

# **“It is ‘in.’ It doesn’t matter if you need it or not, just that you have it.”: Fashion and the domestication of the mobile telephone among teens in Norway<sup>1</sup>**

by

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## **Abstract**

In this paper looks into the use of mobile telephones as an element teen’s sense of fashion and personal display. It is based on qualitative material gathered in 1997, 1999 and 2000, the period during which mobile telephones were generally adopted by the teens in Norway. The recent adoption of the mobile telephone by teens provides one with the insight needed for this type of analysis. In this context fashion, and its interpretation is examine. Three levels to the interpretation of style that are discussed. These include 1) the use of style to carry out some type of intended display, 2) the analysis of style as a type of communication interaction between the person presenting the style and the person or persons who are viewing it and 3) the use of comments about style and fashion as a way to integrate a group and maintain its inner solidarity. It is this last approach that has been most central to the analysis since it opens up the ability to account for both positive, but more often negative characterizations of style.

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## 1 Introduction

The ownership and use of mobile telephones has become a common part of the social landscape in contemporary Scandinavia. Indeed, the simple ownership of a mobile telephone is not enough. Rather, the proper type of mobile telephone used and displayed in the proper way is of importance in certain social contexts. Thus, the mobile telephone is not simply a functional device used for communication but rather is an element in the very presentation of self.

This paper describes the adoption of mobile telephones. Specifically, it looks into their role as a type of fashion – and the ways that they are a breach of fashion. The period between 1997 and 1999 saw the rapid adoption of the mobile telephone by large numbers of Norwegian teens. Among 13 year olds, the percentage saying they owned a mobile telephone went from about 6 to 51% during this three-year period. For 15 year olds the percentage saying that they owned a mobile telephone rose from 25 to 80%, and among 18 year olds, the adoption rate rose from about 40 to 80%.<sup>2</sup>

For those in their mid teens it would seem that the market is largely saturated but it seems that consumption is moving in new, and perhaps unanticipated directions. Analysis shows that a significantly greater number of boys than girls had two mobile telephone subscriptions.<sup>3</sup> Their explanation is that they have a subscription from each of the two GSM operators such that they can avoid the additional cost of calling “across” operators. One can assert however that there is also an element of techno fetishism in the picture.

These statistics are the background against which this paper has been developed. The real question here is the adoption and use of the mobile telephone as a type of fashion statement among these teens. Those viewing the adoption of the mobile telephone by teens often pose the question “What do they need it for?” (Ling and Helmersen 1999). In many respects, this is the wrong question. It attempts to place the use of a mobile telephone into a functional context. This is not directly the issue when considering fashion. In this case, the statement of the father cited in the title of this paper is more to the point. It is not a question of need, rather it is a part of the individual’s “personality kit.”<sup>4</sup>

The adoption statistics and also qualitative material covering the ownership of the mobile telephone point to the sense that, for many teens, the ownership and display

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<sup>2</sup> This material comes from a series of surveys carried out by Telenor R&D during the period 1997 to 2000. The surveys have mapped teens’ access to the mobile telephone along with other issues related to the device such as the use of text messages, use in various contexts and also the expense of owning a mobile telephone.

<sup>3</sup> In November of 1999, the data shows that for 13 to 20 year old boys there was a mean of 1.21 subscriptions for boys and 1.11 for girls. This difference is statistically significant  $f(1,808) = 10.212$ ,  $sig. = 0.001$ .

<sup>4</sup> One might almost say that the mobile telephone is a type of fashion accessory on the same lines as daggers of the high middle ages fans during the northern renaissance, walking sticks in the Edwardian period and other types of additional items one carried on their person (Tortora and Eubank 1989; Kaiser 1990). Taking this line a bit further, the analysis of mobile telephones as fashion parallel the adoption of wristwatches (Landes 1983; Kahlert, Mühe, and Brunner 1986). Both technologies can have the function of coordinating activities, both are part of the display of the self, and both have their gendered versions. There are, at the same time differences that may well have their historical dimensions. The prestige of the wristwatch can depend on the handwork associated with the production, its precision and the cost of the materials used to embellish the device. While there are also many inexpensive, watches available there are also many that are heirlooms. One cannot find the same situations with regards to mobile telephones. In addition, the gendering of the mobile telephone is not as clearly developed as with the mobile telephone.

of a mobile telephone are important aspects of their life style. However, like anything else, this consumption must be done correctly. As one will see below, norms have developed proscribing how one should have and display their mobile telephone. Not surprisingly, the insight into these norms comes from when they are breached.

In this paper, I will first examine some of the theoretical approaches to the use of fashion and display. Following this, I will return to the issue of mobile telephony and discuss it from two different points in the adoption cycle. In this analysis, I will draw on the comments of teens and their parents. Finally, I will place these observations into the context of style, the breaching of style and the role this process plays in the development and maintenance of groups.

## **2 Individual intention, social interaction or reflexive description: the definition of fashion**

As noted above the point of this paper is to examine how the consumption, use and display of mobile telephones is associated with the presentation of self. One of the first tasks of the paper is to try to place fashion and, for that matter, other artifacts used in personal display, into some sort of social context. In this connection, one can posit several different aspects. At the first level, there is the use of clothing as the expression of personal intention or status. In this modus the individual and their choices regarding clothing, are central.

At the next level, there is the notion of the interaction between the individual and the “viewer” of the clothing or artifact. Thus, one introduces the idea that the wearer of the clothing, in effect, makes a statement that is then interpreted by the viewer. The interpretation may be true to the intention of the wearer, or perhaps it is clouded in the bias of the viewer. None-the-less, clothing and fashion in this perspective is seen as an interaction between the wearer and the viewer. Just as with conversation, there is an exchange of communications between the individuals, and there is a whole range of para-communication or background communication that goes on in parallel with the more open interaction (Ling 1998). This is, of course a two-way street. One is not lonely a viewer or a wearer, but both and so there is a negotiation of meaning associated with the presentation of self.

A final approach is the interpretation of other’s clothing and artifact display within the viewer’s peer group. The interaction is not between the person displaying the clothing and a viewer, but rather it is the interpretation of the display by others. It is important to underscore that this is not an interaction with the person and their choice of clothing. Rather it is the use of that person’s presentation of self to enhance the internal cohesion of another group.

### **2.1 Fashion as intention**

To take the first point the analysis of fashion and personal display is the analysis of individual intention (Davis 1985; Dichter 1985). Cunningham and Lab note this when they say:

Material objects, such as clothing, help to substantiate and give concrete cultural meaning to individuals. They are the media through which cultural ideas flow. That is, clothing helps to substantiate the manner in which we order our world of cultural categories such as class, status, gender and age, and express cultural principles such as the values, beliefs and ideas which we hold regarding our world (5; see also McCracken 1988).

Cunningham and Lab go on to note that clothing reflects one’s personality or group identity, i.e. gender, role, occupation, economic status and political beliefs. They note that identities vis-à-vis cultural rites such as marriage, graduation etc. are also reflected in one’s clothing.<sup>5</sup> It is through the active use of various props, costumes and artifacts that one announces to the world around them who they are and how they wish to be seen. The presentation one makes to the world mirrors, at several levels, the attitude one wishes to make. Duncan points out some of the same things when he discusses the social use of manners and fashion.

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<sup>5</sup> There are, of course, counter reactions to the use of stereotyped clothing displays for various rituals.

The individual stages himself through manners. Through dress, gesture, speech, bearing, he [sic.] indicates to others, and thus to himself, where he belongs or wants to belong in his society (Duncan 1970, 266).

