Constructing a Specific Culture: Young People's Use of the Mobile Phone As a Social Performance

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Children, Cell Phones and the Internet:
The Mobile Internet and Children
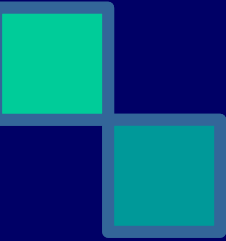Experts' Meeting, Mistubishi Research Centre, Tokyo
March 2003

This study concerns teenagers' cultural ways of interpreting the mobile phone and its uses as they become part of their social world.
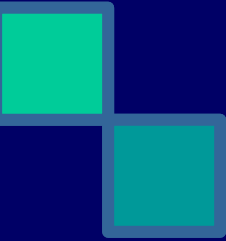
Theoretical framework

Through media related practices, individuals construct themselves in specific ways and produce the forms of their social participation (Caronia, 2002).

Through our uses of media, through the way we act these uses, we define – at least locally – "our belongings and our identities" (Jedlowski 2000: 58).
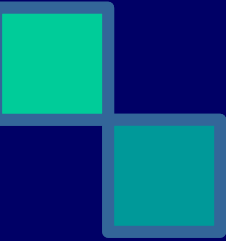
Why study young people and mobile phones

Young people's practices and culture may be considered as a typical example of the work of symbolic creativity in every day ordinary culture, social actors are engaged in (Willis, 1990: 5).

Among the NCT, the mobile phone adds to one of the oldest and deeply studied forms of communication (the telephone call) , two absolutely new dimensions: the *delocation* of communication and the *embodiement* of the object.
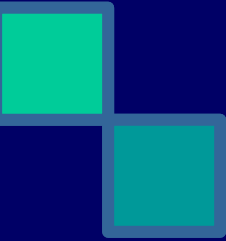
Questions at hand

What are the social and cultural dimensions at stake, besides - or should we say , through- the uses of the macro-functions of this kind of communication?

What meanings and social organization are both expressed and creatively produced through the use of this communication technology?

The research framework and methodology

We developed a project that included multiple fields consisting of shadowing the delocated communication of young people. We used several methodological tools:

- focus groups
- individual interviews;
- log books;
- telephone follow-ups;
- meetings;
- electronic monitoring.

This paper is based on the analysis of qualitative discoursive data coming from the first exploratory part (focus groups) of our study.

The research framework and methodology

The first part of the exploration was carried out during the Summer of 2002

Main methodology:
 Focus groups

Participants:
38 French-speaking Canadians aged 14-18 divided into small groups (3-4 per group).

The reserach framework and methodology

We adopted two main methodological strategies:

- *the construction of the grid by the informants themselves;*
- *the attribution of the "interviewer role" to one member of the group.*

Narratives on the mobile phone: shared mythologies and personal stories at work
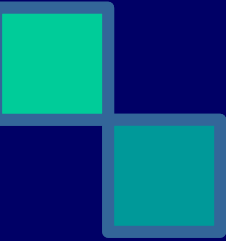
Ex. 1

Isabelle: Yes, but it's not always positive... The image they try to present of themselves... The guy who wants to show off... **It's like the guy who is on the bus and who talks on his mobile and it rings**. You know, it was t u r n e d off and it was just to say: 'Look at me !'.

(Int. N.3)

Narratives on the mobile phone: shared mythologies and personal stories at work

Through the selection of *these* stories (among all possible ones) our informants construct a specific *folk model* of mobile phone both as an object and as a communication tool: they typically inscribe the object and the related talk in what Goffman named a "social encounter" (Goffman 1981).

Narratives on the mobile phone: shared mythologies and personal stories at work

Let us consider **extract n. 4** insofar as it combines more conversational devices.

It is a good example of the joint constructed nature of the stories occurring in a multi party conversation (even when introduced by an official first speaker).

Ex. n. 4

Émilie: What do you think about people who talk on their mobile or that their pager starts rigging in public place ?

Louis-Carl: That rings in a public place ?

