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Children on the mobile

An exploration of playful identity formation

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1 Children¹ on the mobile

For many years producers of mobile phones were almost entirely concerned with improvement of the quality of mobile telephones and the addition of all kinds of new techniques, nowadays the appearance of the telephone is gaining attention, resulting in the rise of more and more possibilities of “pimping” or customizing the mobile to everybody's own taste. Trend watcher Dernenen states that, “styling is a fitting example of the more general recent development of personalized products. Especially young people are into customized products and manufacturers anticipate on this by making more and more products which seem to be unique; tailored to the personal wishes of the individual. We call it the cool appropriation-trend. The rise of ring tones was in fact the first indicator” (Telegraaf, 2005).

Over the course of the academic history of studying (new) media, an array of perspectives have addressed issues of new media and identity formation processes, and diverse claims have already been made. Customization, pimping and cool-appropriation can all be seen as examples of human identity formation within meditative settings. Through individual and collective media usage and engagement changes in the identity or self of individuals or groups substantiate. The observed significance and qualitative and quantitative impact of these transformations vary within the diversity of discourses aimed at understanding new media (Lister et al., 2003; 247). Dutch philosopher De Mul accepts the basic assumption stating that human personal and cultural identity is dynamically constructed by its mediating surroundings. In line with this train of thought he argues that alterations in these mediating structures will be reflected in human identity (and vice versa).

De Mul constructed a triad of ludic self-construction elements, consisting of Play₁, Play₂ and Play₃. In short, Play₁ refers to the ludic preconfiguration of (expressed) elements within our daily life. Play₂ refers to expression of this playfulness. Play₃ covers its reflective understanding and internalization (2005; 260). This macro-level conceptual-philosophical framework can be coupled with micro-level identity formation by analyzing the workings and usage of specific mediating settings and elements. In this paper, it is chiefly used to investigate whether mobile telephone usage can also be interpreted and understood from a ludic perspective by looking how it greases the wheels for ludic behavior of within the childhood of its users.

Further specialization of this analysis is achieved by solely taking into account what I would like to understand as a form of mediated childhood; children and young people's mobile

¹ Children is the label for children aged from 6 until 18 years old. Small children are seen as aged under 7, children as aged between 7-10 years, pre-teens as aged between 10-12, teenagers as aged between 13-15 and pre-adults as aged between 16-18 years old. This distinction was drawn by Oksman and Rautanen (2003a; 307).

phone praxis. This is done for three principal reasons. Those will be shortly presented here, and will be discussed more in depth be it either implicitly or explicitly later on. Nowadays, children and young people represent a rising “influential segment of the population”, which can be seen for instance from a consumer market perspective; “many media goods, especially those that are relatively cheap and portable are targeted at and adopted by the youth market” (Livingstone, 2001; 308). Besides the consumer market, media play central roles in the lives of children and young people, because they “are at the point in their lives where they are most motivated to construct identities, to forge new social groupings, and to negotiate alternatives to given cultural meanings” (ibid.). Also, for several reasons, children are believed to be early adopters of new media and as early adopters, “children and youth are, in many ways, the defining users of the digital media. Even as the digital future is still unfolding, electronic media are already playing a significant role in the lives of children and teens, many of whom enjoy access to their own personal media devices” (Montgomery, 2001; 637). Adding up to this, “young people are often regarded as being at the forefront of technological expertise”, as descriptions such as “the electronic generation”, “the avant- garde of consumption” and “Generation txt” reminds us of (Quigly, 2005; 168)

Bearing this in mind, the aim of this paper is to investigate whether mobile telephone usage can be interpreted and understood from a ludic perspective by looking how it greases the wheels for ludic behavior of within the childhood of its users. This way, we can assess whether childhood is also playfully transformed. De Mul’s description of the transformation process takes predominantly place at a conceptual level, this paper will try to further concretize this fundamental observation. Within the recently started playful identities research project, headed by De Mul, three PhD projects focus on respectively 1. mobile phones, 2. websites, and 3. computer games. The PhD project on mobile phones focuses on play₁ or the ludically organized lived experience. This research will investigate what the role of play₂ and play₃ can be when aiming at a better understanding of playful identity formation via and through the mobile phone. By doing so, possible recommendations can be made towards the PhD project on mobile phones.

2 Structure

In order to grasp the rise of the mobile phone and its proliferation within children’s daily world, a brief history of the mobile phone will be presented at first. This will serve as a fundament for the chief analysis of mobile phones structured along play₁, play₂ and play₃. The focus hereby will be on theoretical implications mostly, thereby practical usage of observed playful mobile elements will

be used illustratively. Under the heading of play₁, the symbolic playful meaning of the mobile phone is investigated by inquiring parental and peer pressure and the appearance of the mobile phone as a gadget. Explorative activities are looked into under the label of play₂. Here, the fundamental plasticity in childhood is coupled with technological, sociological and ideological roles of mobile telephony. Reflective identity formation processes will be studied under play₃. Investigating processes of appropriation, empowerment, secrecy, connection and trust serve as the groundwork for this study. Concluding an overview of findings will be presented, coupled with several recommendations for future research on this topic.

3 Approach

To connect the mere macro-level conceptual philosophical concept of playful identity formation to a more micro-level specific set of media technologies and its usage, an technological interactionist approach will be applied. The technological interactionist approach understands the relationship between technological and social change as mutual and reciprocate, thereby both the technological deterministic and technological constructivist outlooks are avoided. This approach will offer us a method to come to an understanding of the object we're interested in; by means of studying the role of the mobile phone within children's culture or childhood we'll be able to concretize the observed shift of ludic identity formation processes.

3.1 Childhood

In line with the technological interactionist train of thought, children's childhood (which is in this paper also understood as children's culture) is not solely "the result of top-down forces of ideological and institutional control, nor is it a free space of individual expression" (Jenkins, 1998; 4). Over the years, theorists have issued conflicting notions on childhood providing the fundament to propose this statement. On the one far side of the spectrum we can for instance position the comprehension of childhood formulated by Kilne, who denies the role of children in the formation processes of their own culture:

"What might be taken as children's culture has always been primarily a matter of culture produced for and urged upon children... Childhood is a condition defined by powerlessness and dependence upon the adult community's directives and guidance. Culture is, after all, as the repository of social learning and socialization, the means by which societies preserve and strengthen their positions in the world" (1993; 44).

