

Grounded genres in multimedia messaging¹

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1 INTRODUCTION

MMS is a new and important standard for messaging services on mobile telephones that allows one to send and receive not only textual messages, but also pictures, video-clips and recorded sound-files. The MMS phone represents a new kind of mobile media, combining the qualities of the digital camera, the Internet, the voice recorder and the mobile telephone. This paper examines the issue of MMS in terms of its development as a grounded genre and traces the use of this concept using findings from a recent field trial among three work groups. It examines the practical use of MMS among different categories of professionals. Our point of departure has been that MMS needs to develop as a unique genre of communication with socially recognizable characteristics to be successful.

In order to better understand the use of this media, a field trial with MMS use in three different groups of users was launched in June 2003,² giving employees in different mobile teams free access to MMS for a period of 6 months. The groups were all relatively small but in many respects they were highly integrated with a dense internal network of communication. The three groups included 1) a team of mobile salespeople for a soft drink company, 2) a group of real estate salespeople and 3) a team of carpenters.

All members of the respective teams were given a camera telephone with which they could send and receive MMS messages. The specific groups were chosen based on their mobile approach to working. In each case they had a nomadic style of work. The soft-drink sales people travelled from between grocery stores to check on the display of their products, to set up specific promotions and to interact with store management. The real estate sales personnel worked nomadically travelling to the homes of clients for "open houses" and to secure new sales contracts. Finally, the carpenters moved from job site to job site (though not on a daily basis). This group spent their days at a job site and, perhaps more than the other groups, did not have a specific base of operations.

The selection of these groups was also based on the idea that they also have the need to communicate visual information. The soft-drink sales people already had a practice of photographing displays in the various stores. However, each sales team had only one camera that was shared by the whole team. Part of this was to document examples of effective displays (rated in terms of sales) and another dimension

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² The trial was sponsored by Telenor and carried out by Telenor R&D

was the need to document the placement of their product vis-à-vis other soft-drink products. The placement of soft drinks in the stores is determined by contractual agreements controlling the number of shelf meters, the height from the floor, the placement in relation to other products etc. Thus, the sales people were encouraged to photograph and document situations where other producers were encroaching on their allotted space. A final point here is that the soft-drink sales people were rated in total sales for the team. Thus, their success or failure was seen as a common situation.

The real estate sales people also have a tradition of using photography in their daily work. They are often asked to take pictures of homes that they are selling. The photos are used internally within the organization, in the sales brochures and in newspaper announcements associated with the homes. The mode of operation was somewhat different that of the soft drink sales personnel in that they did not work as a team, rather, their success was seen in more individual terms.

Finally, the carpenters and construction workers needed to coordinate the use of specialized equipment and the need to interact with engineers and architects when there were questions as how the work should proceed. Thus, the mobile telephone is a useful item.

Tor (18): [I have a mobile telephone] for my job because there is always something that you need to know. . . 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. . . . 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.

Data for this paper was collected in group interviews, individual interviews and via observations. In addition, MMS messages were collected allowing us insight into actual types of use. The quantitative methods gave us the opportunity both to measure actual implementation rates of MMS as well as differences in media use and working patterns. The qualitative methods gave us a general understanding of how and why the messages were sent, and how the technology influenced communication patterns.

2 GROUNDED MMS COMMUNICATION GENRES

An important issue for the study to answer was how this new messaging media would be used. The research project applied the concept of “communication genre” to set a frame around the different situations in which MMS was used.³ Our sense of genre was not that of a strict taxonomy of communication types wherein the categories were exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Rather, we use the notion of genre to indicate communication wherein the interlocutors have enough of a common sense of the contact (content, form, timing) so that they can have a mutual typification of both the intention and interpretation of the interaction. Used in this sense genre refers to “socially recognized types of communicative action habitually enacted by members of a community to realize particular