Rémi-Loup: It depends… **In the metro heu ! (Laughs) Everyone has that, in the Metro, its 'Dring, Hello ?' Ok.**

Émilie: **It doesn't come through in the Metro, by the way…**

Louis-Carl : **It's true, it does not work.**

Rémi-Loup: **No, the bus, the bus. But it the Metro, it works in the stations.**

Émilie: **In the stations yes, but not in the Metro.**

Rémi-Loup: **When you're in the tunnel, it doesn't work anymore, but when you're in the station, when the train begins leaving it works.**

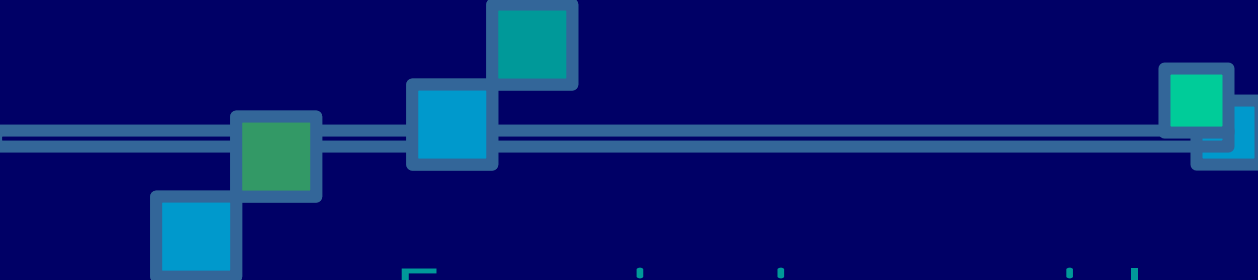Émilie: It depends on the brand of the mobile...

Rémi-Loup: Yeah, it has to be powerful or you need to have a reception antenna just over it, but it works.

Louis-Carl: I don't mind that it rings in public places, **it's even funny because everyone checks if it's not theirs.**
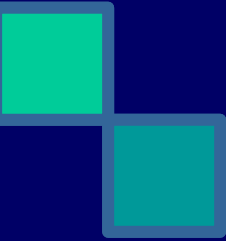
Rémi-Loup: **(Laughs) Yeah, that's it… They're like idiots! 'Damn, damn, where is it ?'**

Émilie: **They all look at the same time.**

Rémi-Loup: **And finally, they figure out that it's not theirs, but anyway…**
(Laughs and murmurs)

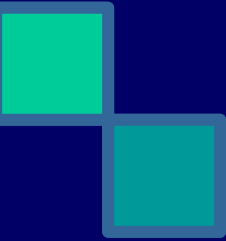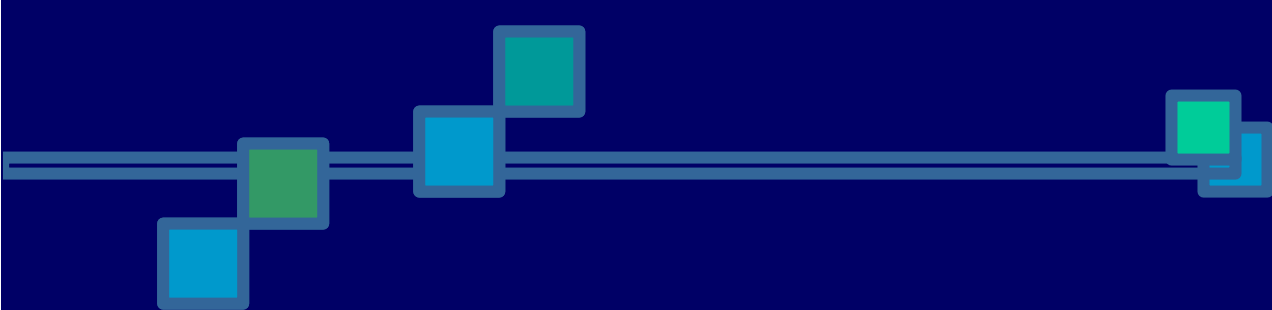# Engaging in a social reasoning : discourse on mobile phone as a social competence constructing device