At this point, it is perhaps appropriate to draw on Goffman who has pointed to this in his analysis of front and back region performances. The back region is where one arranges their dress and the various props that will be used in a particular presentation of self. It is where “suppressed facts make an appearance” and where “the performer can relax; he can drop his front” (1959, 111-112).

By contrast, the front region is where the intended effect is put onto display. It is here that one has arrayed their costume, be it the business suit of the executive or the latest teen fashion on a Friday night. The point is that the individual feels integration between their intended image and their actual façade. It is in the front region that one engages in what Goffman calls face-work. According to Goffman one engages in face work in order to overcome situations in which one’s line of action is threatened with unexpected exigencies. In this way, for example poise or *savoir-faire* is used in the fight against embarrassment when and if the intended façade is put into question. This applies not only one’s own embarrassment but also the embarrassment that one feels when others are embarrassed. He goes on to note that the routines included in face work becomes habitualized and institutionalized within a society. Indeed, they are taken as standard actions in the society and further within the sub-culture (Goffman 1967, 12-13).

The discussion here has been drifting away from the notion that one has an intended form of presentation to the idea that one’s presentation involves an interaction between the individual and those who view him or her. There is the concept that others interpret one’s presentation of self, and indeed that is the point. The individual conceives of a presentation and then passes it off on others in more or less good faith. Cunningham and Lab implicitly include this when they note “Clothing helps to define our identity by supplying cues and symbols that assist us in categorizing within the culture” (1991, 11).<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the viewers with whom one comes in direct contact also have a role in the interaction. Following Goffman, the viewers are a part of one’s ability to maintain a face.

A person’s performance of face-work, extended by his tacit agreement to help others perform theirs, represents his willingness to abide by the ground rules of social interaction. Here is the hallmark of socialization as an interactant. If he and others were not socialized in this way, interaction in most societies and most situations would be a much more hazardous thing for feelings and faces (Goffman 1967, 31).

In many respects, now, we are leaving the intention of the individual and entering into a more complex discussion of fashion. It is here that we find the interactions between the person who is presenting them self via the use of dress and the observer’s interpretation of the individual.<sup>7</sup> Duncan focuses on this when he, somewhat interchangeably, discusses the use of manners and the use of fashion in social situations. With reference to the latter but of relevance to the former, he points to the interactive nature of this by saying “we can say that all manners are a dramatization of the self, a way of telling others how we want to be regarded, in turn how we regard them. For in manners we live through the responses of others” (Duncan 1970, 266).

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that it is not just one’s physical presentation of self that is determined by style and fashion, but also one’s audible presentation can be dictated by style and situation. Labov’s studies of the use of “r” by New Yorkers from various class backgrounds indicates that our very speech can be seen as a presentation of the self that varies after fashion and circumstance (Bryson 1990, 101)

<sup>7</sup> For a further analysis of this issue see for example, Forsythe, Drake and Hogan (1985), Harp Stretch and Harp (1985) and Rucker et al. (1985).

## 2.2 The interactive content of personal display

Planting ourselves firmly in the social and the interactive dimensions, the person who has carried out a key analysis of fashion is Georg Simmel. According to Simmel, fashion has several dimensions that mix to give the striving for (or after) fashionability a dynamic nature.<sup>8</sup> In fashion, writes Simmel, one finds the blending of desire for individual statement and, at the same time, the seemingly opposite desire for group identification. Simmel notes that “Two social tendencies are essential to the establishment of fashion, namely, the need of union on the one hand and the need of isolation on the other” (1971, 301). Further, he notes that:

Fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaptation; it leads the individual upon the road which all travel, it furnishes a general condition, which resolves the conduct of every individual into mere example. At the same time it satisfies in no less degree the need for differentiation, the tendency towards dissimilarity, the desire for change and contrast, on the one hand by a constant change of contents, which gives to the fashion of today an individual stamp as opposed to that of yesterday and of tomorrow, on the other hand because fashions differ for different classes – the fashions for the upper stratum are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them. Thus, fashion represents nothing more than one of the many forms of line by aid of which we seek to combine in uniform spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change. (1971, 296)

Teens have this in spades. There is the search for identity in collaboration with their peers and the need to mark differences with others, in particular with other generations but also with other “types” of teens (Lynne 2000).

### 2.2.1 Fashion as a boundary marker

Within the adolescent culture, and in fact within the culture at large, there is the need to mark the boundaries between groups (Flugel 1950). Adolescent culture has for example the socially conscious, the protesters, the debutants, the punks, the athletes as well as the various ethnically and gender based groups. Socially, it is necessary to mark the boundaries between those who are in and outside the group. Clothing and other types of artifacts are used in this activity (Davis and Isherwood 1979, 50 – 52). Through the adoption of that which is the fashion of the group one becomes an example of that group and, in this way becomes the embodiment of “a joint spirit” (Simmel 1971, 304-5)

From the fact that fashion as such can never be generally in vogue, the individual derives the satisfaction of knowing that as adopted by him it still represents something special and striking, while at the same time he feels inwardly supported by a set of persons who are striving for the same thing, not as in the case of other social satisfactions, by a set actually doing the same thing (1971; 304).

Beyond simply marking membership, such displays can be as the basis for both inclusion and exclusion. Fashion can be used to graphically display one’s allegiance to a group, or it can mark one as a “legitimate” object for one’s retribution as, for example, in the case of the Zoot-suiters during the Second World War (Cosgrove 1984; Mazon 1984; Polhemus 1994). By adopting the dress or the display of a group, one can show their sympathy for the group.<sup>9</sup> Turning again to Duncan, he notes that the

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<sup>8</sup> Simmel has been critiqued as being too class based in his analysis of fashion (Davis 1992; Sproles 1985). This critique has certain validity and the impacts of various social groups on the introduction of styles are well documented (Polhemus, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Generally, I have been discussing issues associated with display. However, there is an equally rich and perhaps more dynamic aspect of this associated with the use of language and argot. This also includes linguistic devices as in Fine (1987).

the sharing of display – or manners – is a type of common bond between group members. Accordingly, at some level, inner group strength or as noted by Duncan “a kind of social euphoria which binds us together simply because we are together” comes from the sharing of a display (Duncan 1970, 269).

Looking for a moment at the opposite case, exclusion can appear when considering the temporal and economic aspects of personal display. Specifically, those who must strive after the adoption of a style or a fashionable artifact such as a mobile telephone and who arrive “late at the party” as it were, may never actually fulfill the full potential of the display. They may be categorized as “wannabes” or *nuveau riche* and they never can share in the social bond as described by Duncan. By the time that those who strive after fashion have arrived, the cognoscenti who move on the innovative edge have likely shifted on to something else. Those without the means to achieve the latest styles – either because of economic constraints, membership in the wrong group, being out of the loop or because of inner restraint – are left to await the democratization of the style. This is not fashion in the Simmelian sense since popularization and the avant-garde are opposites.

### **2.2.2 The timeliness of fashion**

In the previous section, I touched on the dynamic nature of fashion. This is indeed essential to the concept. There are, of course, two issues here, one is the prospective and the other is retrospective. Fashion is a balancing between these two. If one is too far in front or too far behind the popular taste then they are out of fashion. Indeed, Simmel suggests that fashion is a division between the past and the future, that which was and that which is coming.