³ Ling, R., et al. forthcoming. "Nascent communication genres within SMS and MMS." in *The Inside Text: Social perspectives on SMS in the mobile age*, edited by Harper, R., et al. London: Kluwer. (forthcoming); Miller, C.R. "Genre as social action." *Quarterly journal of speech* 70 (1984):151 – 167; Orlikowski, W. and Yates, J. "Genre systems: Structuring interaction through communicative norms." MIT Sloan School of management, Cambridge, MA. 1998.

communicative and collaborative purpose.”⁴ Another important point here is that the genre are not imposed onto the situation but rather it is a reciprocally derived classification. It is in this sense that we refer to these naturally occurring categories as “grounded” genre. They are the product of social interaction between the individuals who are doing the communication.

Thus, within the communication group the individual members have to have a shared sense of various communication forms. They can then draw on these shared forms of interaction in their ongoing communication. If, for example one wants to send a joke, the context, timing, presentation and form of the communication combine to assure joviality. On the other hand, if one wants to relate a serious message – for example a message telling of the death of a family member – another set of elements are evoked. In this way, the context around the message and the way that it is mediated are also important. The joke, for example, can be impulsive, it can be communicated via SMS, e-mail or perhaps over the telephone. On the other hand, telling of a death often means that one must call or preferably meet the person face to face. Our tone of voice, demeanor and use of gestural conventions set a somber frame around the episode of relating bad news.

When thinking of mediated interaction, a new element is the possibility of including illustrations, photos and icons in the communication. In effect this introduces a new “vocabulary” into mediated communication. It also brings up the questions of how senders frame their messages and the degree to which the receivers’ interpretation of text and graphic elements matches the intention of the sender. With text, there are well-engrained rules as to how one approaches reading. When composing or reading a message – using the Roman or the Latin alphabet – one starts on the upper left and proceeds linearly to the right and then starts again at the left-hand side of the line that follows below. Moving towards slightly more iconic interaction one can include various illustrative elements such as emoticons ;-)) or the slightly more fanciful Japanese kaomoji (^.^).⁵ These are used to illuminate points and to provide non-textual clues as to how the reader should interpret the message.

New technology such as MMS allows more complete iconic/photographic interaction. The breadth of color, juxtaposition, symbolism and iconography in the creation/interpretation of photos is much broader than with text. As we move from textual to iconic and photographic communication, a different vocabulary arises and a new world of intention/interpretation and even potential misinterpretation is available.⁶

⁴ Orlikowski, W. and Yates, J. "Genre systems: Structuring interaction through communicative norms." MIT Sloan School of management, Cambridge, MA. 1998.

⁵ Baron, N and Ling, R. "IM and SMS: a linguistic comparison." in *AOIR*. Toronto: AOIR. 2003; Sims-Knight, J. "To Picture of Not to Picture - How to Decide." *Visible Language* 26. (1992); Skog, B. and Jamtøy, A.I. "Ungdom og SMS." ISS NTNU, Trondheim (2002); Nishimura, Y. "Linguistic Innovations and Interactional Features of Casual Online Communication in Japanese." *Journal of computer mediated communication* 9 (2003).

⁶ Kurvinen, E. 2003. "Only when Miss Universe snatches me: Teasing in MMS messaging." in *DPPI 2003*. Pittsburgh, PA, USA: ACM (2003); Ling, R., et al. forthcoming. "Nascent communication genres within SMS and MMS." in *The Inside Text: Social perspectives on SMS in the mobile age*, edited by Harper, R., et al. London: Kluwer. (forthcoming); Sonesson, G. "Semiotics of photography: on tracing the index." Lund University, Lund. 1989. Sonesson. "The challenge of visual semiotics." *The semiotic review of books* 1. 1990.