The main consequence of the stage dimension of the mobile phone use is its becoming a *detonator of social reasoning.* It is exactly because the MP use is conceived as typically occurring on a public scene that it triggers a reflection on the social consequences and the forms of its performance, as well as on the "face" of the performer.
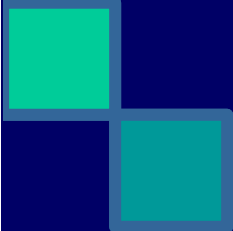
Four main dimensions of the social thinking produced by informants

- *an ethic dimension*: the mobile phone use is depicted as affecting the "other" on the scene;

- *an etiquette dimension*: it needs to be acted out according to some shared forms of politeness;

- *an aesthetic dimension*: insofar at it is perceived as an embodied visible object, the MP lead to reflecting upon the ways its material features integrate with the body forms and appearance;

- *an identity making dimension*: as visible behavior and part of the body, it triggers an inference making process on the social competence, social identity and membership of the performer.
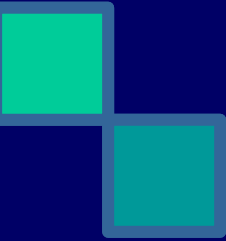
In producing their accounts and typically locating the use of the mobile phone on a stage, young people and adolescents engage in a reflection upon *the social consequences of individual action*, the necessity of matching individual and collective reasons of action (being available VS do not disturb). In one word, accounting for the uses of mobile phones, **adolescents explore and go through the basic issues of ethical thinking.**

Shared forms and good manners: the etiquette dimension of mobile phone use in young people's accounts

Far from claiming for a context-free, unlimited use, young people and adolescents participate to the *social construction of mobile phone use as a rule governed behavior*, elaborating their specific politeness rules.
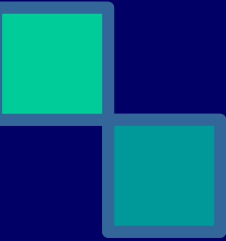
This reflection on the appropriate forms of talk, the local construction of a mobile phone etiquette is informed by the adoption of the "audience's perspective" but not only by that. There are two "others on the scene" whose perspective has to be taken into account when discussing "if" and moreover "how" to use the mobile phone in public places: *the caller and called*.

Ex. N. 16

Émilie: Somebody really wants to reach you...

Rémi-Loup: Yeah, Yeah, who really wants to reach me... So I will answer anyway, I mean...
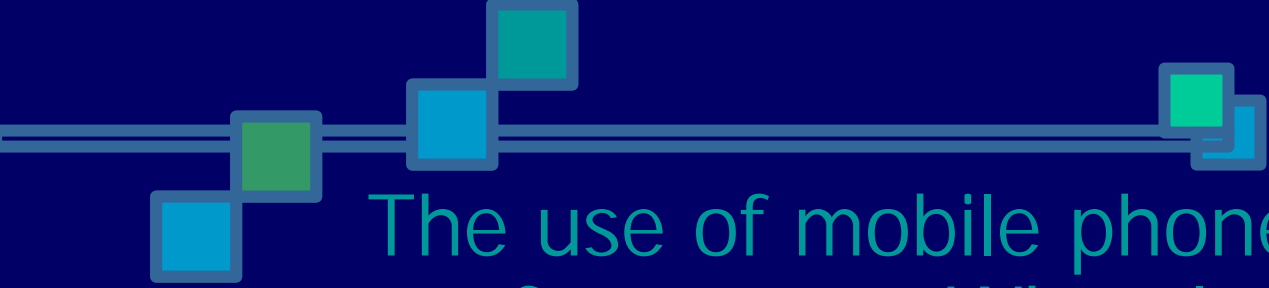
Émilie: Would it bother you to be disturbed at this time, that's the question ?

Remi-Loup: **It depends. That depends where. That always disturbs me, but I will answer, just by courtesy, I will answer, I will not keep the person waiting.**

Louis-Carl: **If I am at a restaurant, the movies, in the bathroom, I will not answer, but at any other time I will answer. It's a question of politeness.**

(Int n. 4)

The use of mobile phone as a social performance : When looking up do date is not "Up to date"

The main assumptions of teenagers'
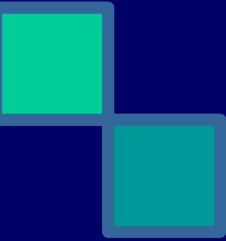*cultural interpretation* of the mobile phone:

- Not answering a mobile phone ringing is a non sense;
- The very sense of having a mobile phone is not "reach people and call when you need" but "being reachable and available".