Life according to fashion consists of a balancing of destruction and up building; its content acquires characteristics by destruction of an earlier form; it possesses a particular uniformity, in which the satisfying of the love of destruction and of the demand for positive elements can no longer be separated from each other. (Simmel 1971, 306)

The timeliness however, is not a uniform thing, but rather has the dynamics of a wave that moves through a group at a varying speed. Fashion is in vogue among a group for a certain period of time before becoming popularized in other quarters, and perhaps rejected in the original group as being too blasé. To use the metaphor of the wave, Simmel suggests that one can really only speak of fashion when a particular form of display is not at the lowest ebb but has started on its way up (1971, 302). As the wave fills out and reaches its apex one is no longer speaking of fashion but rather popularization.

There is another aspect of timeliness in all of this, namely the situational presentation of self and the context in which the presentation is made. In the same sense that fashion is an interaction between the person presenting the fashion and the viewer, all of this is modified by the context in which the presentation is made. Wearing a tuxedo to a football game may be done for comical effect, but if it is done in good faith then the individual has clearly misread the situation. Thus, there is not only a timeliness associated with the ebb and flow of styles, but there is a timeliness associated with the proper sense of time and place.

### **2.2.3 Anti-fashion**

One last point is that there is the notion of anti-fashion. Just as the observance of fashion represents a way of orienting oneself to the world, the observance of anti-fashion is also a similar stance. Indeed the connoisseur of anti-fashion must not only be oriented, at a general level, as to what is fashionable, but must also be able to

choose among those items and forms for display that are their antipode. According to Simmel: “The man who consciously pays no heed to fashion accepts its forms just as much as the dude does, only he embodies it in another category, the former in that of exaggeration, the latter in that of negation (1971, 307; see also Davis, 1992, 132-33).

There is an interesting issue here, however, that goes beyond the discussion up to this point and, actually serves as a transition to the rest of the paper, i.e. the role of characterization in the display of others. The aficionado of anti-fashion is a second order derivation of that which is in fashion. In this capacity he or she, and more generally the group to which they belong, must develop a way of characterizing the fashionable person and then creating an “anti-fashionable” response. The characterizations may include any number of a long list of characterizations such as the dude, dandy, swell, fop, clothes horse, lounge lizard, clod, lout, oaf, and so on. What is important here, however, and the notion that will be examined below, is that within the group of the individual there is the characterization of other’s forms for display and also the creation of a response to that perceived display. Now I will leave this discussion and will turn to the specific examination of the material regarding teens and their sense of fashion vis-à-vis the mobile telephone.

### 3 Material from the interviews

Having placed the general issues of fashion into a context I will now go into material that specifically looks into the ownership, use and display of mobile telephones among teens in Norway. As noted in the introduction, the period between 1997 and 1999 saw the adoption of the mobile telephone by this group. Just as with the wrist-watch 100 years earlier the mobile telephone fulfilled a function for the group and it also interpreted as a type of display (David Landes 1983; Helmut Kahlert, Richard Mühe, and Glibert L Brunner 1986).

The immediate predecessor to the mobile telephone, in the imagination of teens, was the pager. This was used to coordinate social interaction with a distributed group of friends. This technology gained its foothold in the mid '90s and thus the teens saw the potential for mobile coordination and interaction. In the late 1990s the price for mobile telephony was falling, particularly the up front cost of the handsets. A popular confirmation gift during this period was a mobile telephone.<sup>10</sup> As a result, there was a shift over to mobile telephone from pagers. This was followed in the fall and winter of 1997/98 with the introduction of the pre-paid subscription.

The interviews from which the material is drawn come from two periods. The first material comes from the summer of 1997. This was in the period when the telephone operators heavily subsidized the cost of mobile telephone handsets in order to encourage new subscriptions. It was, however, immediately before the commercialization of pre-paid calling cards. This is a period when teens began to see that the cost of owning a mobile telephone was not insurmountable. On the other hand, teens, and also their parents, were quite aware of the potential for running up exorbitantly high telephone bills. Thus, mobile telephones had started to appear on the scene, but they were not, by any means, widespread. One teenaged informant from 1997, Frank, describes the slow shift from pagers over to mobile telephones that was just starting as the interviews were carried out.

Frank: A year ago, or something like that, everybody started to get pagers.

Interviewer: About a year ago?

Frank: Yeah, something like that. A year or year and a half ago. And then it has started to go more and more over to mobile telephones. . . .it has been more and more mobile telephones and not so much pagers now.

Frank indicates that pagers had been popular from about 1996 to the time of the interviews. Their popularity, however, was at that point being eclipsed by mobile telephones. Mobile telephones were still the exception rather than the rule.

The second set of material comes from the period after the widespread adoption of mobile telephones by teens. The material for this portion of the analysis comes from two separate sets of interviews carried out in 1999 and in 2000.<sup>11</sup> By the time of this

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<sup>10</sup> Confirmation is a common rite of passage for the majority of Norwegian teens. Teens are confirmed when they are either 14 or 15, slightly after the move from elementary to middle school. Thus, the child is experiencing life in a broader social world. In addition, social activities of the child mean that familial coordination is also more complex (Ling and Helmersen 2000).

<sup>11</sup> The 1997 interviews were with 12 families in their homes where the oldest child was between 12 and 20.

The bulk of the material in the second set of interviews comes from a series of six group interviews with teens and parents carried out in the Fall of 1999. The material for the second time period is supplemented with material from a series of 15 interviews with families in their homes carried out in the Spring of 2000.

All informants come from the greater Oslo area and were carried out in Norwegian. The material has been coded for the types of technologies discussed and the themes that arose. A criterion for participating in the group interviews was that the individual own a mobile telephone. This was not a criterion for participation in the case of the household interviews that took place in 2000, however.

second set of interviews the mobile telephone was a common object among teens. As noted in the introduction, the vast majority of teens owned one. Indeed, material collected by Statistics Norway shows that as many as 11% of 9 – 10 year olds owned a mobile telephone in 1999. Rather than being a novelty during this latter period, the teens had adopted the device as an everyday part of their lives.

### **3.1 Before the widespread adoption of the mobile telephone among teens**

The material from the first round of interviews provides insight into the characterization of the mobile telephone before its widespread adoption among teens. The comments of the informants bring out issues such as the timeliness of the device, the differentiation of style and the informants also provide insight into its characterization.

#### **3.1.1 The timeliness of fashion**

As noted by the informant cited above, the ownership of a mobile telephone was still unique and perhaps even somewhat embarrassing. As with Frank cited above, Bente (13) also reports that the mobile telephone had appeared on the scene only recently.

Interviewer: OK. Can you remember, is this something that has happened in the last year?

Bente: It is now, in the last month in the school year because it has been so “in.”

Interviewer: Ok. In the last month

Bente: It is now that it has been “in” with mobile telephones you know. So all the time since Christmas it has been pagers but now it is mobile telephones.

Teens’ ownership of the technology was still unique and had not completely been domesticated. This is seen in Bente’s comment that her friends took their mobile telephones with them to school, more for effect than for any functional purpose.

Bente: Now it has been “in” to have a mobile telephone so now there are very many of my friends that have gotten a mobile telephone. So, they are at school just to show them off.

To draw on the wave metaphor described above the level was starting to rise but it had not come close to reaching an apex. Thus, it is in the early, perhaps somewhat exciting portion of the adoption process. Bente reinforces this estimation by repeating that it is “in” several times. As we will see, however, she distanced herself from the trend to a certain degree. Nonetheless, both Bente and Frank, who were students at separate schools and who were interviewed independently of each other, saw that the adoption of the mobile telephone was starting to replace the pager.

