

Just connect

The social world of the mobile phone

The boundaries of human relationships are changing. Mediated interaction, particularly electronic interaction via the internet and mobile phones, have changed the way we conduct our relationships. Whereas before there was an emphasis on face-to-face interaction, now people employ technology to develop and maintain relationships. This article examines the rapid rise of mobile telephony and considers how it has changed social interaction.

According to statistics collected by Statistics Norway in 2003, 100% of teenagers aged 16–20 had a mobile phone. That is to say, Norway's best market researcher was not able to discover one teenager without a mobile. This finding is astonishing, both in the speed with which the transition has come about and the omnipresence of the technology. Only 5 years before, a minority of teenagers had had a mobile phone. However, in the intervening period the device has established itself as part of teenage identity as securely as any other artefact. The same survey showed that 86% of all Norwegians over the age of eight had a mobile. By way of comparison, the telephone took 60 years to reach 80% household penetration in the USA. The television took 12 years to reach 80% and about 35 years to reach nearly universal adoption (Fischer 1992).

Teenage adoption of SMS

Teenage users were among the first to adopt the use of short message service (SMS) text messaging on a regular basis. Already in 1998, teenagers with mobile phones were sending two to three SMS

messages per day. Thus, along with their adoption of the mobile phone, there was the almost immediate discovery of SMS as a way of communicating. These discoveries provided a two-way version of this form of signalling. An added advantage was that originally the system was free of charge. This meant that it was a natural channel of communication. Teenagers only needed to learn how to access SMS and the somewhat clumsy form of text entry.

Teenagers started using SMS quite quickly. Between 1998 and 2003, the number of SMS messages per day more than doubled. Looking at the number of SMS messages being sent on a normal day, teenagers are the most active users. In many respects, the use of SMS is highly focused around teenage culture; it is not a part of the adult repertoire of communication. Teenagers and young adults are more likely to use SMS frequently on a daily basis. The same is not true of other groups.

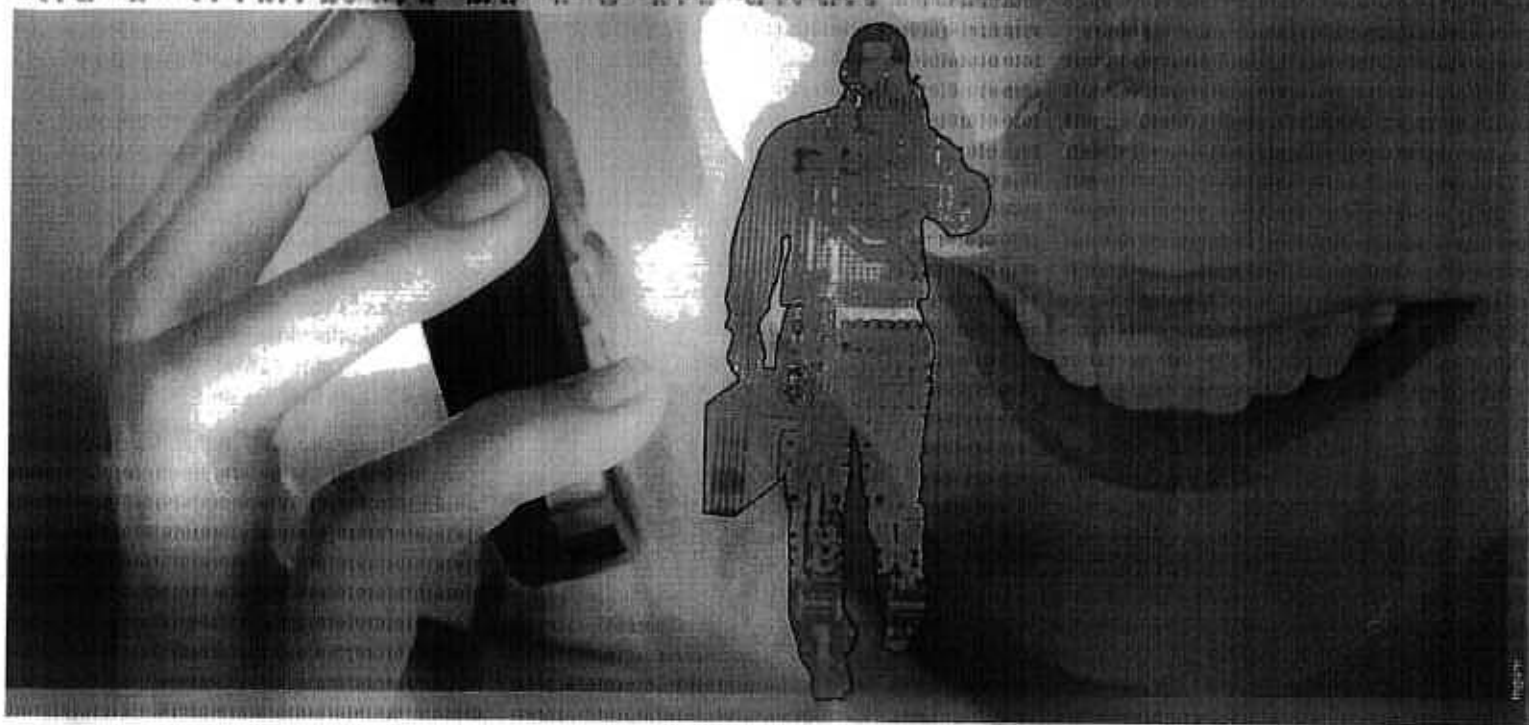
The individualisation of the mobile phone