3 USE OF MMS AMONG THE PILOT USERS

The MMS messages appear to play on typical SMS conventions messages as well as those of traditional photography. The messages also explored new ways of mixing text, sound and images. The main focus was seemingly the exchange of photos. While it is possible to also exchange text and audio messages via MMS, this was rarely done, particularly since it often required more time to develop and edit the messages. The new MMS messages seemed to fall in five general categories:

Documentation of work related objects. These are photos meant to record a situation for later reference. They could be used as quasi-legal evidence should a disagreement arise. This use was seen in the case of the soft drink salespeople who often needed to document the placement of their product in a store vis-à-vis other competing products. MMS provided a way to document the situation at a particular time and place and at the same time send it immediately to others in the company.

Visualisation of details and project status. The second sub-genre that emerged in the trial was the use of photos to help the groups visualize specific details (see Figure 1). The carpenter group was particularly focused on this since they often need to seek out advice as to how their work should proceed. When the blueprints and drawing of a building did not correspond to the situation on the site or when they needed to order materials that fit into a specific space it was often useful to send a photo rather than to try and describe the situation verbally or textually.

This can be seen in figure 1 where the carpenter used the photo of an addition to a home under construction to facilitate a dialogue with the architect. The photo was used to clear up questions as to how the carpenter was to proceed in the building of the addition. The ability to immediately send a photo instead of either trying to describe the situation or wait for the architect to visit the building site was seen as an advantage.

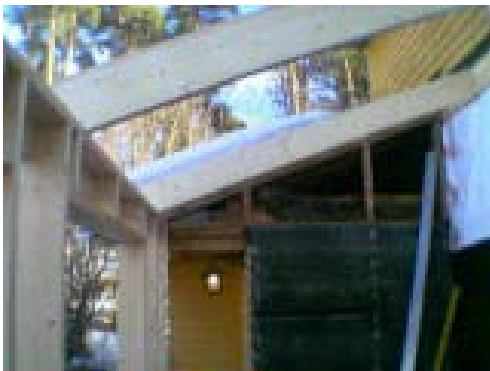


Figure 1 MMS for visualization of project status. The MMS shows the details of an addition to a home. It was sent to an architect to check on the specifics of the construction.

Snap shots. Another aspect of MMS was its potential to develop camaraderie among colleagues (see Figure 2). Frequently pictures were taken of mundane situations and distributed between the colleagues. As in the case of Figure 2 it can also include special event for the group.



Figure 2 MMS used as a type of “snap shot.” The photo shows some of the carpenter group on a visit to the Telenor headquarters to participate in a group interview.

Postcards and greetings. Related to the snap-shots, where MMS messages sent by team-members that were out on a vacation or in another way separated from the group. An example of this is the picture of the fox in one of the participant’s yard (Figure 3). The sender saw an opportunity to capture a somewhat unique situation and enliven the day of friends and colleagues. It perhaps provided the team members the chance to develop lore around a common event, i.e. the time one of them saw the fox and sent a photo to the others. Thus it plays into the maintenance of the group and its collective experience.

This type of communication differs from the other more instrumental forms of interaction discussed above. Rather, it is not associated with any specific goal but it is a type of expressive gift giving. It will allow colleagues to enjoy a moment’s laughter and with time it will form a part of the background upon which the friendship is based.



