the phenomenon of mobile telephones has been thoroughly discussed and they all have a clearly articulated and common sense of the device. Martin feels so comfortable with that ideology that he voices the collective family's position. Their ability to enunciate a common front is, in a way, a celebration of their unity as a family and of their success at creating a common identity. The fact that the son takes the role as the family's spokesperson on this issue indicates his tight integration into the family. Thus, we see here the image of the mobile telephone being used in a negative way, to establish personal identity, rather the idea of the mobile telephone is being used to underscore family unity.

5 Conclusion

In summary then, the material has showed that the ownership and use of mobile telephone equipment increases significantly through this phase in life. As the child approaches the end of the teen years, one can see a dramatic growth in the ownership and use of mobile telephones. The data here shows that particularly among working boys, the mobile telephone is a potent symbol of both independence from one's parents but also one's participation in a social network. While the data shows that the preponderance of the quantitative interview participants had some form of access to the mobile telephone, ownership was something for the boys. The data also indicates that, as with traditional telephony, the girls used the technology as a functional device for social interaction whereas the boys were more focused on its object status.

Turning now to the motifs associated with the mobile telephone, aside from its expense, the mobile telephone fits well into the youth culture. It responds to several of the adolescent's needs. These include availability, emancipation, safety, micro-coordination. Being accessible to others was a strong motivation among the interviewees. "I want to be available" was a common type of phrase in this connection. Another theme common for adolescents is the issue of emancipation. The mobile telephone provides them with a convenient and easily recognized symbol of independence. It is almost an icon through which one can show others that they have achieved an independence from their parents and are quickly becoming adults. Two motifs, safety and micro-coordination, were also discussed. Neither of these, however, was particular to adolescents nor were they as intensely felt as the issue of availability. None-the-less they seem to table in the motivation for purchasing a mobile telephone.

A final motif was the use of the mobile telephone as a crystallization symbol. Even for those who reject the mobile telephone, its presence on the scene provides them with a convenient antipode against which they can develop their own sense of identity or elaborate their identification with significant persons in their life.

Mobile telephony is rushing into our lives at a rapid pace. It is changing the way in which we communicate and the way in which we coordinate our lives. It is to be expected that as adults adopt this technology, adolescents will also become users. One can also assume that the special needs of adolescents for display, emancipation, friendship and status will be played out through the ownership and use of mobile telephones. These are the themes seen in the data reported on here. It will be interesting to follow this development, as the mobile telephone becomes more and more common in society.

¹ As of the end of 1999 about 65% of Norwegian youth owned a mobile telephone.

² $f = 4.742_{,7,819}$ sig. < 0.001

³ $f = 0.198_{,1,825}$ sig. = 0.656

⁴ Since neither of the two adolescents were 18 they could not legally enter into a contract, Erika's father had agreed to function as the legal guarantor of the subscription.

⁵ $f = 3.932_{,1,172}$ sig. = 0.049

⁶ $f = 10.775_{,1,126}$ sig. = 0.001

⁷ $f = 4,730_{,1,659}$ Sig. = 0.03 for a comparison of those living in cities vs. those living in open rural areas.

⁸ $f = 3.963_{,2,997}$, sig. = 0.019. Girls were also more likely to agree with this statement as more than 59% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Slightly more than 47% of the boys had the same opinion. In this analysis $f = 29.084_{,1,993}$ sig. < 0.001

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