Early in the adoption process, the mobile phone was often seen as part of a family's

household possessions and was shared by the family. In effect, children had to show a stronger need than adults, since there are often barriers to a child's use of the device, such as access or cost. Over the years, a more individualised relationship with the device has developed. Instead of being a commonly-held item in the home, it has become a personal possession. Indeed, many mobile phone services are focused on individual consumption. The catalogue of names, sent and received SMS messages, various personalisations such as the ring tone, logos and covers, and even the specific model, are all individualised.

As the market developed, the mobile telephone moved from being common property to belonging to a single individual.

Only about 10–15% of children under 12 have mobile phones of their own; this figure has been quite stable for the last few years. Some young children are given one in the event of their parents' divorce. In this way, the non-resident parent has a direct line of contact with their child and does not need to go through the perhaps hostile filter of their ex-partner. Apart from this group, there is little need for younger



Signposts

- ▶ AQA (A) A2 Module 4 Option 13.1 — Social psychology, relationships
- ▶ AQA (A) A2 Module 4 Option 13.1 — Developmental psychology, social and personality development, adolescence
- ▶ Edexcel A2 Unit 5A — Child psychology, friendships

children to own a mobile. Their social world is often within close range and the responsibility of owning and maintaining a device may be beyond them.

Gendered use of the telephone

In 2001, among Norwegian teenagers, significantly more females than males owned a mobile phone. Indeed, women are often better at conversation and social interaction. Thus, to trace the gendered adoption of the mobile telephone is to trace its transition from being a technical fascination — a status symbol — to being a tool supporting social interaction. Men make more daily calls than women, particularly on mobiles. This is the case in almost all age groups but particularly among young adults and middle-aged people. In contrast, women have traditionally talked

for longer on the telephone. Finally, SMS seems to be used more by females than males.

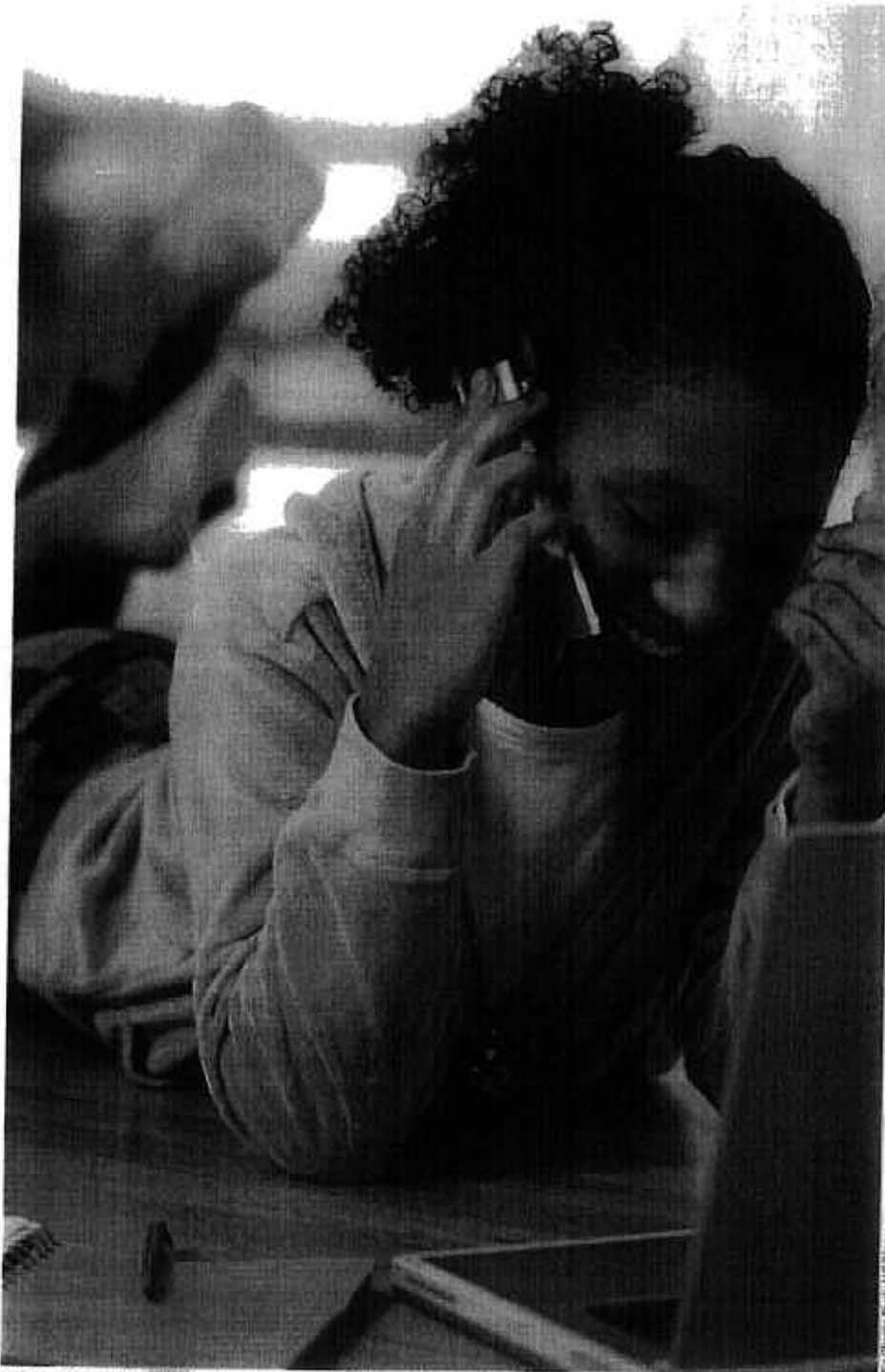
These patterns, and particularly those associated with voice telephony, seem to play on more traditional relationships with the technology. While men appear to have a large number of shorter interactions while on the move, the data point to the notion that women have fewer, but longer, telephone conversations from a fixed location — the quick spontaneous call versus the long, friendly chat. These two approaches to voice telephony point to two different social roles. Whereas the spontaneous call may be connected to some business matter, the long conversation is reinforcing social ties. While it is simplistic to say that it is either one way or the other, the data seem to point to some of the broader issues regarding the gendering of communication that have been described by others (Tannen 1991).

