Postal presence: A case study of mobile customisation and gender in Melbourne

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Introduction

The dissemination and appropriation of global technologies is far from homogeneous. This is clearly evident in the status and significance of the mobile phone in contemporary culture. Indeed, the mobile phone is symbolic of globalisation and the increasing inclination towards mobility and so-called immediacy. In first world contexts, a line can be drawn between two types of public performance—one is the romantic flâneur that laments the demise of an imagined public, the other is what Robert Luke calls the "phoneur" in which the phone is almost surgically attached to the individual (Luke cited in Morley 2003). The former expresses great disdain when a mobile phone "goes off" in their public space, the latter desperately clutches their phone. However, most of us live somewhere in between the flâneur and phoneur modes. The mobile phone is not just a functional technology; it is a maker of certain kinds of status and cultural capital. What polyphonic ringtone or customised phone strap we attach connects us to a process of identification and identity formation.

As a vehicle arguably furthering the collapse between work and leisure distinctions, the mobile phone is a clear extension of what Raymond Williams dubbed "mobile privatisation" (1974) whereby one can be physically and geographically still within the home and yet, simultaneously be electronically transported to other places.[1] With the mo-

1. Mobile privatization needs to be contextualised in terms of specific socio-economic and cultural factors. For example, in the case of Japan, Kenichi Fujimoto (2005) has argued for a distinctively Japanese form of mobile privatisation in the concept of '*nagara* mobilism' ('*nagara*' inferring 'while-doing-something-else'). *Nagara* mobilism is a key

bile phone, the domestic comes out of the private sphere and deploys itself, with much contestation, in the so-called public sphere. But, like domesticated technologies (Morley 2003), this process is far from simple and ever completed, as each specific site locates and adapts to this cultural artefact. We domesticate domesticating technologies (i.e. TV, phone) as much as they domesticate us. If domesticating technologies are underscored by new modes of "mobile privatisation" then they are fraught with feelings of paradox, contradiction and duplicity of what it means to experience and imagine "home" (Bell 2005). I argue that the humanising "personalising" force of customisation (i.e. making the technology "friendly") that is particularly apparent within customisation is an important phenomenon attendant to the rise of mediated communication whereby the user demonstrates agency subject to local nuances. Customisation operates on both personal and social levels as integral to the appropriation of a technology into a cultural artefact. Customisation is, just as any implementation of a domestic technology, never complete and always on-going (Ling 2004; Silverstone and Haddon 1996). Domestication may have moved out of the home—whilst notions of place are subject to flows and mobility—but we may find that the local and the domestic are only a phone call away…

The dynamic interaction between globalisation and practices of locality are no more apparent than in the debates surrounding mobile telephony and its dissemination and appropriation at the level of the local. This is particularly evident in the Asia-Pacific region that houses the four technological tigers and yet bears witness to diverse penetration rates and "user" performance. Mobile telephony is both everywhere and nowhere; or, to take Heidegger's state of "undistance" (*entfernen*), the abolishment of distance also, paradoxically, destroys nearness (Arnold 2003a: 236). As Michael Arnold notes in his study on mobile telephony in Melbourne, the phenomenology of the mobile phone is best understood as "janus-faced" whereby seemingly paradoxical concepts and practices are continuously at play—being here and there, local and global, private and yet public, free and yet always on a leash (Arnold 2003a). In Melbourne we can see the dominance of SMSing and burgeoning MMSing is best encapsulated by continuing a tradition founded in the role of the postcard; a type of postal presence/presents metaphor that highlights changing relations between visual and textual, public and private, individual and social formations.[2]

characteristic of Japanese mobile phone (*keitai*) practices and the associated politics of co-presence.

2. See Esther Milne's (2004) study on the endurance of telepresent forms of "post" from 18th and 19th century letter writing genres such as visiting cards to contemporary email practices. Milne, like Margaret Morse (1998), highlights that intimacy has always involved processes of mediation. The "exchange" notion—underscoring postcard tradi-

Locating the mobile—The role of customisation and SMSing/MMSing practices in Melbourne

In Melbourne, one is confronted by images of being mobile. From the plethora of printed matter deploying intertextual means through such TV programs as *Australian Idol* and *Big Brother* to the cacophony of mobile ads and chat services flooding late night TV and weekly magazines and daily newspapers, one could be mistaken for thinking that everyone is "connected". On the streets one is greeted by the autistic behaviour of one-side conversations as people walk, bike, catch public transport and drive. Supermarkets and video stores are fecund with mobile users asking their invisible friend/partner about appropriate choices. In particular, the popularity of SMSing—and now MMSing—is undeniable. Is it just the case of a severe case of what Ling dubs as "micro-coordinating" of everyday practices whereby being "anywhere" and "everywhere"—demonstrating the underlying logic of co-presence (Morse 1998) in new forms of mobile privatisation—is the mantra for these urbanities?