Terms like powerlessness and dependence tends towards Adorno's notion of the culture industry, in which people become dependent on capitalism (1991), be it that in Kilne's eyes, it is not the dependency on the culture industry but dependence on *adult* popular culture. Walkerdine can be position in the middle-of-the-road and sees popular culture as a reflection of childhood, as a site of contested defining of the child, shaped by adult desires and childhood fantasies, and determined by material conditions (1996; 325). On the other side of the spectrum, in a more Foucauldian way, Giroux argues that childhood is constructed as follows:

“Children's culture is a sphere where entertainment, advocacy and pleasure meet to construct conceptions of what it means to be a child occupying a combination of gender, racial and class positions in society” (1996; 89).

For this paper, Jenkins' notion of childhood is accepted and used as a starting point. He believes that children can be active participants and can thereby actively define their identity, but he also acknowledges that they are not necessarily acting from a position of equal power in comparison with media producers and for that matter adults (Jenkins, 1998; 4).

3.2 Approaching the “mobile phone” within children's culture

Technological interactionism can be seen as the middle way between institutionalization and individualization of children's culture formation and technological determinism and social constructivism. With regard to the latter, the approach rejects the “theoretical macro-approach focusing on the resulting technological artifacts” and the overemphasizing on an “empirical micro-approach focusing on the processes of design and interpretation” (De Mul, 2005).

The approach applied in this manner here focuses on the meso-level in which “both users and artifacts are actors in a complex process, in which socio-economic, cultural and technological factors are shaping, and being shaped by, the other factors” (ibid.) De Mul understands this approach thus as a heterogeneous model of interpretation enabling various readings, reasonings and motives of these socio-technological systems to be enucleated (2001; 66). Technological, economical, political, social and psychological perspectives on the mobile phone are elements of the socio-technological system taken into account in this research.

4 Ludic identity formation

Ludic identity formation is twofold and unfolds in three stages. Identity-formation is possible, because lived experiences are structured by the mediating settings and this shaped structure

enables reflective identification. Here De Mul elaborates on Dutch philosopher Huizinga's attempt to view culture "sub specie ludi" (1950; 4-5), thereby presupposing that "the great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start" (ibid.) by looking at ludic characteristics within mediating structures.

The three stages, play₁, play₂ and play₃, as introduced by De Mul, follow Ricoeur's notion of "la triple mimesis". The theory of ludic identity formation is in essence an attempt to complement Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity. The reading of triple mimesis by Ricoeur sees an imagined synthetic configuration of action (mimesis₂) as a mediator of mimesis₁ (pre-understanding) and mimesis₃ (understanding). M₁ and m₃ constitute *l'amont et l'aval* of m₂ (Ricoeur, vol I, 53). In line with this notion the two sides of play, p₁ and p₃, are mediated by the intermediary position of p₂. Namely, Ricoeur sees a reader as an operator par excellence traveling within a unity from mimesis₁, to mimesis₃, by way of mimesis₂ (ibid.). Internalization of playful elements that were offered from within a pre set-up setting occurs as the result of an exploration. This exploration is done by means of play. The player experiences complete liberty and beliefs to be acting without some sort of subjection to external restraint whatsoever.

Play₁ describes "the ludic prefiguration of our daily life" (De Mul, 2005; 260). In this stance, the world is experienced as playful. The repetitious and infinite play of the world, as in the permeation of human society with play, is hereby reflected in actual technology applications and media utterances. The expression of the experienced "pre-ludic coherence in games forms the level of play₂" results in a "Spielraum", a space of possible action. This refers to the Heideggerian notion of a Spielraum, a room enabling free play which underlines that "playing always creates for itself the space within which it can form and that also means transform itself" (Inwood, 1999; 167). De Mul adds that this space becomes perceived as infinite and without closure (2005; 260). The final stage of the ludic identity formation process, play₃, enables the identification and internalization of the player with "the space of possibilities disclosed by the game. The field of possible action is reflectively applied to the self" (ibid.). Hall states that "before a message can have an "effect" (however defined), satisfy a "need" or be put to a "use", it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse" (2002; 53). This is exactly how I understand this phase; the playful identification process eventually needs an appropriation of the possibilities. The media user needs to establish his or her playful identity by ascertaining the definitive characteristics of it.

More concretely, this process can in my eyes exemplarily be understood as follows: in the first stage, a person gives in to his cravings, possibly initiated by recommendations made by his peers, and starts using a mobile phone and short-message-service (SMS) in order to stay in touch with friends. After unwrapping the wrappings of the newly bought mobile telephone device,

reading the manual, charging the machine's batteries the user can explore the array of offered possibilities in the second stage. In this process, the user comes across the possibility of sending SMS-messages. Subsequently, after initial shilly-shallying, the user gets used to the convenience of communicating via SMS and even starts using the for uninitiated inaccessible SMS-language. This is the beginning of stage three, in which the mode of play is picked up by the user as a preferred way of consuming music. Once this is reflexively assumed, playful internalization of a new mediated setting and/or domain of expression has occurred.

Concluding, in this theory play and games are metaphors that work bipartitely. They cover human identity in itself but also the process of identity formation and shaping. The identity model is presented as hermeneutic and builds upon the likes of Dilthey and Ricoeur. Dilthey understood hermeneutics as interpretation that is fundamentally tied to its relation with its historical objectification. Hereby, understanding is based on studying external manifestations in order to grasp internal substance (2005). Playful identity expressions, thus, need to be grasped as embedded within their historical context in order to come to an understanding of human identity. Studying identity expressions can in this way underline the theoretical conceptualization of the shift from narrative towards playful identity formation.

5 A brief history of the rise of the mobile phone

In order to put this investigation on the playfulness of mobile childhood in its proper perspective, it is useful to take into account the staggering rise of mobile telephone ownership and usage. People are nowadays for instance more likely to own a telephone than a TV-set, which can be attributed to the increase of mobile phone ownership (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; 4) According to a Financial Times research conducted in 2001, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan have a mobile phone penetration rate of 72,4, Western Europe of 72,1, Japan of 53,4, North America of 42,7 (ibid; 5). These numbers are leading up to a common sensual belief of ownership of a mobile phone being a social norm.

The current omnipresence of mobile telephony hinders grasping the fact that the technology has just relatively recently been introduced (and subsequently rapidly emerged). In Europe for instance, analogue TACS/NMT mobile phone services, targeted at business users, were introduced in 1985, the digital GSM service, also targeted at business users, in 1993 and by the end of the millennium GSM devices were already an everyday occurrence (Harper, 2003; 4).

