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Published in:
Mediating the Human Body

DOI:
[10.4324/9781410607768](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410607768)

Publication date:
2003

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (HARVARD):
Lobet-Maris, C 2003, Mobile phone tribes: Youth and social identity. in *Mediating the Human Body: Technology, Communication, and Fashion*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 87-92.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410607768>

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Mobile Phone Tribes: Youth and Social Identity

Claire Lobet-Maris

1. PREMISE

A survey carried out in October 2000 by a producer in the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM)¹ leads us straight to a group of GSM users. It tells us about their buying habits, their use of GSMs and short-message services (SMSs), and what they spend. But who are these young people? This is the first question that the sociologist asks. What social circles do they belong to; what is their school background, their daily social and family life? A contextualization of the survey would have been extremely useful for analyzing the data collected because, behind the sometimes staggering figures on phone calls, SMS messages, and above all money spent on GSM, are young people whom we would like to know more about. Behind GSM there hides a problem of social identity.

Sociologists are neither salespeople nor decision makers, but they are prudent analysts of social phenomena on which they attempt to shed light, in order to help both salespeople and decision-makers get their bearings before acting. It is in this light that my chapter should be read.

2. THE MOBILE PHONE AS SYMBOLIC OBJECT FOR THE "UNPLUGGED" GENERATION

For young people, the mobile phone is not only a practical object with which one communicates but also an object invested with a high degree of symbolic significance and a large factor in the constitution of one's personal identity. It is undoubtedly among this age group that mobile phones have penetrated most deeply and spread most rapidly. Network operators and telephone manufacturers have

¹The survey was carried out by Motorola-Inra on a population of 300 young Belgians aged 12–18 years.

understood this, as witness the radical change in the tone of their broadcast advertising over a period of only 2 years. Just a few years ago, mobile phones were still being sold as the indispensable weapons of those warriors of modern times, the young urban professionals (yuppies). Today a new tribe is the object of advertising, the tribe of the young. A simplistic analysis might imagine that this is no more than imitative social behavior by young people who want to be like yuppies, or that it is an example of an advertising campaign that was more successful than had been expected in a way. But behind the widespread adoption of mobile phones by young people are more profound, sometimes more painful, social phenomena that we must attempt to understand.

3. MOBILE PHONES AS PERSONAL IDENTITY BUILDERS

The poll asked young people about their choice of mobile phone brands. Apart from certain considerations of price, which influence purchases among young people, it is striking that it is the style of the mobile phone that motivates young people's choice of one phone over another. Their choice is based not on functionality or even on the quality of the item purchased, but rather on the identity or image associated with particular models from different manufacturers. Associated with each style of phone is an image of youth, of sports, of rap artists, and so on, with which young people can identify and through which they begin to construct their social identity.

It is important to investigate in sociological terms this symbolic and affective investment in mobile phones by young people, to the extent that it refers us back to other, deeper questions about the gaps experienced by some young people in the assistance they receive, as they construct their social identities, from the structures surrounding them, whether these concern their schools, their families, or their social groups. Thus, quite beyond any commercial success, we must investigate the social fissures in these structures of construction that cause so many young people to attach importance to mere commercial brands, that is, to having rather than to being.

4. MOBILE PHONES AS OBJECTS OF GENDER EQUALITY

Looking back at the history of information and communication technologies (ICTs), it is important to note, in view of the results of the survey, that for the first time an ICT has spread equally among males and females. This strongly separates the mobile phone from other technological innovations—the Internet for example—where a large majority of users are still male. Two hypotheses suggest themselves in this regard. The first hypothesis is that the mobile phone is a communications technology, and therefore part of "being together," a social value that is given a high priority by females (in polling we conducted on a sample of 6,000 young people in 1994 about their relationship with computers). The second hypothesis concerns the path toward adoption of the mobile phone among

young females, a path that is not the same as the one followed by males who become mobile phone users. Among young girls, the mobile phone apparently is first acquired with parental approval, as an additional security measure to guarantee the sort of protected autonomy parents desire for their daughters. The events leading to mobile phone use by young boys are different. It seems to be a personal decision to get a mobile phone, seen as a masculine tool or an object pertaining to the masculine identity, which is inferred from the way boys wear their mobile phone on their belt, like a weapon or tribal fetish. Girls do not display their mobile phones, but conceal them in special purses or holders made for that purpose.

5. TELEPHONE NETWORKS AS LOCI OF TRIBAL BELONGING

The Motorola-Inra survey does not study the reasons for choosing mobile phone networks or operators. This is worth a brief sociological excursus, for the interesting social phenomena we can find.

In choosing a mobile network, young people are motivated less by price than by image. For these young people, each mobile network has a well-known social connotation that is usually reinforced by advertising: One is humanitarian, another professional, another emphasizes families and getting together, another is provocative. Thus for youths and among youths, new groups of social belonging are rapidly created through these networks. Youths are 0475 or 0496 in the way other people belong to tribes, and accordingly there are certain rituals and codes of usage, licit and illicit, which differ from network to network.