In addition to denoting that the device was in the early stages of adoption, Bente’s repeated, and perhaps ironically intoned, notion that it was “in” seems to indicate that she had a critical distance to the trend. In her comments she brings up the issues that her friends had them at school “just to show them off.” That is, she implicitly compared the actual need for the device to its value as a timely fashion item. Her father, who was also present during the interview, adopted about the same line. He noted, “It is in. It doesn’t matter if you need it or not, just that you have it.” Both Bente and her father build up a type of needs/function argumentation in their discussion of the mobile telephone. The positing of the “need” argument is a common context in which teens use of the mobile telephone is placed (Ling and Helmersen 1999).

The comments indicating that the technology was “in” indicate that there was a heightened sense of the moment concerning fashion. As noted above, Simmel talks about the tension of avant-garde as opposed to the great mass of the population. Thus to be in, in one group, is to be seen as trendy or faddish by others. The concept of

being “in” can be used, in a sarcastic way by those who are not on the most avant-garde, to describe those who fling themselves upon the new at the least provocation.

A perhaps unique aspect of the mobile telephone is that beyond merely owning and displaying one, the technology allows for other ways of announcing its currency. With most fashion items, the visual aspect is their main function. However, the mobile telephone also has an audible dimension that can be incorporated into one’s display, indeed one need not even be physically present to indicate to others that they now own a mobile telephone. One sees these possibilities when Bente notes that her friends and classmates “joke around and call each other during class just to show off.” Playing further on this theme she relates the following episode.

Bente: There were two in my class that just got a mobile telephone. That was two weeks ago. They called up Maria, who is in my class and she had just gotten a pager. They called up her pager and another, her name is Nina, three times and then the teacher said that they have to turn them off. And so, the teacher took it away from her, a pager. She got it back after a week or so.

One sees here the remote communication of fashion via the use of the mobile telephone.

This also illustrates how the mobile telephone plays into Simmel’s notion of group identification via fashion. In a sense, the mobile telephone takes this to new heights. It is in the very nature of the artifact that one can communicate and coordinate activities with others in the group (Ling and Yttri, forthcoming). It is not only the mere ownership of the physical artifact that identifies the individual with others who are in the same group.<sup>12</sup> In the episode related above, the technology allowed the group to interact remotely and in a previously impossible manner. In addition, the unique manner of the interaction along with the sanction imposed by the teacher provided the group with a memorable episode that had been added to its lore. The device had provided a multifaceted opportunity for further group integration. Thus, identity goes beyond the simple sharing of a common consumption pattern, but the object of consumption in itself also supports group interaction.

### 3.1.2 The differentiation of styles

Another issues that arose in the interviews was the ability to distinguish between the image given off by various types of mobile telephones and pagers. These two devices had been in circulation in Norway for some time previous to the interviews in 1997, particularly among business people (read: yuppie) and various other groups of adults. Thus, the informants were able to make distinctions between various types of devices.

Interviewer: Is there a type of mobile telephone that is particularly in?

Bente: The one that people want the most is that Ericsson the new little one, or that newest, but there are a lot who have a Nokia, the yellow one that lights up.

Interviewer: If you wanted one which one would you want?

Bente: I think that I would have the Ericsson because it is so little and nice.

Interviewer: Is it the same with pagers? Is there one that is especially in?

Bente: That is the Motorola, the square one with, what is that, what do they call it? The screen up there sort of. It is transparent and yellow and green and many different colors that light up.

Bente had some notions as to which devices are more popular as well as some sense of which characteristics are to be sought after. As we will see below, however, this

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<sup>12</sup> Examples of this type of display are recorded in the work by Holloman (1991) and Schlick and Rowold (1991).

was only in its first stages at the time of these interviews. In the latter interviews the differentiation of the styles was further developed.

### 3.1.3 The characterization of fashion

At this early point in the adoption of the mobile telephone among teens, the public use of the device did not go unnoticed. Its strong connection to the “yuppie” culture and its expense marked the public use or display of the mobile telephone by a teen as a special event worthy of characterization. One can see this in the comments of Martin, a 17-year-old respondent who, along with his parents, opposes the use of mobile telephones in general.

Martin(17): . . . When it rings it is like ‘I have a mobile telephone’ . . . There are a lot [of people] that have one to show that they are somebody you know.

Martin builds on this thought when he says:

Martin: . . . There are a lot of them that use, like if you go places where there are a lot of people like, and like you can go ‘Yeah, hi.’ Shout loud like. [They] can almost hold their hand up to the mobile telephone and point like. ‘I have a mobile telephone.’ That is, like, shouting to show that he has a mobile telephone. There are a lot that do that.

Beyond Bente’s remarks about the mobile telephone being “in,” there is the sense in Martin’s comments that one uses the mobile telephone, in a vulgar, graceless way, to attain status. Martin goes on to assert that the individuals are not acting in good faith. He says “people at school realize that [using a mobile telephone] is nothing special actually.” There is an assertion that at some level, the presentation of the individual is out of kilter with the context in which they operate, i.e. the “correct” type of artifacts that a Norwegian teen should have.

Given this general orientation to the mobile telephone it is interesting to note how Bente and Martin characterize the use of the device. As we will see in the discussion, both Bente and Martin had a codex of terms available for these types of descriptions.<sup>13</sup>

Bente (13): I have never used a mobile telephone at school. I don’t do that. I think that is dumb . . . . [When a mobile telephone rings in class] I start to laugh. I think that is dumb to have a mobile telephone. I don’t want one because I think that it is a little *harry* to have one. There are a lot who think it is cool. So I don’t have one. [emphasis added]

Bente calls the use of the mobile telephone in school dumb (*teit*) and then goes on to employ the colorful Norwegian term *harry*. To call something *harry* is to say that it is tacky or vulgar. *Harry* is an adjective used to describe one who is taking on airs. The American concept of a “lounge lizard,” for example, describes some aspects of being *harry*. It is the opposite of “cool.”<sup>14</sup>

One can see here that there is the tension between the daughter's current sense of style and her observations of those who own a mobile telephone. Vulgarity is often associated with the sense of display that is over one's station, i.e. students posing as

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<sup>13</sup> Such terms are a common feature of groups, both on a broad regional basis and within smaller peer groups (Fine 1987). The terms used here are broadly understood among Norwegians and are not the more specific peer group terms used for inappropriate display. The teens used broader terms that had a general currency in Norway and not specific peer group related terms. This is likely the result of the interview situation, i.e. it is a one-time discussion with a relatively unknown adult in the presence of their parents. Thus, the more specific peer based terms were not seen as appropriate in that setting.

<sup>14</sup> A light hearted examination of the concept can be found in Kalvø (1999).

important business people through their use of the mobile telephone. Thus, one is asserting a "face" in the Goffmanian sense, but the display is only partially successful. From the perspective of the viewer, there are too many chinks in the façade and the audience asserts that there is disjointedness between the display and the way that the person "really" is. The girl here seems to be commenting on the fact that those with a mobile telephone are trying too hard to be something that they are not.

Martin is also able to place a characterization on the display of the mobile telephone.

Martin (17): There are some in my class you know, there are a lot that are *so*ss and [wear] really expensive brand name clothes and things and many of them have, you know, a mobile telephone because you know to show that they are, you know, a little rich, you know. We have one that is not really *so*ss but he is in our class, and has a mobile telephone and it is so really like so, some times, it suddenly rings and so 'Wait a little and I will call you back during recess.' you know [emphasis added].