“In simple terms, the history of the mobile can then be described as, first of all, a period of individual business people pulling the technology; second, their success leading to a

period of business management pull, which resulted in a sufficient level of familiarity with the general public for a third period during which the consumer at large adopted the technology very rapidly; and fourth, this eventually resulted in the situation we have now where having a mobile phone is virtually a social necessity” (ibid.).

According to Katz and Aakhus, this development is both praised and criticized within folk framing. On the one hand, mobile devices shown warm approval because of its liberating character. Practical matters can for instance be managed more easily, therefore “Individuals who master these devices are shown as people who control their destiny” (2002; 7). On the other hand however, mobile telephones are blamed “as the cause or catalyst of the loss of control over life” (ibid; 8). The most striking example for this loss is the blurring of a mobile phone users sense of the former concrete public / private distinction.

6 Play: childhood’s introduction to new ways of expression

This chapter will focus on play₁, which will be understood here as the introduction of playful expressions in children’s culture, or the introduction of the mobile phone within childhood. First, a general introduction on the rise of the mobile phone in the lives of children will be given. An overall impression of the symbolic character of mobile telephony follows. This will be specialized in paragraphs on parental and peer pressure respectively. An inventory of gadget and symbolic status functioning of the mobile phone is presented subsequently.

6.1 Introduction

The proliferation of mobile phone usage has also taken place within the lives of children and youngsters. Multisilta et al. for instance investigated the ownership of mobile phones for different age groups out of a sample of 2300 Finnish youngsters. Their results can be seen in figure 1.

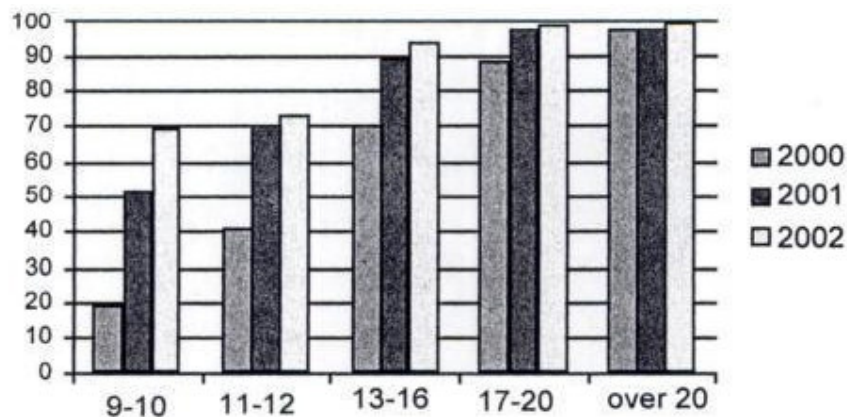


Fig. 1. “The percentage of children who own a mobile phone in different age groups”.

Especially Finnish children, living in the home country of Nokia, have experienced “nokialization”, leading up to the notion of being born with a mobile phone and growing up in a mobile phone culture (Puro, 2002; 28). It is however plausible that this trend is not restricted by the Finnish borders, when accepting the earlier described penetration rates.

Let us now focus some more on theoretical implications reflecting the rise of the mobile phone that have been formulated recently. Starting of with the current parental cultural view on mobile phones and children’s usage of it as described by Oksman and Rautiainen, who made observations of its status by interviewing parents and children in Finland. They’ve extrapolated their findings to a generalized Western view: “the age at which the mobile phone is acquired is expected to fall [...] because they expected the culture to change so that children’s mobile phones would come to be seen as casual everyday appliances” (2003a; 107). In addition to this, Tarpley believes that the “greater portability” of newly emerging electronic devices such as the cell phone “may inevitably lead to the greater intrusion of media into daily lives” of children (2001; 550).

When taking into account the observed notion of everyday casualness of the medium, associations of unrestrained, unconstrained, natural, relaxed and spontaneous communications can arise. Apparently, the nature of the medium has begotten (elements of) this character, after acceptance of the use in children’s culture. Harper saw the mobile phone as an addition to people’s lives, working alongside previously existing communication systems. “The result was that mobile phones expanded what is called in the literature the ‘ecology’ of communications technologies, and in so doing became as important to work, family and personal life as the fixed phone and other communications systems” (2003; 5). The ecological expansion is understood here as the alternation in relationships between human groups and their physical and social environments as constituted by the acceptance of mobile telephony within children’s culture.

6.2 Symbolic meaning of the mobile phone

The “nokialization” and further mobile telephony ecological expansion can partly be attributed to the peer pressure in which children and youngsters can find themselves. They can choose to search confirmation, in order to live up to the existing ideal of their childhood. This can be illustrated best as follows:

“the adoption of the mobile phone is not simply the action of an individual but rather it is the individuals aligning themselves with the peer culture in which they participate [...] This is perhaps more true of the mobile phone than it is with other adolescent artifacts such as clothing since the mobile is, in the first instance, an instrument with which one communicates. Beyond this the mobile telephone also communicates symbolically. The

façade of the device, the type and its functions indicate something about the owner. Finally the very ownership of a mobile telephone indicates that one is socially connected” (Ling & Helmersson, cited in Quigley, 2005; 169).

This quote is densely packed with examples of new domains of expression that one is introduced to when using mobile telephony. By confirming, the users of the peer culture are able to communicate hints about their person both towards their parents and family as well as towards their peers in the form of the type and offered ways of expression and of course appearance of their gadget.

6.2.1 Parental pressure

Oksman and Rautiainen have argued that mobile phones are used as follows:

“To (re, KL) define borders” and “to open up new dimensions in relationships with parents and friends. As an object or being, the mobile phone reflects the self of the owner, its boundaries and how they are opened or closed from others [...] The definition of boundaries works both ways: both parents and children may establish rules on how to realize communications between family members” (2003a; 299)

Here we’ll focus on the relationship with parents, in the following chapter we’ll focus on the relationships between friends. The mobile phone has provided teens increased levels of freedom:

Seventeen-year-old-girl: “The mobile’s increased it a lot. After confirmation [age fifteen], they were asking quite a lot about where I was going and who with, but now when I leave home they don’t ask anything, they just call if they want to know when I’m coming home” (ibid.).