If you take your mobile phone and transgress the preferred use (that is "you don't answer it") then you are taking it "just to show".

Ex. n. 19

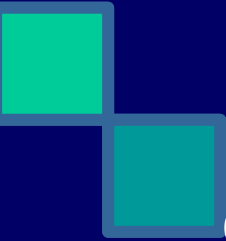Anne: You don't perceive them differently ?

Julie: Well some of the people that buy them think that it will change their look, but it   doesn't change at all. But I think it changes. It changes because there's   someone at a given time that bought one   and **it changed toward the negative   side because I noticed he was a show off** and that he was like : 'Haa, I have a   mobile, Haa I'm hot !'
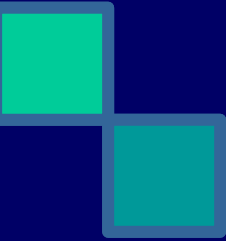
The use of mobile phone as a social performance

The main point here is not to establish if ownership, uses, and some ways to take the mobile phone are considered "cool" from the teenagers' point of view.

The main thrust of this paper is to underline that adolescents *make this technology work as a symbolic tool*: through the repertoire of mobile phone related actions young people interpret themselves according to their relevant dimensions of social life (i.e. "coolness" and "up-to-dateness", "fashion" and "good manners").

Exploring the aesthetic dimension of the social self: the mobile phone as an embodied object
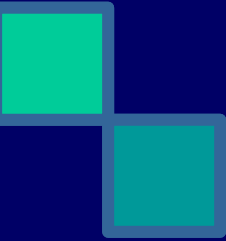
"If you wear a short tee-shirt and the mobile is attached... everything may be fine it may be fine...", "you can make it fine"

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Isabelle: When you have a pack sac to put it in or pants with pockets or jeans with... **But when you go out, you're leaving, Friday night you go dancing and you have a skirt and a little shirt, you know "where do I put it ?"**

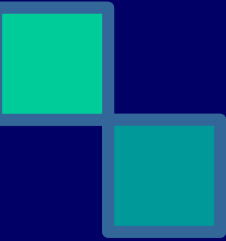# Exploring the aesthetic dimension of the social self : the mobile phone as an embodied object

This technological object is represented as a *visible* part of one's own body which has its own features.Like a new prothesis to which the individual is not accustomed to, the mobile phone may be a "material load" hard to integrate to the body in an armonic way: a strange object which features are not bodymorphic and bodycomplementary at all. Seen as such, it may breach with the aesthetically fluidity of the owner's movements, the elegance of his/her appearance and dressing.
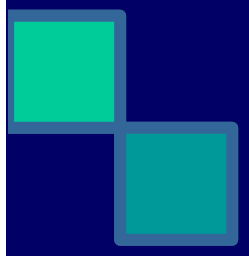
Conclusion

Talking about the mobile phone, accounting for its uses becomes *a laboratory of social thinking* : by taking the "other's perspective", by shifting from the user's position to the audience's one, by making judgments on the forms of mobile phone use, by making mobile phone working as a text supposed to account for users' social identities, teenagers explore and figure out the intersubjective dimension of everydaylife.
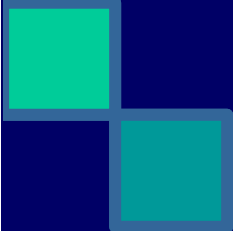
Conclusion

Working in different countries that have different patterns of diffusion and penetration of the mobile phone, adopting different methodologies and research designs, researchers appear to come to many similar results.

This may be considered as a result *per se*: the main practical and symbolic functions of the mobile phone in young people and adolescents' everyday life are cross culturally recurrent.

Conclusion

Is this an index of what may be considered as a "global" young people's culture overcoming local identities and cultures? In this sense the ownership, the uses of and the expertise in mobile phones seem to join other cultural artifacts and ways of life (music repertoires, literature, films and television genres, fashion, electronic media) as part of a shared universe of references that constitute a common specific culture.