By choosing one mobile network over another, young people are trying to construct their own social belonging to a group that shares certain values or reference points. And this social membership is reinforced by the price structures used by various network operators, which aim at "capturing" individual young people and keeping them within the network tribe by making it very costly to communicate with members of other tribes. This belonging phenomenon was closely observed by Fize (1999):

This appears to be the response to a defective social connection, or to the lack of collective meaning of post-modern society. Adolescents recreate the ties between members of a community, making patches in a social fabric which is still tearing itself apart. Thus there appear on the scene tiny communities which operate on the principle of excluding outsiders, and these are just so many responses to a social system that does not connect anyone to anything any more, or does so with ever-decreasing effect. (p. 181)

The network becomes the place where young people arrange closed group territories for bands and groups that share the same values and the same social points of reference. Within these groups, rituals and codes circulate but they remain within the network; that is, they exist for the tribe. In order to reinforce the connection between members of such a tribe, pagers appear to be an important fac-

tor, and the survey confirmed this. First of all, pagers are cheaper than telephones and thus certain cost barriers are lowered that kept some young people from joining the network. But even more (and this was shown in the survey), pagers allow tribe members to develop secret linguistic codes, which only they know and which reinforce their feelings of belonging.

6. EXISTENCE ON THE NETWORK

One of the striking findings of the inquiry concerns the motivation of young people with regard to mobile phone usage. One might have expected the primary motivation of the young to be practical, to concern the need to communicate, to speak with others. Nothing of the sort. For a large majority of those questioned, the simple fact of being "reachable" is the most important social motivation of all. Behind this motivation can be found two important sociological phenomena that are worth studying.

The first concerns the social existence of youths within their tribe or network. In order to exist socially on a network, you have first of all to be sought out, that is, called up. Calls received are seen by young people not as functional signs, as in "I communicate a lot," but as symbolic or existential signs, as in "I am somebody in the tribe." At this level, too, pagers provide an important remedy to those who have difficulty maintaining their existence on a network. Such reasons for the rapid adoption and diffusion of pager technology were discovered by the survey. Thus, when young people are questioned about their mobile phone usage, it is impossible not to be struck by the high symbolic value they place on the number of calls they receive (whether by voice telephony or by text messaging); they are a sign of their social importance.

The second phenomenon concerns the effect on family relationships. Heurtin (1998) observed: "Family structures are changing today ... and these changes may be going in the direction indicated by the development of mobile telephone" (p. 48). Once upon a time, the apartment or the house was the spatial and social locus of communication between parents and children. Today, it is an empty area as regards social relationships. This is the result of several developments, such as the increasing number of working women and mothers, the transformation of family structures with the growing number of single-parent or patchwork families, and the increasing length of time during which parents and children live "together." All this contributes to making mobile phone and wireless messaging links more and more important as part of the relationship between parent and child. Because a place to get together no longer exists, togetherness is recomposed in a place where the other can be reached even if he or she is not there. Thus for some adolescents, the mobile phone may represent a sort of leash that constitutes a connection with parents, although the length of the leash is the object of constant negotiation: "Leave your mobile phone turned on"; "At least leave your pager on"; and so on.

It is important to stay with this phenomenon of the presence of mobile phones as part of family structures, in order to underline two aspects. First, ordinary tele-

phones and later mobile phones and pagers became ways for young people to kill time. In just a few years the nonmobile telephone ceased to be merely a useful thing, and became a leisure-time appliance just like the television or sports equipment, filling an emptiness that neither family nor associative structures could fill. Young people communicate all the time, and are always somewhere else. The present moment is always being split, always shadowed by an "elsewhere" that takes up every moment of time not filled by some immediate activity. There is no more empty time. The "mobile" fills all the previous gaps between activities. By the same token, we have the impression that the act of transmitting and receiving messages has become as important as the messages themselves. Being connected to the network is the new way of being there, the new way of being oneself. The user is always in the process of escaping from the present, slipping away stealthily by sending a discreet little message "just between us." Studying these customs is also a way of understanding, "from the inside," the addictive behavior and psychological dependencies that can be observed with regard to mobile phones.

This question of the relation with time was particularly pointed out by Fortunati (2000), especially with regard to the impact of the cellular phone on interpersonal relationships. So, according to Fortunati (and in line with the approach of the French philosopher Bergson): "In the case of interpersonal communication managed by mobile, this expansion of time could have very harmful effects on social relations and especially love relations. In the same ways as communication feeds also on silence, so also seduction feeds on absence: if we eliminate absence and silence, we expose relations to early deterioration" (p. 4).

The other aspect to underline is the progression from nonmobile (or ordinary) to mobile phones. As Heurtin (1998) emphasized, the nonmobile telephone is a public communication tool within the family structure. Not only is it visible and audible, but its use is even traceable through telephone bills. The mobile phone, in contrast, is par excellence the tool of a certain individualization of communication that permits young people to recapture a degree of autonomy and to find a more discreet refuge from parental control in their communications. With wireless messaging a further step is taken, because it is possible by that means to communicate without speaking.

These developments should be carefully studied. Although mobile phone service providers may be celebrating those external factors that allow young people's mobile usage to fit into their parents' purchasing behavior, sociologists are getting worried. For beneath the surface of this mobile phone usage there is first and foremost a rather desperate search for social existence, for a social connection in a world that appears less and less communicative to youth. For such reasons, as the research shows, about half of young people apparently would be willing to receive wireless advertising messages. These are all indications, not likely mistaken, of the need for communication that some young people feel today. The rise in importance of mobile phones and pagers among young people is perhaps the most convincing sign of a "disconnected" society.

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