Instead of *harry* Martin uses the Norwegian term *so*ss that might be translated as something between preppy and pompous (Lynne 2000).<sup>15</sup> This is an extension of the *harry* discussion that was given above by the girl. It contains the same elements from a slightly different perspective. Both *harry* and *so*ss are usually derogatory adjectives that are used to describe others who appear to seek status through personal display. With *harry* the wrong clothes are used in an outdated fashion by a person who probably does not know any better. By contrast, a *so*ss has a well-integrated and often expensive display but is seen as being self-important, vain and conceited. It is, perhaps, a display behind which the individual hides.

It is often, but not always the case that a difference between the *harry* and the *so*ss is the income of the individual. There is also often a class based element in the use of *so*ss and *harry*. *So*ss often refers to those who are perceived to be above the observer's station while *harry* often refers to those who are below. In addition, *so*ss often but not always refers to those who live in the better portions of the larger cities while *harry* is often used in relation to rural persons. As with many derogatory terms these are quite loose and flexible in their application. Indeed their looseness and flexibility is essential to their role in the vocabulary. Their power lies in that different people can stretch them to cover different situations. This very flexibility makes them into lively words that, in themselves, makes their application a topic of interest. The ability to assert that one or another thing is *harry* or *so*ss is the ability to define how one should be. Thus, as I will examine below, these concepts have in them an element of power. These terms will be further examined, both in the following section where I go onto the material from 1999, and also in the concluding discussion.

### **3.2 After the widespread adoption of the mobile telephone among teens**

In the interlude between the first set of interviews and those carried out in 1999/2000, teens' use of the mobile telephone had become more of a common sight. After the initial confrontation with the existing sense of how one should display themselves in public, it became a more common part of everyday life.

Beyond the mere ownership statistics, the device also has a currency among teens. It represents both access to friends and is also represents an aspect of the child's emancipation (Ling and Yttri forthcoming). There is often a real passion associated with the ownership of the device. The desire to own a mobile telephone is not always

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<sup>15</sup> Lynne (2000) examines the concept of *so*ss and places it into the context of a broader set of characterizations that include terms for persons from various parts of Oslo, political orientations and activities.

shared by the parents. The decision as to whether a child should have a mobile telephone was not always resolved. One can see the dimensions of this type of discussion in the following sequence taken from one of the household interviews carried out in 2000.

Interviewer: Do you have a mobile telephone?

Gro (14): No

Interviewer: Do you want one?

Gro: Yes.

Father: I was called at work today because she wanted to know if I could buy her a mobile telephone.

Interviewer: You called today?

Gro: [No answer]

Father: Yeah, it isn't the first time I have been asked about it, but today is the first time I have been called at work.

Interviewer: And the answer was?

Father: When have you needed to have a mobile telephone recently? In which situations do you need to have a mobile telephone? And that, but that is not the background for it. It is a group pressure thing I think.

Interviewer: Why do you want a mobile telephone?

Gro: I don't know, I just want a mobile telephone.

Interviewer: Are there many of your friends that have one?

Gro: Just about everybody in the class has one and so I want one too.

Gro's father develops the "needs" argument that Bente and her father used in the 1997 material. Gro is somewhat less clear in her desire for the device though she points to a type of "popularity" or perhaps a fashion based justification for her eventual adoption.

Beyond this, the sequence indicates that the ownership of the mobile telephone was still an issue of contention. Unlike the interview with Bente and her father and also the interview with Martin and his parents, there was disagreement between Gro and her father in the evaluation of the technology. Where eventual ownership was not "taken for granted" by the teens in the earlier interviews, the sense that one can read into the material here is that Gro has the anticipation that she will eventually get a mobile telephone. This was not the case in the earlier discussions. This underscores that the mobile telephone was more integrated into the everyday culture of Norwegian teens in the latter set of interviews.

### **3.2.1 The nuanced knowledge of fashion**

After the threshold of to be seen or to not be seen with a mobile telephone was crossed, there were of course new dimensions associated with the presentation of self. As Bente alluded to in the previous section, the vintage, price and size of the mobile telephone were often seen as important. Where in 1997 there was a broad notion regarding style, this became precise during the second time period.<sup>16</sup>

Comments from both the parents of teens and also the teens indicate that the style and type of mobile telephone one used had significant importance in the eyes of the teens. One mother informant noted, "I think that it is a little snobby and such, because it is not what ever mobile telephone any more. Before it was such that it was nice

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that even though there is more precision in determining the characteristics that are desirable in a mobile telephone, they are none-the-less dynamic. The introduction of new models and the culling of various characteristics among the teens means that this year's most sought after model will be next year's curiosity.

to have a mobile telephone, but now it depends on which model you have. So it should be expensive.” By the time of the second interview period this was often not if a child had a mobile telephone or not, but rather which type they had. This can be seen in the comments of parents who participated in a group interview.

Marta: Now it is like our children will get our old telephones.

Gerd: No, they are not good enough.

(Laughter)

Marta: They are good enough because they have them to be available

Gerd: I tried that [with my children], but it is at home and it is not used.

Interviewer: That didn't work?

Gerd: Could not send text messages with it and it was completely useless.

Interviewer: Was it the functions or was it the way it looked?

Gerd: The functions plus. . .

Mia: The size and the way it looks

Gerd: Yeah, the size was completely awful plus the battery was only good for a quarter of an hour. It was better than that, but still. . .

Another mother reported the following incident:

Mia: My 13 year old can borrow her father's from his work but there is no chance for that you know. It belongs in a museum. It is over two years old and you can't show your face with that. I had both my daughters on the ferry from Denmark last weekend and I said that one of them could call home and say that we will be docking at this or that time. 'With that telephone, are you crazy?' There was no chance of that. She took the SIM card<sup>17</sup> and put it in her own mobile telephone. She didn't touch [mine] in public. She would have to hide [to do that].

The opposite perspective regarding this point is provided by one of the teenaged informants in the group interviews. When asked to show her mobile telephone she refused out of embarrassment.

Interviewer: Why don't you want to show us your mobile telephone?

Anne (15): Because mom bought my mobile telephone.

Ida (18): I have a borrowed a mobile telephone and I can't say that I am exactly proud of using that one.

Another informant, Morten (14), provided comments that were along the same line when he adopted an ironic tone to say "My mother bought this one for me. This is my weapon."

These comments point to an importance of fashion vis-à-vis mobile telephony. They also point to a concern regarding the type and style of mobile telephone one is seen with. These comments relate to the intention of the individual's display. The teens are perhaps more concerned with the image that they give off than other groups. This is done almost to the point that their concern to arrange the symbols of presentation overtakes the actual presentation itself. To put this into Goffmanian terms, the front stage presentation is overshadowed by so much back stage noise that the play is not the thing; rather the machinations behind the staging are the thing. In the citations here, the striving for the proper façade overshadowed the elegant management of the presentation. That this happens in the presentation of the mobile telephone underscores the fact that as of the end of 1999, there was prestige invested in the device, its ownership and use.

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<sup>17</sup> The SIM card is the card that contains the subscription and billing information for a mobile telephone. A SIM card can be freely moved from handset to handset and the calls made through that SIM card will be routed into a single telephone bill regardless of the handset used during the call.

As noted by Anne in the previous sequence, from the perspective of the individual, one of the problems with fashion is that one strives for an integrated sense of style in that all the aspects hang together. One does this to gain identity with the appropriate groups and also contrast with the other types of groups. Others are not always able to make these types of judgments for us, and intergenerational decision-making is particularly difficult. The taste and style of one's parents is not the same as that of the teens. This also comes out when the teens comment on the use of their parent's retired telephones.

Interviewer: Do you have a mobile telephone?