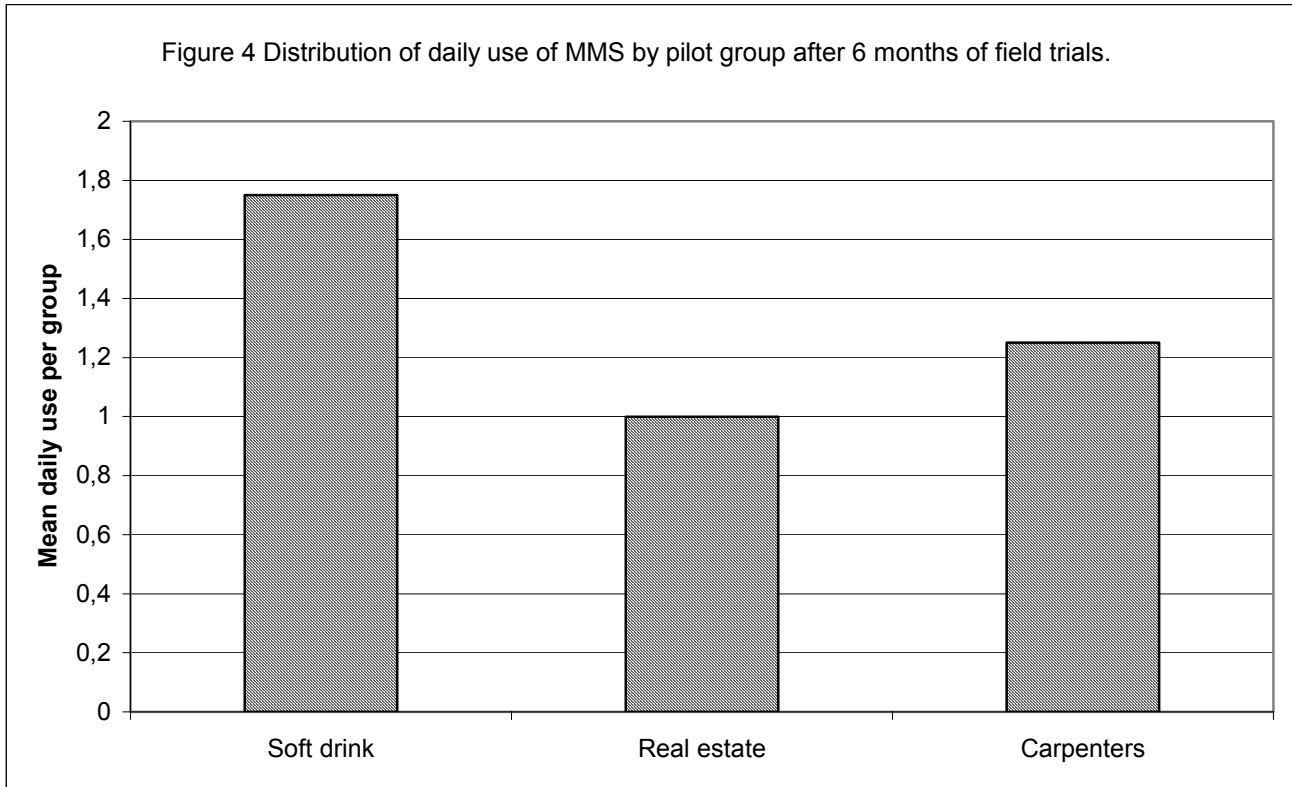
Figure 3 MMS used as a type of “post card” showing a fox in the yard of one of the participants.

“Chain-messages” A last genre identified was distribution of standardized messages, usually downloaded from web sites. This is a version of similar SMS messages, the difference being that MMS messages have the potential to include more lively pictures as well as sounds. This type of messages often is widely distributed within large and small social networks. In this genre the messages often constituted jokes (that could include risqué humour).

3.1 DEVELOPMENT OF THE GENRES

There were differences in the degree to which the three groups adopted MMS. In the trial MMS was regularly used most extensively by the soft drink sales persons. After the 6 months period, the

employees sent more than one MMS message a day (see figure 4). The carpenters were more reserved in their use although MMS was still used regularly.



The use of the sub-genres varied significantly between the different segments (See table 1). The qualitative data suggested some explanations for these variations in adoption of MMS. First, there were important variations related to the groups' former experiences with mobile media. The team of soft drink salespersons and the carpenters had more experience with the use of mobile telephony and mobile messaging. These two groups also had used digital cameras extensively before the field trials. Thus, hands-on experiences from use of these medias may explain some of the variations in the adoption of MMS. Second, the actual need for job-related documentation and visualisation was greater among the carpenters and the soft drink salespeople. For these two groups, MMS was useful as a way to provide a mutual sense of a particular physical situation. The soft drink sales people also saw MMS as a way to document the situation in the stores where their products competed against those of other companies.

