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Title

ID unknown?

You must be from UNAUSTRALIA:

Exploring the significance of the mobile phone to Australian identity.

Abstract

This paper investigates and analyses the significance of mobile phone communication to an Australian identity. Mobile phones are now ubiquitous in Australia, so is it UNAUSTRALIAN to not own a mobile phone? To what extent is Australian citizenship now connected to the ownership and use of a mobile phone for communication in everyday life? Without a mobile phone does one lack access to an Australian identity? Do you live in UNAUSTRALIA if you do not own a mobile phone? Are you invisible in Australia without a mobile phone? Are you able to exert cultural and social agency without one? What does your choice not to own a mobile phone mean?

This study examines the discursive processes of communication in which the mobile phone is used. It then links this use to the broader socio-cultural constructions of the mobile phone and Australianness. It analyses how discourse is part of a generative process in the lives and practices of young Australian adults and outlines how a mobile phone is the mechanism of agency as we use the mobile phone to construct our identity and engage with the wider world. Conversely the mobile phone constructs who we can be. How does being Australian influence the function, context of use, and the processes of communication via a mobile phone?

## Introduction

You can tell what a culture values by what it has in its bags and pockets. Keys, combs and money tell us that property, personal appearance and trade matter. But when the object is expensive, a more significant investment has been made. In our day, the mobile or cell phone is just such an object

(Agar 3).

Currently the majority of Australians choose to keep a mobile phone in either their 'bag or pocket'. "In 1998 only 44% of households in Australia had access to a mobile phone, by 2000 it was 61%, and in 2002 it was 72%" (ABS). In 2004-5 "the Australian mobile telecommunications industry had more than 16 million subscribers... representing 81 per cent of the Australian population" (AMTA 2004). And it is now estimated that "the mobile phone penetration rate will exceed 94 per cent in 2005-2006, bringing the number of subscribers to almost 19 million" (Ibid). This swift and continuous rate of mobile telephone penetration into Australian society clearly shows that the mobile phone is now ubiquitous in our culture. If almost all Australians own and use a mobile phone could it be considered UnAustralian to *not* own a mobile phone? The mobile phone is one of the most personal objects that we carry in our day-to-day life, "the only other device apart from the wristwatch, that we carry with us every day everywhere" (Ahonen online). Evidently it is omnipresent. The mobile phone's qualities of being personal and ubiquitous to us and to our culture, makes it a very particular tool for 'plugging' us into our culture, our Australianness.

This paper investigates and analyses the significance of mobile phone communication to the formation and construction of a particular Australian identity. The paper analyses how discourse is part of a generative process in the lives and practices of young Australian adults by outlining how a mobile

phone operates as a mechanism of agency. It also discusses how being Australian influences the function, context of use, and the processes of communication via a mobile phone.

So what is a mobile phone? The mobile phone is a technological communication device created for making telephone calls; calls to *people*, not places. Being able to call a person (and not a fixed place) allows for calls to be made and answered in spaces and places that would otherwise not be possible. However the “mobile phone is as much a *cultural and social artefact* as it is a technology” [emphasis in original] (Hjorth 23). The mobile phone is a very personal everyday object, one which gives us the freedom to contact who we want, when we want. The mobile phone influences identity formation in Australia because it impacts on how we communicate, with ourselves and others; the mobile phone plays a role in how we make meaning on a daily basis. How does the omnipresence of mobile phones contribute to our sense of self? What does it mean to own and use a mobile phone? Or what might our choice not to own a mobile phone mean? And what perceptions does our culture facilitate about mobile phones and the way we use them?

If we own a mobile phone, which most Australians do (see above), then it is most likely that our mobile phone goes everywhere with us. Whether by choice or accident, it is uncommon for the owner of a mobile phone to leave the home without it, as an Australian student stated in *The Ties That Bind Are Fully Unplugged*, it is now “something that you grab along with your keys and wallet, without realising it” (Connell 73). Whether we are in a public or private space, when a mobile phone rings all those in its vicinity will hear it. A ringing mobile phone demands attention, (except of course for the ‘mosquito’ ring tone which is generally only audible to those aged 25 years and under) (Noguchi and Hart). A mobile phone ringing is almost like calling someone’s name – the technology insists on being answered by its owner. Why? We set that specific ring tone and we know it intimately. If *our* phone is ringing then the

call is for us, no one else, it is very hard to ignore, and it will/can change the dynamics of our social interactions.