Joakim (14): Yeah, but I don't use it too much because it is almost in pieces now, an old (unintelligible).

Interviewer: Do you use a mobile telephone?

Joakim: Yeah,

Father: If it was a Nokia 8110, is that the one?

Joakim: 3210.

Father: (chuckle) with games and such.

Joakim: That is a little bit better than the one I have at any rate.

Father: Yeah: it is like that and when the battery goes.

Joakim: They don't weigh so much and they are not so big

Some of the same elements came out in another interview:

Interviewer: So you don't have a mobile telephone any more?

Mads (14): Yeah, but it is so old.

Mother: He has inherited it from his father when he got a new mobile telephone because he used it for his job.

Interviewer: Why don't you want it?

Mads: because it is so old.

Again, Simmel's discussion regarding the currency of style comes in here along with the issues of identity and group membership. The generational difference almost guarantees that at least the nuances of how the symbols are arrayed have changed and more likely the whole codex of symbols is different.

When looking for the elements that are particularly sought after, age and the size of the mobile telephone, the model number, the façade, particular colors, the functions of the handset and sometimes various accessories such as pouches etc. were common points of comment that went through many of the interviews in the second round of interviews. Comments from various interviews included the following:

Eskild (13): It is not fun to have the worst [mobile telephone] on the market you know.

Inger (17): I have a real ugly Bosch telephone . . . it's so big and awkward.

Nina (18): It is . . . about how it looks and its size. Often it is the small cute mobile telephones that have the most status, at any rate that is how I experience it.

The discussion continues to indicate that it is not simply owning or not owning a device, but rather that the type of things that the telephone can do and also the way that it looks. Thus, a telephone is not a unitary device, it is rather a compellation of attributes that each can be interpreted in their own direction but also are a total package.

A negative example of the importance of the mobile telephone can be seen in the comments of Rita. She was asked to show her mobile telephone upon which she had painted various patterns.

Rita: (18) I have taken nail polish and painted [on my mobile telephone] you know, but it is worse now.

Interviewer: Can I see it?

Rita: It is really pretty. It is real heavy, a weapon [ironic voice]

Her use of irony is telling. Irony is a type of humor, and like humor in other situations, it is a lubricant that helps one through social situations. Irony has this capacity, but in addition, it indicates that one is asking for the complicity of the other. Duncan notes that irony “helps us to endure that what we can not, or will not, change (1970, 380). This is surely the sense here. Rita has an old and unfashionable telephone. In order to accommodate this device she is forced to treat it in a certain way. In order that the audience does not mistake this as a fashion statement, she has even enhanced the effect through decorating the device.

### 3.2.2 The presentation of self with the mobile telephone

In addition to ownership, the teens have developed notions of how one should display a mobile telephone. Earlier we met Martin who described how his colleagues seemed to “Shout loud like. [They] can almost hold their hand up to the mobile telephone and point like. ‘I have a mobile telephone.’” His description of the display of telephones had, in the mean time, been replaced by a more discreet code of conduct.

In the interviews from the second time period, other rules regarding the form of display had been developed. This is seen in the following sequence.

Interviewer: Where do you have your mobile telephone? On your belts?

Arne (17): Covered up as much as possible.

Interviewer: Covered up as much as possible?

Oda (18): It is a little *harry* to go with it in your belt. It is not too cool to go around and show off your mobile telephone, or at any rate not on your belt.

Interviewer: It is not cool to show it off?

Nina (18): I think that it looks dumb.

Interviewer: Where do you have it

Inger (17): In my bag or in my pocket.

Interviewer: Why shouldn't you show it off?

Oda: It is not that you shouldn't show it off, but you look like the village idiot if you have it in your belt.

Arne: I think it is a Norwegian thing that you shouldn't show it off. It's *jantelov* thing.<sup>18</sup> [emphasis added]

This sequence that describes that one should be discrete in the display of their mobile telephone. It contrasts with the description provided by Martin above.

Looking further, the phrase *harry* comes out again here as a description of the person who has a mobile telephone on their belt. This is seen as being too obvious. The best strategy according to these teens is to have the telephone in your pocket or in your bag.

The last comment that *Jantelov* has come into play is interesting. It is, in effect saying that the device has been, at least partially, embedded in the culture. The fact that it is appropriate to have it in a particular place on the body and not another is a recognition of this. Further, that this is placed in the context of a well known and discussed cultural concept, i.e. *janteloven*, means that the mobile telephone is not simply a loose undefined artifact. Rather it bears social meaning. It has been taken into the culture and put into at least a first approximation of its social placement.

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<sup>18</sup> Jantelov describes a Norwegian cultural trait that encompasses the sense that one should be humble in the way they behave and not believe that they are better than others. This is a well-engrained notion in the Norwegian culture.

The material also points to the idea that not only the type of telephone, but also the additional decoration are an aspect of display. One informant, Nina (18) said: “I think that at any rate that it looks dumb when people have a lot of sunflowers or dinosaurs on their telephone. That is really childish.” Another informant, Erika, places this type of decoration into the intention of personal display.

Erika: It is like I say, a mobile telephone is actually an expression of personality because, take for example, I hate flowers all over the place. But she has a cover with flowers on it you know. That is what she has chosen to have because it represents something for her. But that is something that I would not have chosen. So your cover shows, in some way, what type of person you are.

While some teens strove after the latest fashions, others used other strategies to distance themselves from the pursuit of that which is fashionable, i.e. the pursuit of “anti style.” In the following sequence, one can see the informants using various strategies with which to distance themselves from being seen as overly focused on the pursuit of fashion. We have already seen this in the comments of Rita presented above. Several of the same themes come out in the following sequence.

Interviewer: People were really embarrassed when we asked them to show us their mobile telephones at the beginning.

Nora (18): It is not [embarrassing] for me at any rate.

Rita (18): I think that it is a little fun with an ugly mobile telephone. I am proud of what I have.

Rather than self-irony, as in the case of Rita, there is certain defiance in these comments.

### 3.2.3 The characterization of using the mobile telephone

Finally, there is the issue of how the mobile telephone was characterized during the second time period. As with the material from 1997, the informants drew on some of the same concepts when discussing the device. For example, an 18 year old informant, Rita, noted “The most *harry* of all is when people use their telephone in the bus and talk really loud. That is just an incredible pain.” The comment is not a general condemnation of one who uses the mobile telephone as for example in the comments of Martin above. Rather, the mobile telephone is accepted, rather it is the specific situation that is in question here.

The possibilities for condemnation were, however, not static in the period between the first and the second time periods. Specifically, a new approach to using the mobile telephone, i.e. “hands-free” devices, had arisen since the first time period and was the focus of comments by the teen-aged informants. These devices were on their way to becoming legally required for mobile telephone users who were driving. In spite of this, the teens saw this as dumb.

Erika (17) If you have a hands-free, then at any rate you have your hands on the wheel, but you don’t concentrate 100% on the road.

Rita: (18) I think that it is ok in a car, but to walk down the street and talk on a hands-free is completely awful

Interviewer: Why is that?

Rita: It looks completely dumb (*teit*).

Anne(15): You go around and talk to yourself you know.

Erik (14): If you are standing there and he has the telephone there, and so he is sitting there and talking like that and you see that he is not talking in the mobile telephone. It looks completely stupid.

It is interesting to note that there is far less use of derogatory characterizations of the mobile telephone during the second time period. All in all, there were only two evo-

cations of *harry*, two uses of “dumb” and no use of *soxx* in the second round of interviews.