Ling and Helmersson observe age sets of transitions, on which this paper will elaborate briefly. Ling and Helmersson have observed the following three transitions: elementary school at age 12-13, confirmation at age 14 and the conclusion of the obligatory schooling at age 18-19. At age 12-13 the child expands his social milieu out of the more bound elementary school setting. A formerly strong rite-de-passage occurred at the age of 14, when children were expected to “come out” into adult society by participating in openly adult activities. The transition from obligatory schooling to university or work marks a major transition towards the complete emancipation from parents (2001).

To put this into perspective, in 1997, as a confirmation, children were given mobile phones by their parents at the age of 14/15, in 2000, parents anticipated that this age would go down to 7 (Oksman and Rautiainen, 2003b; 107). By providing their child with a mobile phone, a

parent provides him or her with an indication of confidence, a notion of expanded freedom and independence. For instance a notion of expanded freedom arises when the teenager is asked to pay his own mobile telephone bills, since “paying one’s own bill is considered a sign of independence, as it denies parents the right to interfere with the use of the device” (2003a; 299). Now when we take into account the anticipation of giving a mobile phone to 7 year olds, it is not directly plausible that 7 year olds will also be asked to control the expenses of their calling behavior, but it remains a fact that children become put under certain different pressure when given a mobile phone. Children’s culture thus incorporates adult senses of responsibility, thereby children become young adults.

However, it must be understood that parents optimistically often have high expectations (of the capabilities of) their children, as can be made clear with the following statement done by the mother of a six-year-old boy:

“I’m going to be calling kindergarten soon, when I have trouble with the computer, to ask if he could lend me a hand with it. The new generation is going to surpass us in this” (Oksman & Rautiainen, 2003a; 302).

Nonetheless, in general, children do need help in learning to use the telephone, (Fortunati, cited in Oksman & Rautiainen, 2003a; 302) but this process can also take place outside the family context. Getting the hang on the use of the device can also be learned within peer group settings. It is already discussed that the mobile device is more and more becoming an everyday appliance also within children’s culture. The introduction of the device within childhood also introduces some underlying parental expectations regarding actual practical usage. Namely, parents expect the child “to display sensible communication behavior”, and when the child is able to do so, it “is a matter of honor to the parents” as becomes clear when hearing the mother of an eight-year-old boy state that “Niko is a very smart mobile user. He doesn’t chatter. He says what he called to say and then it is bye-bye” (ibid, 303).

Nonetheless, it remains to be seen how children perceive their own typical mobile telephony communication behavior. The playful exploration of the functioning of the mobile and the appropriation and internalization of the mobile telephone will be discussed under the heading of *play*₂ and *play*₃ respectively.

6.2.2 Peer pressure

“We know that adolescents are particularly susceptible to peer pressure, and at various moments in the developmental cycle peer pressure is much more significant to young people than parental

pressure” (Berger, 1996; 65). In this paragraph the so-called peer-pressured socialization processes will be taken into account. Within psychology, it is commonplace to understand peer pressure as a negative factor, since it can for instance “exclude students socially from a certain group or coerce students into performing negative behavior”. This way it is understood as a factor that can strongly influence behavior, “influencing them to say the ‘right’ thing, wear the ‘right’ clothes or act a certain way” (Lange, 2005; 378). Besides (negative) pressure, peer-groups can also be relied upon, for instance Adler states that it can guide children’s understanding (Adler, 2003; 4) and Ling and Helmersen underline this by acknowledging that “One’s peers provide self-esteem, reciprocal self-disclosure, emotional support, advice and information” (2000; 4). Also, peer-pressure is applied in juvenile detention centres, to pressure children into other ways of thinking.

We’ve seen that in Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Western Europe, roughly three-fourths of the population owned a mobile phone. However, when looking in more detail, it seems that young people are indeed in the forefront of technological expertise, since for instance in 2002 in the United Kingdom, 81 percent of 15-24 year-olds owned a mobile phone, in comparison to 70 percent of all adults (Quigley, 2005; 169). And among the demographic of for instance Norwegian youth, the device is widespread (see figure 1). “90 percent of Norwegian 20-year olds [have, KL] some form of access to a mobile phone [and, KL] about 60 percent of the thirteen year-olds have some form of ownership [Furthermore, KL] 26 percent of 11-12 year olds and about 11 percent of 9 to 10 year olds indicate that they own a mobile telephone” (Ling & Helmersen, cited in Quigley, 2005; 169).

As a youngster growing up, it can become (to be perceived) vital to own a mobile phone. When one’s peer-group consists of persons who all personally own a mobile phone, a pressure will be put on the shoulders of the one without a mobile. He or she will probably receive advice and information from peers, to enable confirmation to their shared dominant image of mobile phone ownership. Confirmation can subsequently provide self-esteem, and a sense of shared group loyalty or group consciousness. Exclusion can however occur, when one’s for instance not financially able or not willing to pursue ownership and partake in the mobile telephony rat race.

6.2.3 Gadgets

The peer pressured image of mobile telephony ownership is directly related to the rat race development of the mobile as “iconic markers of status” (Agar, 2004; 144). Grumet adds: “Like a Lamborghini or a gorgeous blonde on your arm, your cell phone is a status symbol” (2003; 33). The mobile phone communicates symbolically, by indicating things about his owner. This can

occur in different ways. At first, by owning a mobile phone, a user is expected to have some level of technical know-how and reflecting this by being a capable mobile telephone user. Related to this, Ling and Helmersen addressed the fact that owners of mobile phones are enabled in the process of “gifting”, by being able to send and receive SMS-messages and phone calls (2000; 17). Also, Schejter and Cohen compared symbols that have developed within a thirty-year time span: in the 1960’s a car symbolized social status, in the 1990’s the portable and visible-to-all mobile phone has taken over this role (2002; 32).

This paragraph will however focus on the mobile phone and its ways of symbolizing status. Fitting example for this matter is for instance the XELIBRI mobile phone, as introduced by Benq/Siemens (see figure 2). The phones, marketed as a fashion accessory, with Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter collections, have a look and feel giving its users feelings of being unique and a bit different than everybody else (Grumet, 2003; 33).

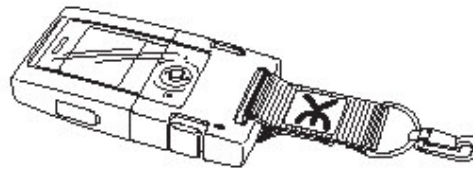


Fig. 2. “Benq/Siemens Xelibri 5. World’s first click-on fashion phone”.