In my research, which involves a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews, communication diaries and document analysis with young Australian adults, only one of the participants does not really use a ring tone. This twenty-two year old participant is acutely aware of how a mobile phone ring can interrupt space and mood so he chooses to use the vibrate mode only. He said,

I always have my phone on silent, cause I, for some reason I don't like my phone ringing, I think it could be because I don't like people knowing when I am getting texts or phone calls, or stuff like that, so I can get a text, and if there is no tone that goes off then I can sort of access it whenever I want, I know it's vibrated and it's there. Because I know my mum yells at me a lot, 'oh you and that phone' if she can hear every time that it goes off, if she can hear when it goes off, because it goes off quite a lot (RP02 i/v).

### The Physical Object

Making personal changes to the material object itself, as described above, says a lot about who we are and how we would like to be understood. In choosing a handset, there is much to be thought through about how we understand our place in the world and our sense of self: there is the shape of the phone, 'flip' or 'candy stick', the colour, the size, the weight, and the screen resolution. There are also the features of the phone we choose when purchasing a new handset: camera, video, radio, mp3 player, infrared, Bluetooth, GPRS (2.5G), G3, and the memory capacity. And then there are the elements of the phone which we may personalise such as the ring tone/s, the wallpaper, the screen saver, what images are stored on the phone and so on. Importantly, each of these aspects of the decision-making process has a bearing on and is simultaneously dictated by, contemporary cultural trends and already established

discourses. “*En masse* we go about defining ourselves through it, competing with friends or even strangers over the models we use. Which is the coolest? Which is me? Nokia or Ericsson? Vodaphone or Motorola?” [emphasis in original] (Hassan 82). An example of this was seen with one of the interviewees, the key reason she chose her phone was purely “because it was pink” (RP03 i/v). This participant had also changed the shell of a previous model to pink and she also used a pink bag. This indicates the range of socio-cultural tools in material form that we use to construct identity. And although the following interviewee did not choose his mobile phone because of colour, he clearly made a considered choice,

I’ve had this phone now for about 2 months now, cause it’s only a very new model, so I was saving up for it and when it finally became available I bought it (RP01 i/v).

Conversely, while we as consumers make choices about which elements of form and function of the mobile phone we find pleasing, the mobile phone also constructs who we *can* be. If we don’t know how to operate a mobile phone there can be a strong sense of uselessness. Often we will make self-deprecating remarks about who we are and what we are capable of if we cannot seem to get the ‘hang’ of how to use the technology we own. Not knowing how to use technology that is widely considered to be an everyday tool marginalises us. Not knowing how to also renders us ‘tool less’ for hooking into/participating in our current culture.

In this way the mobile phone gives us relevance and a sense of belonging. The flip side to this Louise Williams illustrates in *Don’t call us...* ‘they are the new social outcasts: teenagers and young adults without mobiles. Disconnected from their peers they risk nothing less than social desolation’ (Williams 12). Hence the ringing mobile phone is public evidence of our belonging to society. It is a sign that someone else wants or needs us when the mobile rings: a sense of self worth is generated by its ringing presence. This can be seen in the frequently spoken public declaration ‘Somebody loves me!’ when a text message alert is heard. One participant in the research spoke of how he felt comforted by

regular incoming text messages, so if he did not receive them as regularly as he was used to, he felt a sense of rejection,

If no one is texting you, you think, what are you doing that's more interesting than what I'm doing, or [I wonder] if my phone's still working, or why don't people love me? And so if it gets too bad you try and text people to try and get replies back and if I still don't, then I get pocket news, or something like that (RP02 i/v).

This quote illuminates that a sense of self is strongly linked with the daily connections we make with others in our culture via our mobile phones. This interviewee is sensitive to this and hence, by choice he actively engages (using his capacity for agency) with the mobile phone (creating text messages) to produce this sense of connection (when he feels others are not connecting with him).