One obvious difference here is that the people who made the characterizations in 1997 did not own a mobile telephone. In contrast to this, the informants who made these characterizations in the second time period were mobile telephone owners. This may be an indication that the mobile telephone has become more integrated or domesticated (Palin et al., forthcoming).

## 4 *Harry and soss: Identity, group membership and terms of degradation*

As we have seen, the sight of one using, or even owning, a mobile telephone can be characterized in a range of different ways. Now we turn to the question of what all of this means. What is the effect of placing names, either degrading or venerating on the sight of various social phenomena?

We have at our disposal a whole set of these terms with which we can interpret the display of others. These interpretations are dynamic as seen in the data in the previous section of the paper. The things that constitute *harry* and *soss* change with time. At one point and in one location a *soss* can be quickly defined as one who wears a certain type of jean jacket and another type of pants. In another time or place the same word can be applied to one who wears their collar flipped up and at another time or place, it is those who wear Lacoste shirts and Treitorn shoes, etc.

In the context of this analysis when comparing across the two time periods, the concept of *harry* vis-à-vis mobile telephones seems to have wandered and become less common and the idea of *soss* has disappeared. During the interviews in 1997, those without a mobile telephone use the terms to describe those with a mobile telephone. Further, the informants in this first round of interviews were not as able to describe the specific things that made up a stylish mobile telephone. During the second set of interviews, the informants were generally mobile telephone owners, indeed as many as  $\frac{3}{4}$  of all teens owned one at this point. There were fewer examples of belittling terms used in these interviews and their use was more specific. The informants also had more detailed knowledge of what is stylish, i.e. the size, color, façade and model number of the most sought after mobile telephones. Further, there has developed a style of display and an understanding of where and how one should use the device. These considerations indicate that the device had become embedded in, at any rate, the youth culture.

### 4.1 The genesis of derogatory terms

An interesting point here is the development and use of the terms to describe mobile telephone use. The notions of *harry* and *soss* have been described. In the sense that these are degrading terms, they exist as antonyms for that which is fashionable, stylish and cool. From the perspective of Simmel, rather than engendering inclusion and a sense of belonging, these characterizations point more towards a sense of exclusion. There is not the idea that the individual who characterizes another as being either a *soss* or *harry* is including them in their social group. Indeed, one often will not say to another that they are *harry*, as it is a type of insult.

The question arises as to the genesis and the social function of terms such as *harry* or *soss*. The application of denigrating or prejudicial terms arises when one feels that another is out of line in some respect.<sup>19</sup> Negative attributions can arise from disruptions in the use of manners and what Goffman calls the ritual code (Goffman 1967, 40). When one is on the bus, at school or in another context and all the others are behaving according to the individual's perception of how they should, then there is no cause for comment. However, when this is not the case, that is when a person does not behave the way another thinks they should, then there is the basis for com-

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<sup>19</sup> Obviously, denigrating terms can also serve to define and exclude whole classes of "out groups." Examples of this are the terms used against Afro-Americans in the US and Jews in Nazi Germany. The sense developed in this paper is much more narrow.

ment and perhaps attribution. Thus, it is in this gap between actual and imagined situation that one finds the root for comments about being *harry* or *sooss*.

There is an element of reflexivity here. When one sees behavior in others that would be embarrassing were they to do it them self, it becomes the object for characterizations. These characterizations are, in effect, linguistic crystallizations of social events. One has, for example, a set of expectations as to how one should behave on a bus. Given that set of expectations they, themselves, try to match their behavior as much as possible to that expectation.

The expectation set can vary such that, for example, one has different expectations for older women than those covering young children, etc. None-the-less there is a set of expectations that one has internalized and which one draws upon in the planning of their own behavior and, more to the point here, in their expectations of other's behavior. One can modify their expectations, for example, if one is confronted with a child who's behavior is outside of that which is common in the situation. In the case of the mobile telephone, the informants applied these terms to situations in which they thought others were out of line.

This goes along the lines of Goffman's discussion of face and "face work." Described above. The *savoir-faire* allows one to navigate through difficult situations. It includes a set of strategies and devices used to save face. In many situations, for example, laughter and levity serve to lubricate difficult situations. Duncan describes how these devices allow one to marginalize and to encapsulate their embarrassment.

Goffman describes the reciprocal nature of interaction in that it includes an unspoken agreement that one will observe the norms of the situation and also that one will help others to observe the same rules. That is, we base and adjust our presentations, our "face," on our perceived nature of the situation and the needs in that context. This is, in fact, the centerpiece of socialized interaction. Without this ability, behavior would spin off in unpredictable directions and common inter-subjective understandings of the nature of the interaction would be impossible. However, this is a precarious balance.

A person may be said to *be in the wrong face* when information is brought forth in some way about his social worth that cannot be integrated, even with effort, into the line that is being sustained for him. A person can be said to be *out of face* when he participates in a contact with others without having a ready line of the kind participants in such situations are expected to take. (Goffman 1967, 8)

Thus, there may be various understandings of a situation and various lines adopted in relation to one's participation. If there is, at least, a general accordance between the various actors, then the social action can continue. To use an example cited above by one of the informants, if all the passengers on the bus agree as to how they should present themselves, then all is well. However, there is a delicate balance at work here. One's actions, or the interpretation of one's actions by another, can upset the balance if these are thought to be outside that which is expected in that situation.<sup>20</sup>

The next point, that is somewhat curious, is that one only rarely comments on the untoward behavior of others. Goffman describes this as the concept of civil inattention. He suggests that actors in a situation strive, as much as possible, to maintain the sense of the situation. A person conducts himself or herself such that they strive to maintain their own face, as well as that of the others in the encounter. In a successful

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<sup>20</sup> The tendency here is to think of this as a negative thing, but just as easily, the interpretation can be unexpectedly positive. In the context of dress, one can be seen to be notably fashionable though it is far more common that negative situations are those of note.

encounter, be it a dinner party or a bus ride, all individuals accept the lines established by the others, indeed there is the willingness to oversee minor mishaps and miscues. A sneeze, or the unintended contact between persons is either tactfully ignored or brushed aside with a smile or a laugh. Goffman suggests that tolerance of the lines established by others is a structural feature of interaction (Goffman 1967, 8-9). Thus, they work to ignore others who threaten this sense of the situation; sometimes this ignoring can come to the point of being false and studied.

To behave properly and to have the *right* to civil inattention are related: Propriety on the individual's part tends to ensure his being accorded civil inattention; extreme impropriety on his part is likely to result in his being stared at or studiously not seen. Improper conduct, however, does not automatically release others from the obligation of extending civil inattention to the offender, although it often weakens it. In any case, civil inattention may be extended in the face of offensiveness simply as an act of tactfulness, to keep an orderly appearance in the situation in spite of what is happening (Goffman 1963, 87).

This citation has obvious meaning for the discussion of mobile telephony in public places. The boundary as to when the intrusive conduct has breached the sense of propriety is flexible, situational and as shown in the material presented above has to do with one's experience with the disturbance in question. It has to do with the context in which it takes place and the degree to which the person introducing the breach is able to alter the definition of the situation to their own ends.

In reference to the issue of describing others as *harry* or *sozz* etc. is the implication that they have strained the sense of proper conduct in a public place. The ex post facto description of others in derogatory terms indicates that the rule of civil inattention has perhaps been extended in the specific situation, but that the strain was so great as to imprint that situation on the mind of the speaker for later comment and characterization.