A third factor is related to the internal structure of the groups. The soft drink team and to a lesser degree the carpenters could be characterized as being a close network of employees collaborating on a common task. These two groups had a strong sense of in-group loyalty. Beyond this, the soft drink sales people felt a keen sense of competition with sales teams from other soft drink producers. In-group solidarity and the sense of external threat facilitated bounded solidarity. In this context, the ability to send impulsive team building messages fits well. Drawing on the introductory discussion, the person taking and sending the photo and the interpretation of those who received it were in sync. They had a common sense of the context around the message and its meaning. Thus, there were fewer questions as to what an MMS contained or why it was being sent. In addition, the sales people and the carpenters used MMS for more expressive purposes. They sent jokes to each other and used the technology to develop and maintain their common sense of solidarity.

By contrast, the real estate sales persons moved in a different type of situation. First, there was a problem with the quality of the photos. In the case of the carpenters and the soft-drink sales people the quality of the photos was good enough. They shared a strong common sense of the situation in which the photo was being taken. Thus, they could make allowances for the grainy quality of the pictures and they could glean the intended message. By contrast, the real estate sales persons were often in contact with potential customer and they could not take for granted a common ability to interpret the photos. This augured against the use of MMS in more instrumental situations

In addition, there was not the same internal solidarity between the sales people. Rather than being judged on the results of the team, they were more often judged on their individual results. This meant that they were, in essence, competing against their colleagues. Because of this there was not the same motivation to cement collegial ties as one found in the other two groups.

Group	Use of MMS	Genres for MMS
Soft drink sales persons	High	documentation visualisation snap shots postcards & greetings chain messages
Carpenters	Moderate	visualisation snap shots post cards & greetings chain messages
Real estate sales persons	Low	post cards & greetings snap shots

Table 1. Cases and implementation of MMS

postcards and greetings and chain-messages. Only one group used MMS extensively after the six-month long field trial. In all the teams however the more expressive genres of snap shots and postcard and greetings were used. Some possible explanations for the variations in the adoption of MMS have been discussed, including former experiences with mobile medias, the need for documentation and visualisation in their jobs, the internal structure of the group and the relative advantage of MMS in comparison with other available medias.

“Messaging” has been a blind spot in studies of information and communication technologies in organizations. The fast rise in the use of mobile messaging systems like SMS in the Nordic countries, and instant messaging in other parts of the world, however has triggered a new interest for this field of communication. As noted by Nardi et al. messaging systems seem to cover a certain need for immediate and informal communication that is supplementary to other more structured ways of communication.

A last factor is related to the relative advantage of MMS in comparison with other available medias. For the carpenters and the soft drink salespersons the mobile telephone was their main communication tool. For the real estate salespersons the situation was different; they all had access to PCs with e-mail and Internet at their office desks. Thus, alternative messaging systems like Instant messaging (IM) as well as e-mail communication may have made MMS a less tempting alternative.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study shows how the use of a mobile multimedia messaging system (MMS) depends on the development of grounded genres in order that it can develop into a useful professional tool. Based on the field trial among three different groups of professionals, several general genres of use were identified. These included ddocumentation of work related objects, visualisation of details, snap shots,

MMS is a parallel messaging systems that can develop the use of these medias further in an expressive as well as more instrumental ways.⁷

Understanding genres of communication is crucial for designers of applications and services for mobile media. However, acceptance or rejection of services like MMS is clearly dependents on the ability of users to collectively develop genres for use. Recognizing established genres of communication seems like a natural point of departure for the development of new applications or software. Failure to develop a mutual typification of the intention and interpretation of the interaction may cause a rejection of the service in general.⁸

⁷ Nardi, B. A., et al. "Interaction and Outeraction: Instant Messaging in Action...."(2000).

⁸ Pargman & Lanz. "The role of "genre" in the analysis of the use of videoconference systems at work." in *Nordic CHI*, Århus, Denmark. (2002). These authors have, in a similar way, discussed how a lack of genre understanding may have hampered the adoption of videoconference systems among Swedish companies.