### A Tool for Agency

The mobile phone is linked to our sense of agency in the world. We choose to own a mobile phone, and to choose which mobile phone we own. Having the free will to choose which mechanism of agency we want to own and use is promoted in the media. This is evident for example, in the advertisement for the new O<sub>2</sub> Xda Atom. This magazine advertisement depicts the mobile phone, utilising a visual metaphor, as a car in the express lane overtaking countless other banked up faceless cars (other mobiles). Reinforcing the concept in the visual imagery, is the text which reads, "Take the express lane. The Xda Atom Exec" (Roit 31). In this example the mobile phone is depicted as a symbol and tool of choice, that we can choose to take the 'express lane' (like the e-tag in Sydney), or we can choose not to, in which case we presumably end up in the lines of 'banked up traffic going nowhere fast'.

In addition many individuals use the mobile phone to be spontaneous, to use whatever time they can, such as choosing to catch up with friends (social networks) in their time limited lifestyles. So to not own a mobile phone means to be out of contact and socially isolated. To have a mobile phone indicates the user makes the choice to be fluid and dynamic with time (Hassan). One of the participants commented that having a mobile phone meant being able to,

be doing something, I am always sort of using my phone to catch up with friends and arrange things, like to go out and to go and have tea, and go to their house and stuff  
(RP03 i/v).

So if owning a mobile phone allows us to remain active agents in our social circles, what does our choice not to own a mobile phone mean? Is it that we do not want to participate in the culture that mobile phones are a part of? Owning a mobile phone is normative in Australian culture which places any person without a mobile phone in a minority group: those without. The assumption that we all have a mobile phone highlights a 'Discourse model' (Gee) of mobile phones. Discourse models are "often unconscious and taken-for-granted, theories about how the world works that we use to get on efficiently with our daily lives" (Gee 71). The mobile phone is so normal that it is, in a sense, culturally invisible. Therefore, to not own a mobile phone – to not follow the social 'norm' is to discursively exclude ourselves from natural participation. To purposefully present ourselves as social outcasts is to actively 'contest' the discourse (Gee).

However, the majority of Australians choose to identify with the 'prototypical simulation' (Gee) described in the Discourse model. One participant elucidated this when asked if he could go without his mobile phone. He said:

I say no I couldn't, but could I foresee everyone living without them, yes, you would just go back to the way things were, but if all my friends still had mobiles and I didn't, yeah I

wouldn't handle it very well. You would probably get used to it but just because you would feel isolated and out of the loop, and you like to have it, because you are in that loop, and you can communicate easily and all of the good things about mobile phones. But yeah I would prefer not to live with out it, but I wouldn't drop dead if I had to (RP02 i/v).

However in this statement another possible reading of the model is also brought to attention. That is, that another reason for choosing to not own a mobile phone (or turning it off) is the need to isolate ourselves. This active choice was highlighted in the following response to the question 'when would you not take your mobile phone with you?',

It would be probably only if I was feeling sad or something and just didn't want to talk to anyone, and just wanted to go and do something, and then come home without being annoyed, be by myself (RP03 i/v).

The reasons we resist the technology, for whatever reason, illustrate how we choose to exercise our right to insulate ourselves and express our right to have privacy. These choices may also be about conserving time, because to not own a mobile phone (or have it turned off) renders us not available. Not having our mobile phone on us (or turning it off), at particular times of day may be a time-saving choice, a choice which minimises the interruptions, at work or in our personal lives, in our time poor lives.

### Identity Formation

Many of our autonomous choices about mobile phone use are connected to our identity. The mobile phone has evolved as a tool for forming and expressing self-identity. There are multiple dimensions to the way people construct a sense of themselves,



Politically, people exist as citizens and as members of a public.

Socially, people exist as exemplars of social roles...

Culturally, people exist as exemplars of social groups.

Economically, people exist as consumers and members of an audience

(Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney 206-7).

Identity is not a permanent and unchanging conception; rather it is something that is constantly played out by an individual in a culture. Barker and Galasinski stipulate that “identities are both unstable *and* temporarily stabilized by social practice and regular, predictable behaviour” [emphasis in original] (31). The concept and social practice that one is almost always contactable is prevalent today, especially for those within the 18 to 35 year old age bracket. “The mobile phone mediates our way of being” (Arnold and Klugman 74), and this function of the mobile phone in the generative process of identity formation was clearly suggested by one of the participants in the following comment:

if you meet someone new, or you know, to get someone to know you better, I show them through all the photos [on the mobile phone], cause it sort of tells a story of my last year, ‘oh this is us at that, and that’s my friend, and that’s my cousin’. So you know by explaining all the photos, you can sort of, explain yourself a bit better (RP02 i/v).