The world’s first click-on fashion phone is just one example of the ever-improving mobile phone. Today’s phones offer a lot more than just the possibility of making a telephone call, it is becoming more and more standard and accepted that devices can nowadays play MP3 music files, make photos and can access the Internet.

When one wants to symbolize his or herself, it is becoming harder to be other than average, since the average level of the mobile phone has ever rising standards. The newest devices, or gadgets, are most original, trendy, stylish and also expensive and thereby distinctive markers of status. To put this in perspective, in an 1997 American survey conducted under 1000 respondents, 11 percent of 25-to-34-year-olds perceive mobile phones as status symbols, followed by 15 percent of 45-to-54-year-olds and 18 percent of those aged 18 to 24 and 35 to 44 (Ten Kate, 1997; 32). It is interesting to note that both almost one-fifth of the 18-24 year olds as well as nearly one-fifth of 35-44 year olds sees mobile phones as symbols of status. Symbolization in the forms of pimping, customization, ring tones, screensavers, logo’s etc will be further analyzed under p_2 and p_3

7 Play₂: the playful exploration of mobile telephony

Puro stated that “younger people in particular are right now adopting and so shaping the rules of the new culture” (Puro, 2002; 28). An inventory of childhood’s exploration of mobile telephony will be made, to investigate the fundament of the shaping of a new culture. This will be done under the heading of play₂. The expression of the experienced new possibilities of expression results in a Spielraum, a space of possible action. Thereby, we accept Huizinga’s secludeness’ characteristic of play: “it is played out within certain limits of time and place, [whereby, KL] it contains its own course and meaning” (1950; 9).

7.1 Plasticity

Grasping the playful exploration of possibilities in children’s culture can be characterized by what psychologists label as plasticity or children’s agility or quality of being flexible. This is a “double-edged sword that leads to both adaptation and vulnerability” (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000; 194). This paper will focus on the former, the adaptive qualities derived from plasticity. It is applied here as a specific feature of the overall technological interactionist perspective employed throughout this paper. Bornstein states that children can show openness “to particular experiences in ways that alter their future structure or function” (cited in Shonkoff & Philips, 2000; 195), or as it is understood here: by being receptive to new ways of expression and show capabilities in order to explore those, the future (of children’s culture mobile) communication can be fundamentally altered.

7.2 Exploring possibilities and roles of the object

An approach issued by Calvert, on the functioning of objects, will be applied here to investigate the children’s culture’s exploration of this space of possible action from a clear-cut framework. The three functions or roles she defines, the technomic, sociotechnic and ideotechnic roles (1998; 69), will fundamentally structure this chapter. She reckons an object can “be capable of numerous functions or meanings, only some of which are valid to a given society at a particular time [...] [but, KL] on the other hand, a single object might fulfill several different functions simultaneously” (ibid.). The youngster’s play with new offered possibilities will be grasped within this framework of roles an object can have.

7.2.1 Technomic exploration

The more technomic or practical use of possibilities offered by the newly introduced mobile telephone covers the principal technological ends that are (eventually met). In other words, the technomic exploration looks at the technological-driven practical handling of the phone. In their study, Carroll et al. found that young people tend to make “technology-driven rather than task-driven decisions”, working from the premise of how the technology can be incorporated into their lives rather than how it can help them complete a task (Quigley, 2005; 168).

A clear example of a child’s playful technomic exploration is to be found in the following statement done by an eleven-year-old girl:

“I still don’t know how to sue everything in it. But I’ve tried. I browsed it a lot, and it took me a couple of years to learn to send text messages and things like that. I just tried things out” (Oksman & Rautianen, 2003; 303)

The playful browsing of the options found in the device lets children incorporate new technologies as well as new techniques or skills in their childhood. As we’ve seen earlier, parents have high expectations of the learning capabilities of their children. By giving children access to the world of mobile telephony, they are offered a sample of what’s in store in adult world. In a sense, the child already learns skills that he will not necessarily need in order to function until he or she is a full-grown.

Children are expected to quickly gain knowledge on how to type numbers, phone home and family members, to type and send text messages and to lock and unlock the device. Wajcman has emphasized the fact that technology tends to be designed to match technological skills, be it with men in mind (cited in Skog, 2002; 268). Girls have however also taken their chance to master the skills needed to functionally operate the mobile phone, but they still seem to symbolize “soft” mastery in contrast with boys who seem to symbolize “hard mastery” and her exploration of Norwegian teen showed that “girls responses tend strongly towards the symbolic pole (color, design) and boys’ towards the functional pole (technological performance, logo, brand) (Skog, 2002; 268).

Thus it seems that the technomic exploration done by boys centres around mastering the pure technological skills, while girls are less concerned with this hard form of mastery. It showed they merely want to be able to socially express themselves, nothing more and nothing less.

7.2.2 Sociotechnic exploration

The sociotechnic aspect of the room of possible actions covers the interactions and relationships between the mobile phone user and his social network. The social role of the device, earlier

discussed from a parental and peer pressure perspective, will be expounded here. We must at first, on this level, as well as the following ideotechnic exploration level, understand that:

“teenagers do not compromise a homogeneous user group: there is significant variation in the use of the mobile phone. When studying children’s relationship to the mobile phone, one should take into account that children are not little adults or small teenagers but have their own styles of communication as well as their own specific needs and ways of thinking” (Oksman & Rautiainen, 2003a, 307)

As we have seen, boys, mastering technology the hard way, can earn respect from their peers for their technological skills. Girls, can also win social popularity, by their “soft” mastering. For instance, the mobile telephone brings forth a divided consciousness which Gergen describes as an expansion of absent presence (2002; 227). With their observed tendency towards social openness girls possibly are better capable of establishing and keeping relationships healthy via their mobile phone.

Within children’s culture, popularity can be extremely important. Sociotechnically, the mobile phone can offer possibilities to broaden networks and expand reputations. Sharing stories have been understood as group-tying as creators of a common history or narrative. Berger and Kellner saw the sharing of messages, for instance passing notes in class as a type of gifting and thus as an objectification of relationship (cited in Ling and Yttri, 2002; 159). This let’s us understand the following note of a teen: “If you get a good message or something that’s cool you often send it on” on which Ling and Yttri concluded that “the sending and receiving of messages is an objectification of popularity” (2002; 159). In this case, when taking SMS-messages into account, we can thus speak of the establishment of a playful, interactive common ground.