Future developments

The current situation indicates that the mobile phone is overwhelmingly being used for voice interaction and to send SMS

messages. These are the main areas of income for the mobile network operators. However, there are other areas where mobile communication may become more common. These include enhanced forms of interaction, such as multimedia messaging service (MMS) and other kinds of data transmission.

MMS — the transmission of messages that can include text, pictures and sound — is a new form of interaction now on the market. In many respects, this is a further development of SMS messaging, in that it is relatively speaking asynchronous (it does not occur at the same time, unlike voice interaction). It may come to occupy a somewhat similar position in the public imagination, becoming a way for individuals to share their daily experiences with people close to them. Another function may be to enhance the communication between, for example, tradesmen who need to specify with a relatively high degree of precision the situation at a worksite. Thus, we see that there are both expressive and, perhaps more importantly, instrumental issues that are at play in the eventual adoption of MMS. One can also



It's good to talk! Mobile phones serve social as well as informational functions

speculate that, just as with the evolution of e-mail, SMS and MMS will eventually merge into a single type of service. Along the same lines, one can imagine that multi-party chat rooms may develop in the mobile realm.

Social consequences

Another issue is the actual impact of mobile telephony on our lives. It seems to satisfy certain needs and, at the same time, can lead to difficult and unexpected situ-

ations. On the one hand it is wonderful to get a message from a friend while sitting on the bus, or to be able to arrange a meeting or let family or friends know that we will be late for dinner because of a traffic jam. On the other hand, it is perhaps embarrassing to hear our mobile ringing during a critical sales meeting because we forgot to turn it off.

We are in an ongoing process of working out our relationship with the mobile phone. As new situations arise, we

use the device in new and unexpected ways. New features give us new possibilities. At the same time, we have to work out how and when to use the device. We are bending it to our purposes and we are reformulating our lives around the possibilities that it provides; we are domesticating it (Ling 2004).

A shortlist of the mobile phone's social consequences indicates that the device provides us with an enhanced ability to coordinate our activities with others, it gives us a sense of safety and it has become an element in teenagers' negotiated emancipation from their parents.

Coordinating activities

In the Western world we have experienced the growth of cities and the adoption of rapid, individualised transportation in the form of the motor car. We know from many studies in Norway and other countries such as France, Germany, Japan and Korea, that the bulk of traditional landline telephone calls are primarily for instrumental purposes — in other words for coordination. For example, we use the telephone to make and confirm appointments, organise schedules and arrange the delivery and collection of children for various events.

Mobile telephony expands these possibilities. With the mobile phone, we can plan — and re-plan — activities anywhere and at any time. This can be done far more conveniently than with the traditional telephone since we are, in effect, calling a person and not a geographical position. Thus, we do not need to be at a specific location to receive information. This increases the efficiency of planning our everyday activities. If we get out of a meeting early, we can call our spouse and discuss who will pick up the children from day care or shop for groceries. When in the grocery store, we can again call to find out if it was Swiss or Cheddar cheese that was needed for dinner that evening. These are mundane issues, but they are significant in that they oil the machinery of everyday life. Indeed, the ability to coordinate activities quickly in a complex society is probably the most significant contribution of the mobile telephone.

This ability has been revolutionary for some sections of society. A good example of this is deaf people. Before the advent of mobiles, and specifically SMS, this group was reliant on special telephones and translation services in order to coordinate their activities and their daily needs. If, for