And “ultimately, the media’s ability to produce people’s social identities, in terms of both a sense of unity and difference, may be their most powerful and important effect” (Grossberg et al 206). This was clearly stated by one of the participants,

My mobile phone is an extension of myself, firstly because it’s so much a part of my every day that to take it away, like I think you would take a part of my life away. So in that sense it is an extension of myself, but socially too the way I interact with others. A lot of that interaction is through mobile phones, so to take my mobile phone away from

me, it would [take away the way I] interact with them, in the ways that I do, like texting something funny or that social element that I am to them, of the ‘oh he always sends me funny messages’, or ‘he’s always good for a chat’ or ‘I can always rely on him to talk to when I need to’ then that social bit of me would be gone (RP02 i/v).

This comment also highlights that identity is not a fixed entity but is a changeable entity and is always in process (Gee; Foucault; Bourdieu). How we use a mobile phone connects with our identities, our sense of self and our social power and influence within our cultural context.

### The Social

In today’s cultural landscape the mobile phone is a tool for enacting particular sorts of ‘socially recognisable identities’ (Gee 21) and a tool for creating social bonds. The immediacy of mobiles affects how we negotiate our own part in a relationship. The following statement captures how significant the mobile phone is to a social and cultural life in Australia.

Just cause it’s, I mean you live your life but there’s a certain, like the interconnected, like when you live your life socially I guess, you share it with other people. And so how I share my life with certain other people is, a lot of it occurs through the phone, like my best friend, we sort of, you feel like you’re living with each other because you’re in constant communication like probably through text or talking. And so if the phone wasn’t there you couldn’t do that as much, you wouldn’t have the same sort of relationship you have with the people, like friends and things like that (RP02 i/v).

The process and production of social identity can be seen through the example of *Australian Idol*. A by product of *Australian Idol*, is the online brand and competition called *Street Idol*. *Street Idol* is a

competition that is advertised while (and only while) *Australian Idol* is broadcast on free to air television. The following advertisement explains how to enter the *Street Idol* competition.

You missed the cut in *Australian Idol*? Well you can still be *Telstra's Street Idol*. Go to [streetidol.com.au](http://streetidol.com.au) choose your song. Record a 30 second clip performing your song then send it to us via your mobile or PC. Now each fortnight my favourite *Street Idol* will get to star in their very own TV commercial. In November Australia votes. The most popular *Street Idol* wins a trip to the Grammys? Plus if they're with Telstra, a 20 grand cash bonus. Go to [streetidol.com.au](http://streetidol.com.au) for all the details" (Street Idol).

In this particular example the mobile phone is being presented as a possible mechanism of agency. To participate we are asked to sing and self record on our mobile phones, and then send this audio-visual clip to a public website for all to view. The mobile phone is the facilitating device in the process. We get to have control over, and make choices about, our public identity. Whether we choose to publish (via brands such as *Street Idol*) or keep our identity private, the mobile phone plays a role in the generative process of identity formation. Hence the mobile phone is connected to "the points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us." (Hall 1996a, 5-6 in Barker and Galasiński 32).

#### Discourse and Australianness: *how not what*

Foucault considers that discourses structure and "co-ordinate the actions, positions and identities of the people who inhabit them" (Thwaites, Davis and Mules 140). In order to recognise how people socially construct meaning within the specific context of mobile phone use in Australia, an understanding of the broader discourse of the mobile phone is required. The process of defining an object or social practice forms a part of the discourse itself (Foucault; Macdonell, Mills). There are numerous elements that affect