Both teenagers and commercial companies have embraced this new notion that has arisen, and examples are plentiful: let’s focus for instance on the as it seems immensely popular SMS-chatting on television. For example, I’ve recently observed that Dutch, Belgium, German, Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian and Italian music television (both national and worldwide chain) stations, who value themselves highly, have engaged in this. On the Dutch music television station The Music Factory, viewers are asked to rate and comment videos on the daily scheduled program INTERACTIVE CHARTS and during these and other shows, a moderator under the name of Dr. Love lets viewers respond on statements dealing with everything related to love and sex. The Belgium music station The Music Factory enables users to send in photo’s via mms on their daily PHOTOCHAT show. A shared narrative from the days of passing notes in the classroom hereby becomes replaced by a playful interactive Spielraum, or understood shared room of possible action. The Box, an other Dutch music television channel, shows statements of TV-

chatters accompanied by personal avatar-pictures. The mobile phone thus enables its user to present him or herself to others in a variety of different ways.

7.2.3 Ideotechnic exploration

Calvert understands the ideotechnic role as the fulfilling “of a symbolic vocabulary expressing or affirming cultural beliefs and values” whereby for instance coral and bells could be seen as an icon for infancy (1998; 69). This paragraph aims to lay bare the symbolic functioning of the mobile phone for children and teenagers throughout their pre-adult live. The ideological assuming of the technical object will here be investigated by looking at the relationship to mobile phones throughout this time.

Oksman and Rautianen, have schematically presented their findings on mobile appreciation among Finnish children as follows (2003a; 307):

Age	Small child (under 7 yrs)	Child (7-10 yrs)	Pre-teen (10-12 yrs)	Teenager (13-15 yrs)	Pre-adult (16-18 yrs)
Relationship to mobile phone	-imaginative -personifying -other toys seen as more significant -games are most interesting feature	-attitudes differentiate -relationship quite pragmatic -mobile is a games machine	-age of “mobile fever” -mobile important appliance, -toys significance has diminished -importance of hobbies and friends increases	-attitude differentiated -practical and instrumental for some, expressive and affective for others -personalizing and making the device more aesthetic	-practical and instrumental side are highlighted -offline use decreases

Fig. 3. “Users relationship with mobile phone, differentiated in age-groups”.

When looking at figure 3, it becomes evident that certain curves of mobile appreciation can be found. Under 7 years, the mobile is perceived as not really significant, and the same can be said about pre-adults. During pre-teen and teenage years, the appliance is most important, while a child enjoys the mobile as a games machine and the teenager likes to personalize his device.

When looking at this development from a Spielraum perspective, it can be said that playful identity formation follows a certain path with ups and downs. This finding contrasts with both Huizinga’s notion of the “Homo Ludens” and De Mul’s notion on playful transformation of our culture. Namely, Huizinga insists that play is merely temporarily, “it plays itself to an end” within a limited spectrum of time (1950; 9), while De Mul believes that games within playful identity formation must be seen as an endless process “to oppose the continuous threat of closure” (2005; 261). However, when taking account figure 3, it could be said that young people tend to take a middle-way. There’s no complete final closure, but neither can we speak of endless

play. More likely, we should preliminary speak of certain (fluctuating) stages of playful identity formation, in which certain elements of this process are highlighted and others are perceived as less important.

8 Play₃, ultimate identification with the possibilities

This chapter will focus on how expressions that were explored in earlier stages of play are ultimately implemented in the life of the user. Under the heading of play₃, the identification of the user with what De Mul described as the “space of possibilities” will be explored. Insight will be gained in the appreciation and application of offerings disclosed by the exploration process, to investigate how “the field of possible action is reflectively applied to the self” (2005; 260) this way. From a technological interactionist perspective, when looking at the practices of the observed transformation from narrative towards playful identity formation, it is (too) easy to speak of a dawn of a new kind of man, however this could sometimes easily spring to mind. Albeit an urban legend or not, when hearing the story about a 9 year old kid winning a large Halo2 computer game tournament and parents calling kindergarten to solve problems with their mobile telephone it is logical to tend to do so.

Accordingly, Harper and Hamill state that the arrival of the mobile phone hasn't structurally altered the life of children, but merely a new medium to do the same as they have always done (2005). But what is it then, that has changed? In this chapter, an answer on this question will be provided, by looking at ludic identity formation through personalization and (changing) interaction patterns.

8.1 Identity formation

Apter understands a “protective frame” as a constitutive base for adults to enjoy play. This frame assures players of a game that their play will bear no consequences in/for the real world; as in ‘don't worry about it, this is only play’ when for instance enjoying a show with a caged tiger. Safe arousal is represented by this protected frame (1991; 22). However when applying this notion on the pre-adults' playful identity formation as it is understood in this paper, the protective frame can be seen as being perforated by mobile phone appropriation. Early-adopting teenagers, as strollers of the cityscape, have become postmodern flâneurs, or in Luke's words “phoneurs” (2005; 4). Understood this way, the phoneur becomes a commentator on the postmodern world.

The stable narratives as fundamentals for identity construction are running behind time and are replaced by more fluctuating playful processes. This is reflected in the lives of mobile phone

users. Kopomaa acknowledges the more flexible schedules according to which mobile phone users tend to live:

“The increased speed of connectivity and information transmission, as well as the increased facility of movement, have changed our notions of time, of the nature of the present, and of distances as well. Mobile phones have altered our old notion of time as something linear that has a clear direction” (2000; 52).

By playfully and interactively expropriating and participating within the world of mobile telephony, the user gets ready for the challenges raised in the 21st century. As a matter of fact, Luke states that “the postmodern city, punctuated by the peremptory sounds of cell phones ringing, now has its own home” (2005; 3). This home is constituted by the mobile phone networks in which in our case youngsters playfully construct and expose their identity.

8.2 Exploring ‘cool’ personality defining traits

The phoneur, when reflectively applying the offered possibilities within his or her life, also defines and articulates his or her identity by means of his or her meditative surroundings. Elaborating on the ideotechnic exploration phase, this paragraph will focus on specific ways that youngsters have chosen to define and express their personality via their mobile telephone. Defining identity by means of technology and meditative settings can be understood when addressing the intersection between difference and identity. Kelly firmly states that “it is difference that makes identity possible” (1997; 108). Standing out in public by differentiation and personalization is exactly what mobile telephony is all about in the world of youngsters. Myerson, albeit negatively, states that “at heart, the mobile concept is about being in control –as a separate and distinct individual” (2001; 20). Distinctiveness achieved by means of mobile telephony can be realized in several ways.