As part of the Asia-Pacific, with obvious influences from techno-savvy places such as Tokyo and Seoul but without the full implementation of 3G (third generation) technologies, the usage of mobile phones in Melbourne is marked by various differences in terms of class, age, gender and ethnicity. In a multicultural city such as Melbourne, Sanrio (makers of the Japanese white cat, *Hello Kitty*) products can easily be found among the various forms of customisation.[3] In such a place, customising one's mobile phones (or the choice not to) is a decisive form of representation—both as an extension of one's identity and as a form of identification to certain forms of cultural capital. From quirky polyphonic ringtones, to mobiles dressed to the nines in a cornucopia of cute Asian merchandise, Melbourne is an example of a city with ubiquitous mobile consumption and customisation. Whilst not as conspicuous as places such as Tokyo, Melbourne mobile users are customising—from cute dolls hanging from the device to dialect-specific phonetic SMSing—to demonstrate the importance of customisation to signify types of lifestyle. However, much of the customising—as noted by the sample survey—tended towards internal forms from screensavers to particularising SMS.[4] As Gerard Goggin notes in his

tions—is pertinent to discussion of mobile telephonic practices replicating earlier social rituals (Taylor and Harper 2002).

3. Brian McVeigh has defined this Japanese form of cute (*kawaii*) character customisation as "technocute" whereby users appropriate *kawaii* characters to make "warm" or "friendly" the coldness of new technology (2000).

4. This internalised mode of customisation is just as much part of an exchange and participation in forms of cultural capital and individualisation as the "external" customi-

study of the usage of SMS (Goggin 2004), and as seen in the work of Anita Wilhelm, Marc Davis (and the Garage Cinema Research) Nancy Van House (2004), and Mizuko Ito and Daisuke Okabe (2003) on MMSing (particularly the function of camera phones), this is an burgeoning area of expression that needs to be understood as not just a remediated (composition of older and new technologies, Bolter and Grusin 1999) form of expression and exchange but also a media/genre in its own right.

In the case of Melbourne, the second largest city in Australia and notably constituted by a multicultural demographic, the mobile phone is a dominant form of everyday practice. The practices and experiences of mobile telephony are divergent and ubiquitous, marked by different factors such as ethnicity, age, gender, class and sexuality. As a city part of the Asia-Pacific region, one can find many appropriations of customisation practices (such as cute characters and other fashion accessories) for the phone. The streets are filled with a cacophony of polyphonic ringtones as users traverse the city with phone in hand. With 3G technologies set to sweep the Australian market, dominant practices such as SMS will be challenged by the burgeoning of content-driven applications and services—most notably the relatively new emerging mobile gaming market. Due to economic restraints, the cheaper options of SMSing (rather than MMSing) and instant messaging are the main forms of usage, marked notably by gendered inflections. But whilst cost may have been the initial main motivation for opting for SMS over voice calling, now it is a dominant form of expression that is preferred by many Melbournians as the chosen form of intimacy and co-presence.

With four main service providers—Telstra (the largest), Hutchison (Orange, 3), Optus and Vodafone—all vying for the Australian market, there seems innumerable amounts of choice.[5] However, this choice is underscored by what James Fergusson (a specialist in new market trends in the Asia-Pacific region working for the third largest information research company in the world, TNS global) sees as a market still in need of service providers offering content and applications to niche demographics. In an interview with Fergusson, I inquired about the role of customisation—that is the hanging of characters from the phone, face plates, personalised screensavers and ringtones—and whether it was just a fleeting trend (Hjorth 2004). He believed that

sation. This shift towards internal customisation could be seen as part of the general trend towards 3G mobile technologies whereby presence migrates from a noun to a verb (Joichi Ito 2005) and context becomes pivotal in negotiating content.

5. Australia has many service providers apart from the aforementioned—such as AAPT and Virgin mobile to name but a few. For details on the various providers see: http://toolkit.gov.au/mobile.csp.html (19 January 2005).

users' customisation of phones was a way of completing what the service providers had overlooked—the need for specific applications for particular niche groups. This is particularly the case in the introduction of 3G mobile phones such as Hutchison's 3 whereby the phones are crammed with applications not necessarily relevant for users. Fergusson believed Hutchison 3's hybridisation of 2G and 3G technologies—the first example of 3G in Australia—has resulted in much confusion on the behalf of consumers as to what exactly constitutes "3G" technology and whether it has any relevance in facilitating everyday practices.