society's perception of mobile phones. One such element is the way mobile phones are portrayed in the media and an example of this mediation is the recently published book by Stephen King, Cell: a novel. The premise of this story is that civilisation comes to an end via the mobile phone. The cause of the disaster is 'the pulse' which is a stream of data that melts your brain upon answering a phone call on your mobile. The by-line states "there's a reason cell rhymes with hell" (stephenking.com) because "the next call you take may be your last" (cellthebook.com). This depiction of the mobile phone in the mass media clearly plays on, and constructs our fears of what negative consequences are possible from the ownership of a mobile phone. Contrastingly, other representations of the mobile phone in the mass media can be seen in the advertising of the objects themselves. For example, in the advertisement for a Samsung E530 the mobile phone is depicted as an object of beauty that you wear (or own) with style. The mobile phone is being held, by a flawless face, as if it were lipstick about to be applied, and the text reads, "*imagine* beauty that's more than cosmetic" (Samsung 24). This advertisement unmistakably draws on the idea that the mobile phone is a symbol of beauty and sophistication, which we could choose to own and by default, become.

The "mobile phone sellers tell us that the model and level of customisation 'define the owner'" (Hassan 82). The mobile phone marketing machine is taking us on a journey – the industry re-creates and appropriates our desires and appends them to what it means to have a mobile phone. This shapes our sense of self while at the same time we shape what the media are able to use for creation and appropriation. These broader socio-cultural constructions of the mobile phone link with our sense of Australianness.

The mobile phone is, in part, significant to Australian identity because it is a communication device used and owned by almost everyone in Australia. It is now recognised on a day-to-day basis as a tool of communication that we simply have. As an Australian student quoted in the media said "It's a part

of your life that you take everywhere” (Connell 73). Whether it is used to be in contact with friends, family and the workplace, or to be reminded by text message that the car is due for a service it is almost a requirement that we have one. So if it seems that being Australian goes hand-in-hand with owning and using mobile technology, how do mobile phones affect the way we understand ourselves and others?

This paper is not about nationalism or the stereotypes of Australian culture; rather it is interested in how we, as Australians, go about making ourselves available to, and connecting with our culture. It is about participating in our culture, not about the components of patriotism. The mobile phone gives us the ability to participate in our culture, to grant consensus and to belong. It also plugs us into a global culture; however, in this paper I am focussing on the particular way the mobile phone plugs us into our own *home* culture, Australian culture. Mobile phone use in this context is not about the characteristics of our Australianness but the cultural framework of Australia. We could possibly substitute any nationality here. My interest is not in *what* is Australian but *how* participation in a culture is normalised. The nuances of the communication practices would change (Schirato and Yell) from culture to culture.

To be Australian is to be part of an imagined community, “people have always needed a sense of who they are and a place to ground that sense of their identity in one or more of the institutions or activities of their lives” (Grossberg et al 205). To what extent is Australian citizenship now connected to the ownership and use of a mobile phone for communication in everyday life? If we did not own a mobile phone could that mean that we fail as good citizens? How would we help in an emergency? How would we ‘call’ for help?

How does being Australian influence the function, context of use, and the processes of communication via a mobile phone? We need to participate with the rest of those around us who are also using mobile phones in order to communicate and engage with Australian culture. A mobile phone

facilitates a sense of being a part of the culture, being contactable, and for this reason most mobile owners do not often turn their phones off.

I turned it off once today, but that was only because of the interview, I generally keep it on all the time, until the battery runs out. It only runs out once a week, and then it turns itself off, and then I just plug it into to the charger, and it comes back on. So I generally never have my mobile phone off. It's only very, very few occasions where I might (RP01 i/v).

Do we live in UNAUSTRALIA if we do not own a mobile phone? Are we invisible in Australia without a mobile phone? For some Australians, yes. One participant commented about trying to live without a mobile phone,

I once thought I could, and trialled it and yeah didn't last long. When my phone got stolen (laughing) I was like 'don't need a mobile', and yeah it lasted like a couple of days. Yep, I was like yeah I don't need a mobile, and yeah it just didn't work at all. I guess because like, nobody had like, like hardly [any] of my friends had mum and dad's number. And then like nobody had the number like, where I used to live with my brothers, so I just couldn't get in contact with anyone and then it was like quite depressing, 'cause nobody was calling me and yeah, yep (RP03 i/v).