In the introduction, the term cool appropriation was issued, this trend will be addressed first. The term originates from the world of (internet)marketing, where it is used alongside cool empowerment, cool secrecy, cool connection and cool trust (ZBC Consultants, 2005; 3). Personality defining traits will be investigated under these headers. For this paper, the term cool can also be substituted with playful, since these can all be understood as ludic identification elements.

8.2.1 Cool appropriation

High demands on surveyability and controllability resulting out of users’ digital surroundings are labeled cool appropriation. Under this heading, for instance the customization of mobile phones

and mobile phone enabled communication can be taken into account. Clearest example hereof is ‘pimping’, or in other words customizing the device to one’s own taste. When snooping a popular online youth community website, a striking statement was found, posed by member “Xxiemm”, who states that his phone is pimped, since he puts on perfume to personalize it according to his wishes (2004). The one day he sprayed on JPG, and tomorrow he was going to apply some Gucci Rush 2 perfume, see figure 4.

[xxiemm](#) [quote](#)

Geplaatst op 29-11-2004 22:16

quote:

[Jett schreef op 29-11-2004 22:15:](#)
 [..]
 ik zou jou NOOOOIT slaan
 je telefoon ruikt lekker 🍷

I know ik heb een pimp telefoon
 die naar JPG ruikt ^-^
 morge doe ik hem gucci rush 2 op ^-^

[i]Lievii.. Hou Fann Joel_ Kus JoOh :love:

Fig. 4. “Superdudes.nl user Xiemmm speaking about his pimp telephone”.

This is just one extreme example of how the mobile phone can be tailored according to ones own preferences. Illustratively, Oksman and Rautiainen, acknowledged that customization is not predictable since “Children who personify their mobile phone may attribute a variety of different meanings” and the perfume example is perhaps better understood when according to Oksman and Rautiainen children can also “ exhibit nurturing behavior toward the mobile” (2003b; 109). Other more widely accepted and applied customization and personalization actions are downloading or composing polyphonic and real-tone ring tones, downloading or drawing wall papers and downloading or creating screen savers and ordering personalized mobile phone covers.

When glancing at appropriation processes from an other perspective, we can see a gap between parents and children’s assumption of mobile telephony. As discussed earlier, parents tend to think of their children as quick adopters of new technology, while they are themselves wary to engage with these new influences within their own lives. So parents themselves have witnessed an alteration. More specifically, the alteration here hinted can maybe found in the absent presence dilemma that is perceived as overcome by youngsters. As early-adopters, pre-adults do not seem to have any problem with handling the two parallel spaces they inhabit while

engaging with their mobile phone, “the physical space where one is talking, and the virtual space of the conversation. While using the mobile phone we are having simultaneously remote and co-present interaction” (Lasen, 2005; 48).

8.2.2 Cool empowerment

Cool empowerment can be understood here as the desire of the mobile phone user to take matters into his or her own hands. The mobile phone has been described as an empowering device from several different perspectives. It can for instance provide freedom, the feeling of adulthood and happiness when having a ‘must-have’ (Quigley, 2005; 544), while “convergence of mobile telecommunications and the Internet [as is the case with services like WAP, KL] leads to more personalization and customer empowerment” (Barnes, 2003; 97) It can also be understood as a force that can extend personal space, as Kopomaa believes that “mobile phone users increase their personal territory within the public space” (2000; 79). Now when we take into account the by adults disapproved chattering of youngsters in public, we have a clear example of empowerment which is more specific for young people. This way, the urban mobile phone lifestyle let its offspring bring private life in public sphere.

Namely, the appropriation of the device, “as children learn at a young age that the mobile culture follows people anywhere” (Puro, 2002; 28) as discussed under play₂, is possibly done in a different way than this is done by adults. This can be deduced from the following observation of different attitudes towards mobile telephony: “when adults respondents disparage chatting, they often make reference to teenagers and children. Mobile phone use for social conversation seemed more acceptable to the younger members of the focus groups” (Mante, 2002; 124). As Lasen adds, “their [teenagers’, KL] use of mobile phone is mainly related to friendship and sociability (2005; 55)². This way, the mobile phone is incorporated in the lives of youngsters as a medium for social interaction, in contrast with the more adult view on mobile communication as a medium for practical, instrumental (fig.3³) and rational transmission of information. The latter is already an indication of the alteration observed by parents, as addressed earlier, they expect rational communication behavior out of their children, however, it seems that children have appropriated it in another way.

² However, empowerment can also bring forth a more negative development, since it is for instance expected that within the next few decades, virtual bullying will have significant impact on the lives of children. As an empowering medium, the mobile phone can also be applied for these goals (Katz, 2005).

³ Pre-adults already tend more towards more practical and instrumental forms of communication, as a possible indication of adjusting towards (accepted) adult mobile telephony behavior.

8.2.3 Cool secrecy

The incomprehension of these processes, by for instance parents and other adults, can be strengthened through the youngsters feeling of independence, that is connected to the ownership of the mobile phone, implying that conversations on the phone therefore also will be private. This can be illustrated as follows: “Keeping the contents of the communication private is important for teens: a young person may be insulted if parents take the liberty of checking the messages in their mobile phone” (Oksman and Rautiainen, 2003a; 299).

Since we’re living in an experience economy, youngsters are more and more inclined towards sensational and enigmatic (communicational) behavior. This behavior is labeled as cool secrecy. This is the kind of behavior that youngsters logically tend to conceal from their parents eyes and ears. On the other hand, after “ purchase of the mobile phone, parents do not monitor their [children’s, KL] comings and goings as strictly as they may have before” (ibid.), thereby enabling children to engage in more concealed communication behavior. Because of this, children are also more or less expected to deal with their own phone bills. This can lead up to problems, as the urban legend goes of a girl sending €500 worth of SMS-messages to vote for her favorite Big Brother-show candidate. On the other hand, being financially independent, even though on a small scale, eventually leads up to (a feeling of) (cool) empowerment.