Telstra (once known as Telecom when it was a Government service and had a market monopoly) was set to adopt the "Blackberry" phone—successful in UK and US markets—but the launch subsequently fell through. Now Telstra has signed with NTT DoCoMo to take up *i-mode*, six years after it was implemented in Japan in 1999.[6] According to Telstra press releases, it is believed that one in twenty Australians will have i-mode in the next 3 years. Already established 3G content service providers include Optus Zoo and Vodafone Live. According to Fergusson, for 3G technologies to take off in Australia, the carriers and device manufacturers need to consider niche applications for corresponding demographics. Fergusson argues that currently 3G devices available in Australia are gimmicky—jam-packed with various applications most users will only use once or twice. The applications that are important, Fergusson notes, are those that make a difference to people's lives. Fergusson sees that the relatively poor picture quality and resolution of MMS applications and camera phones has seen them mainly adopted by youth markets rather than work-related users. Unlike markets such as Japan and South Korea where government infrastructure and financial support helped to fully implement 3G technologies, Australia's take-up has been much slower, uneven and cautious.

Pixoleur—The art of being mobile: A case study of a sample group

Much of the advertising for mobile phones in Australia—from service providers such as Optus, 3, Vodafone and Telstra to device manufacturers such as Sony Ericsson, Nokia, Siemens, Motorola, LG and Samsung—reiterates the importance of being connected both literally and

6. For critiques of DoCoMo's i-mode as not "mobile with Internet" but, rather, mimicking the closed architecture of Minitel see Harmeet Sawhney (2004). Also see the comprehensive anthology by Mizuko Ito et al. (2005) that focuses on the social and cultural dimensions of the rise of Japanese mobile media—"*keitai* IT revolution"—from pagers to contemporary configurations of i-mode.

metaphorically. In the advertising media on TV and in printed matter we see the significance of the phone as a status symbol (corresponding with types of cultural capital) and increasingly this identification is marked by the choices offered to users for customising and personalising the device. More and more, different device providers are selling types of identity and status—from prestigious Nokia designer phones (such as models 7260 and 7280) to Motorola's fun play on the currency of Japanese popular culture in Australia. Once a market dominated by Nokia, the Australian market is now awash with various brands and associated consumer stereotypes. Of the twenty people surveyed, only three had Nokia phones; the rest of the respondents had brands such as Siemens, LG and Samsung.

In a sample survey I conducted in Melbourne in November 2004 with twenty students, administrators and staff—both male and female ranging from 20-50 years old—from the University of Melbourne I found that the role of the mobile phone as a predominately personal device was deeply interwoven in attempts to articulate modes of intimacy whilst trying to negotiate co-presence. Isolating the survey to one university entailed that only certain types of cultural capital (tastes and values) were occupative with all respondents being attached to tertiary education. Of the twenty surveyed I conducted follow-up in-depth interviews with six users to gain a sense of the symbolic role of the phone and the gendered function of customisation. I asked users about the role of the mobile phone in their everyday rituals and social relations and how customisation operated to personalise the device.

When asked to provide adjectives to describe their relationships to mobile phones, some of the responses were: easy-going, casual, evolving, distanced, frustrating, resistant, obsessive, attentive, fun, easy, takes over my life, happy, sad and pathetic. Many saw the mobile phone as beneficial in maintaining relationships, especially in terms of being available anytime for friends and organising meetings. One respondent was ambivalent towards the medium, acknowledging its ability to establish intimacy with new people but creating distance with already existing friends.

Whilst still not immersed in the world of 3G mobility, Melbourne has a burgeoning industry for convergent mobile media aimed at socialising—especially to establish new relationships through the non-evasive mode of mobile net telephony. Dating services, chat lines and after-production customising services (downloading specialised ringtones and screensaver animations) fill the TV airwaves (after 10pm) and tabloid newspapers and magazines. When people are not actually customising and SMSing or MMSing, they are perpetually bombarded by a plethora of usage possibilities. However, in the sample survey, very few respondents used such services, arguing that mobiles were more important in reinforcing already existing relations rather than

establishing new relationships. In terms of customising services such as downloading screensavers, only two out of twenty had used the downloading services; many preferred to either use their own images (mostly taken by camera phones) or choose from the images provided with the phone. Images used included places visited, Asian animations of cute characters, Betty Boop, the user's name and a flower. Some had tried the downloading services but had found them unsatisfying, too costly and often frustrating to use. Whereas most (70 percent) selected ringtones and screensavers supplied with the phone, many claimed that they would do their own customisation if the phone had the capabilities (i.e. camera phone, Bluetooth).