#### **4.2 The use of characterizations to enforce group identity in adolescent culture**

Up to this point, the discussion in this section of the paper has described how individuals relate to a situation as it unfolds, there and then. As noted here they can develop various ideas about its content, particularly if things happen that are outside that which is generally expected. It is through this process of setting words on the situation, that is, packing it into the vocabulary of the individual and transporting it to other social situations for retelling, that is of interest here.

The specific point of departure is the institution of seeing something as *harry* or *sozz*. This refers not so much to someone presenting them self as being a certain way so much as it refers to others' sense of who that person is and how they present themselves. Within the specific situation, the individual is afforded the deference of not being told that they are out of face. At worst, there is studied non-observance, i.e. the cold shoulder.

The process of retelling about socially awkward situation to others is what one might call the institutionalization of characterizations. This includes the sighting of a person who presents them self in a particular type of dress (with what ever intentions they may have). The observer who views this, interprets the presentation and formulates a description of it using a repertoire of words and concepts that have been built up in the individual's interaction with others. This is a critical aspect of the process. The various terms are invested with meanings depending on the experiences of the individual and the experiences of the groups in which the individual participates.

The final step in the process is that the individual relates their understanding of the presentation to a third party who may or may not be able to observe the original presentation. If two persons who share the same general repertoire of descriptive terms view the presentation and if the two are in agreement as to the proper description of the event then the incident becomes a further confirmation of the concept's content and also a celebration of the group's identity. An alternative is that the event can be related, second hand, to others who have the common perspective. In this case, the audience of the retelling has to draw on their own understanding of the speaker's description of, for example the *soos* or "oaf" they saw.

This "comment" regarding the observed person is made to other friends and confidants. This type of interaction within the group is a part of the internal moral economy of the group. It is the relating of events and the development of a common notion of what is appropriate and the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable display. It is the mapping of new experiences on the already existing framework of friendship and, in this way, it is the further development of the common ideology. Thus, the assertion that a viewed person is "neat," "dowdy," "stylish" or "gaudy" or a whole set of other characterizations is a brick in the maintenance of the group ethic.

Beyond the simple labeling of others as dumb or tacky, the use of the language enforces a type of group identity and the boundary between the in and the out groups. That is, the description of the event afterwards and the application of characterizations become themselves events in the life of the group. They provide the group with common reference points and a common sense of how characterizations should be applied.

There can also be the exercise of power in the use of derogatory characterizations. If one is able to assert their definition of, for example, *soos* within the context of the group then they are in the process of asserting a certain power over how group members should present themselves. If there is a good-natured disagreement over the content of the term then the persons asserting the alternative definitions have a way of sharing the power to define style within the group. However, if one person defines the term over the heartfelt objections of the others, then there is an assertion of unilateral power on the part of that individual, and there may be the makings of a schism within the group.

Thus, these terms can take on the character of casual and perhaps amusing chatter among friends, or, can be used as serious terms of control. The latter situation obtains perhaps more often among teens where the building up and establishing of identity is a central issue. Indeed, one of the crucial issues of adolescence is the emancipation from one's parents and the establishment of one's independence. The peer group has, in industrialized countries, become an agent in this process. The peer group helps the individual to find their bearings (sometimes misguidedly) through the process of adolescent maturation.

The work of Sullivan (1953) and those who have followed his analysis have noted that the peer group is a necessary area for the development of the socialized adult. The peer group provides the adolescent with a relatively bounded situation where, none-the-less, they can exercise certain forms of control and also participate in group decision making among equals. (Giordano 1995; Harter 1990; Savin-Williams and Berndt 1990; Youniss 1980; Youniss and Smollar 1986;). To cite earlier work on the role of the peer group:

One's peers provide self-esteem, reciprocal self-disclosure, emotional support, advice and information. They provide the ability for one to be vulnerable among equals, sensitive to the needs of others and generally, perhaps for the first time, to

acquire insight into social interaction outside of the family. These groups are largely protective of their members. They draw a symbolic boundary around themselves and resist the intrusion of others. This is seen in the development of what Fine calls idioculture and that may include a whole system of nicknames, jokes, styles of clothing, songs, artifacts etc (1987, 126). While there is support in the peer group, there is also teasing, gossip and infighting. This can take place for example in the chafing between one's immediate peer group and the broader circle of friends (Giordano 1995). The peer culture's influence is also somewhat selective. While it has profound influence on the selection of certain cultural items such as slang and clothing, parents and the adult world are influential in areas such as career choices (Brittian 1963). Fine has indicated that these activities may indeed provide the basis for enhanced group solidarity and loyalty (Ling and Helmersen 1999).

One of the activities of the peer group is the informal establishment of codes of dress consumption patterns and in their orientation (Hogan 1985, 2). It may well be that there is a greater need for identification than for distinction within the adolescent peer group. In addition, the established patterns can be either gently or more ruthlessly enforced. We have seen in the material above some relatively benign linguistic examples of how style of presentation vis-à-vis the mobile telephone is enforced. The use of various terms such as *harry* or its Norwegian opposite *kul* (cool) can be seen in this context.

The need to revert to derogatory comments regarding the behavior of the others indicates that they are not sharing the sense of the interaction and that they are not "in line," nor are they worthy of envy in the sense that Simmel talks about fashion. There is a sense of the need to not be like they are. Thus, the notions of *harry* and *sooss* contain ideas that are the polar opposites of fashionable in the Simmelian sense of the word. Rather than the assertion of identity and the desire for group membership, they point more towards the sense of wanting to distance oneself from the individual. There is a similarity in the concepts, however, in that the specific definition of that which is fashionable and that which is *harry* or *sooss* is under constant redefinition. Just as fashion is dynamic, so is the need to distance oneself from that which is tacky or overbearing. Where gold necklaces and other disco attire were "in" during the '80s they are definitely "out" in the new millennium. The popularity of the mobile telephone will share the same fate.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked into the use of the mobile telephone as an element in the display of teens. To do this I have looked at the issues of what fashion is, and how it is interpreted.

There are three levels of approaches to the interpretation of style that are discussed in this paper. These include the use of style to carry out some type of intended display. The second level is the analysis of style as a type of communication interaction between the person presenting the style and the person or persons who are viewing it. Finally, there is the use of comments about style and fashion as a way to integrate a group and maintain its inner solidarity. It is this last approach that has been most central to the analysis since it opens up the ability to account for both positive, but more often negative characterizations of style.

The description of mobile telephones by teens and their parents and other's use of mobile telephones has been the basis for this analysis. The fact that teens' use of the mobile telephone has arrived on the scene only recently means that it provides one with the insight needed for this type of analysis. Thus, the qualitative material examined here gives one the chance to see how this technology has been embedded in the culture. This is particularly the case since the material covers the period during which the device was popularized and generally adopted by teens.

While the mobile phone has become more democratized – some will say vulgarized – it seems obvious that it has not reached its final functional form. In addition, the device has yet to be encoded into the range of status giving devices to the same degree as, for example, timepieces. We have already witnessed the rise of one kroner mobile telephones just as the One-dollar watches, the Timexes and the Swatches have swept through the timekeeping market. However, at the other end of the scale, advertising slogans such as “*You never actually own a Patek Philippe (wristwatch) you merely look after it for the next generation*” are unthinkable for today's crop of mobile telephones. However, as with a whole range of devices, this type of message will undoubtedly arise vis-à-vis mobile telephones, indeed the work of Berit Skog indicates that this process may be beginning in Norway (Skog 2000). This points to the sense that the mobile telephone will not always be such a “hot topic.” That is, its use will become normalized eventually and will become a general part of the background that is not a point of comment.

## 6 References

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