8.2.4 Cool connection

Cool connection is a term referring to the effect that every multimedia exchange between two individuals gives birth to. When addressing the peer pressure under which children tend to live, social conversational usage of mobile telephony during teenage years can be explained. According to Rubin “perhaps the only time in our lives when friends come fully to center stage, transcending all other relationships in immediate importance as they engage us on a daily basis around every aspect of living” (cited in Ling & Yttri, 2002; 148). The significance of “uniting circles of friends” this way, by means of the mobile phone, has also been emphasized by Oksman and Rautiainen (2003a; 299). The playful connection via the mobile phone unites the speakers and thereby a bond is created. These bonds take part in the playful identification processes and are an expression hereof.

The desire for connection can, however, also have side-effects, since some come to perceive the mobile as a prison, after parents want to remain in contact with their children constantly (Gournay, 2002; 203). The motivation to stay connected can also take place the other way around or in other relational settings, the need to be connected and reachable can constitute a heavy burden. But the provided ability to stay connected with friends and to make new ones

must also be stressed. The circle of friends, easily reached with the mobile phone, makes it easy to set up (approximate) meetings and/or to exchange ideas at any given time.

8.2.5 Cool trust

Cool trust, essential within non-face-to-face communication, covers the shared notion of trust necessarily for successful wireless communication. Witkowski et al. recognize that the definition of trust in contemporary cyber-societies encompasses it “both as a function of accumulated beliefs and as a function of direct experience” (2001; 112). Since face-to-face contact is elementarily lacking in mobile telephone communication, except for sending MMS picture-messages made with mobile telephone device, young people are playfully asked to develop and apply a set of beliefs of telephone behavior, partly through direct experience. In the core, both parties need to firstly accept the absent-presence character of the interaction.

During the appropriation process, the Spielraum is explored and mutual trust is thereby shaped. Before hand, before entering the room of play, childhood of course already contains some accumulated sets of belief on the do and don'ts of trust but these are not yet to be seen as final or stable.

“When it is not controlled by normative codes or stabilized rituals, trust must be won by providing tokens of openness, willingness, emotion and commitment. Trust is not therefore as table category but is constructed as a process, and the bonds it supports become reflexive projects, always open to a revision of conventions that sustain them” (Licoppe & Heurtin, 2002; 106).

Mutual trust is mutually constituted through mobile phone communications, through sending SMS messages and so on, up to a point that it can be reflectively applied. Further along down the road, throughout the communication process, emotional bonds can be strengthened through mobile phone interactions, since “the particular management of mobile phone interaction reassures both parties of their commitments, to the point where this negotiated and repeated traceability becomes part of the very fabric of the bond itself” (ibid.).

9 Conclusions

This chapter will give a brief overview of the findings of this research. Based upon the exploration of children's culture and playful identity construction, some conclusions will be drawn and recommendations will be given. The aim of this paper was to investigate whether mobile telephony could be understood from a ludic perspective by looking how it constitutes ludic behavior within the childhood of its users. The focus to do so was chiefly based on an inventory of possible theoretical implications mostly, thereby practical usage of observed playful mobile elements were used as purely illustratively.

The technological interactionist perspective on children's culture and identity formation processes was the fundamental framework to do so. Childhood is hereby understood as a correlation between the individuals freedom to act within and among the possibilities offered by our society. The technological interactionist perspective on technology uses was applied corresponding to this notion. By means of an introduction, a historical overview of the mobile phone introduced us to the staggering rise and proliferation of mobile telephony within children's culture and its perceived liberating effect. Usage of the mobile phone showed to have a conflicting character, on the one hand it promised control over destiny and on the other it could cause loss over control over life.

Subsequently, $play_1$ was analyzed. The introduction to a new set of playful symbolic expressions were shown to be originated under both (shifting levels of) parental, peer and gadget pressure. When introduced to a mobile phone by parents, children perceived a feeling of independence and freedom. However, parents also expected immediate rational communicational behavior out of their children, thereby implicitly pressuring their children to conform to their expectations. Besides parental pressure, peer pressure introduces children to a new world of expression. Hereby ownership of a 'gadgetical' device can provide mobile phone users with a feeling of uniqueness within peer settings.

The mobile phone user's exploration of this new space of possible action was studied under $play_2$. Children's plasticity towards these new possibilities were looked into by describing possible technomic, sociotechnic and ideotechnic roles. The technomic probing of the mobile phone was showed to be gender-specific, boys strived for hard mastery, while girls aspired usage of the mobile phone as a medium for social expression. However the heterogynous character of explorative mobile phone use, sociotechnically, the mobile phone proved to offer possibilities to expand networks and to improve reputations. This ideotechnic inventory showed that children's

playful exploration can be understood as neither endless or infinite, but as structured via (fluctuating) explorative stages.

The application of explorative findings were observed under the label of play₃. Children's culture seems to have embraced phoneusing, its characterization showed to fit youngsters' mobile telephone usage. By doing so we could gain insight into observed cool appropriation, cool empowerment, cool secrecy, cool connection and cool trust behavior. Under cool appropriation personalization and phoneusing skills were analyzed. Playful empowerment was subsequently looked into. The mobile phone was experienced as a provider of freedom and methods for social. Cool secrecy pointed at the hidden character of mobile telephone communication and it's linked notion of independence and freedom. Possibilities to firmly unite with circles of peers were discussed under cool connection. Concluding, cool trust laid bare the mutual trust necessary for engaging in mobile telephone communication.

Via a meso-level technological interactionism exploration of playful identity formation through the proliferation of the mobile phone within children's culture, it became clear that play₁, play₂ and play₃ can only be grasped when intermingled. De Mul's approach towards the mobile phone, via a PhD research project which chiefly focuses on play₁, should therefore be altered and broadened in order to come to a better understanding of the bigger (total) picture of the mobile phone as a constitutive element within (the playful construction of identity and) childhood.

Future research on this relatively new phenomenon is must needed however, for instance to illustrate and elaborate on the array of different perspectives that have been addressed in this article. In its core, significant work must be put into understanding elements of playful identity formation, to come to a better understanding of the mere conceptual philosophical framework. More concretely, it is for instance also necessary to investigate the mobile phone within children's non-western culture. Also, findings such as the recognizing of the mobile phone as a status symbol need to be addressed as well, when investigating other age-groups. As children showed to be early-adopters, it's interesting to see how adults and elderly people cope with the new technology. Thereby it would be intriguing to investigate whether these groups of people likewise playfully construct their identity.

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10.1 Figures

1. Figure 1. “The percentage of children who own a mobile phone in different age groups”.

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4. Figure 4. “Superdudes.nl user Xiemmm speaking about his pimp telephone.”

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