Likewise another participant found being contactable so vital that he practically had the phone on as a constant. The only place he would not take his mobile phone was,

To the shower, if I was swimming, like if you are going to get wet I wouldn't have it, and that's about it. If sometimes, on weekends if, if it might stay in my bedroom, if I have for

some reason, pants without a pocket, ... I was walking around on the weekend and I think all I had on was thongs and my undies on and I had my phone tucked down the side of my undies (laughs). So I take it everywhere and if it's not with me I would be checking it every half an hour or hour and it, I hate to do that, cause it gets me depressed when I check it and there's no messages. But if it is in your pocket then at least you don't have to check it, so you don't get as worried (RP02 i/v).

Similarly for the same interviewee, owning a mobile phone meant not being isolated,

I would feel more isolated, I know I didn't have my, I ran out of battery and I was down in Sydney and so it was a full day that I didn't have a phone and you just sort feel like you're in a tight, like a black hole where everything else doesn't, like your cut off from everything else except from where you are now, because I always feel like a lot is happening where I am not now, so you like to know that if anything interesting is happening with those friends that you can still communicate about it, and you can find out, like when you go out you might, you might, all our friends might go out independently, but you still feel like you have shared a part of the night with them because you have been in communication with what they're doing in the night and what you're doing and things like that (RP02 i/v).

Another way the mobile phone has significant bearing on Australian identity is that it enables easy contact with family and friends. For example one participant highlighted this when asked to describe how his life would be different without a mobile phone. The participant said,

Restricted. Really restricted. Just because, socially and to do with my family as well, because not all my family live in the same state. I've got family in Queensland and in Western Australia so, and it is actually cheaper for me to call from the mobile than it is to

from the land line, so I use that, and they know that they can use that [the mobile phone] to contact me as well (RP01 i/v).

One not so positive example of how the mobile phone is a tool for participating in Australian culture is the Cronulla riots that happened in Sydney December 2005. These riots were represented and communicated as particular versions, of what *is* Australianness. The mobile phone's role in the Cronulla riots was that it facilitated *how* each group could participate. The phone itself was not indicative of what being Australian might mean, but, its use value which precipitated action was deeply connected to a notion of Australian or indeed UnAustralian identity. The mobile phone was used as a tool for generating large and spontaneous crowds of people with a particular purpose. Without a mobile phone, people would not and could not, have been invited to take part in this incident. In this case it can be seen how the mobile phone is a tool for connecting discursive members in an already established discourse, race.

Without a mobile phone does one lack access to an Australian identity? To be Australian we have to be a participant in Australian culture. We must *consent* to being a part of the culture. To have an Australian identity one must join in the culture – to do this one must have a mobile phone. Is it possible to participate in everyday culture here in Australia without a mobile phone? Are we able to exert cultural and social agency without one? Well, of course, on one level we can.; not owning a mobile phone does *not* stop us from everyday activities. There are still people who do not own a mobile phone. On a number of other levels it is difficult to function as a cultural contributor without one. It is now *assumed* that we own a mobile phone. Most administrative documents either in print or electronic form, ask for a mobile number. In addition, the media expect us to have a mobile, if we want to participate in popular cultural activities. Some of these may include: radio song requests on JJJ or NX-FM; entering travel competitions such as those run on the popular travel show *Get Away*; voting for entrants on either *Big Brother* or *Australian Idol*; or continuing *Rockwiz* after the SBS television show has ended. In addition there are now other uses



of the mobile phone being developed, such as the new educational game, Scoot. Scoot is “a location based game that brings together the internet and mobile phones to bring a whole new type of experience to a visit to an art gallery or museum” (Media Report).

The discourse of the mobile phone in Australia is a complex generative process that includes both the specific instances of communication practices by Australian individuals who use the mobile phone everyday (as illustrated above), and the larger contextual framework of the perceptions that we as Australians hold about what it means to be Australian and own a mobile phone.

### Conclusion

Being Australian involves participating in Australian culture; Australianness connects us with the sense of belonging to an imagined community. The mobile phone is a technology that is another means for Australians to connect with other Australians. This paper has analysed how discourse is part of a generative process in the lives and practices of young Australian adults and outlines how a mobile phone is the mechanism of agency as we use the mobile phone to construct our identities and engage with the wider world. The mobile phone is a significant enabling device for accessing culture and personal identity.

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