Gender featured predominantly in discussions about customisation, with female respondents tending to be more decisive and opinionated about their selections, often downloading different screensavers and ringtones rather than using the generic (and unsatisfying) ones supplied by the manufacturer. In turn, female respondents spoke about the ways in which people judged others by the types of mobile phone used and such features as ringtones. Key features for ringtones were factors such as being 'distinctive but not annoying'. As one female respondent noted:

"I have chosen Betty Boop (screensaver, face plate and doll hanging from the phone) because she is a bit of a role model of mine—she operates like a type of avatar or alter ego. There are some physical similarities such as we both have black curly hair. My ringtone is one of the Nokia ringtones supplied with the phone. It was chosen because it suits another alter ego of mine—so I felt it correspond with that identity; it's like playing dress-ups."

When asked about whether she saw customisation as an extension of the user's personality/identity she replied, 'I think so because I think you get judged by your ringtone when you are in public. When you hear someone's ringtone that is the same as yours you expect to find your doppelganger… It (customising) does become a fashion thing that you do get judged on'.

Here we are reminded of the work by poststructuralist Judith Butler on the performative elements of gender—that is, rather than gender being innate it is continuously practiced and informed by social and self-regulatory practices (Butler 1990). The performative element of customisation—from customising the phone to customising text messages—was acknowledged by most of the female respondents. Whilst both male and female respondents predominantly used the mobile phone to contact friends (rather than family or work colleagues), many of the female respondents preferred SMS as a means of communication with over half of the female respondents preferring SMSing—more than 80 percent compared to 20 percent preferring voice calling. Both

male and female respondents claimed that at least 80 percent of their friends had mobiles; the only respondent (female) who did not SMS used her mobile to mainly contact family and only 10 percent of her friends had mobiles.

It would be easy to surmise that the rationale for using SMSing over voice calling and MMSing would be the cost factor; and whilst this was acknowledged, it was not the only reason. One male respondent stated, 'Most of my communication is SMS because it is cheaper. But I don't like telephone conversations; I think they are often misleading—there is not enough eye contact or body language to determine what they are really saying. So hence I prefer SMSing.' The same respondent noted a difference in his frequency of contact with the acquisition of a mobile only one year ago. He noted, 'probably in a space of a week I keep in contact with just over a dozen people. It's very important—particularly with people I am close to—that I can communicate with them immediately when necessary. The mobile does reinforce relationships. I would take calls/messages from people at 2am; it is very unlikely that I would with the landline.'

For one female respondent, SMSing was a new form of expression that she saw as an 'art form'.[7] In combining the spoken with the written, she viewed SMS as a very particular mode of communication that was assuring and not confronting (as is face-to-face). She stated:

"I see texting as a new form of expression; it's not necessarily destroying (English language) but a borrowing and reappropriation—not the same as. It has a lot to do with compression, speed, and efficiency. The main form of writing I do is texting; I do see it as an art form. I enjoy making a funny message; and I appreciate receiving ones where the sender has put in time and thought by personalising and individualising it... A text message is like a book, each sentence can be compressed to become a chapter... I spend time editing texts... Often the initial original message is quite different from the one I end up sending; for example, if I am sending a long text message that goes over into two messages I will edit into one message. This is not because of the cost but more about the flow of the message; often it gets sent as two separate messages that hinders the message and its intentions. Recently I got a message from someone who sent six messages in a row; they were obviously familiar with texting! She wasn't concise, it was literally as if she were talking!"

Here the respondent identifies the role of customisation, especially inside the phone through modes such as SMS, to signify a type of cultural capital, performativity and self-presentation. As the respondent described her process creating an SMS, there was nothing immediate about it. The editing and regulatory process was, as she stated, not just

7. See Gerard Goggin's (2004) discussion of SMS as a new emerging—and yet remediated—genre.

a matter of cost. Rather, it was about a type of conversion into a different genre utilising the language (vernacular) of the user. It was about flow and individualisation, not just efficiency and speed. Like all media and genres, SMS comes with often unspoken conventions and etiquette marked by cultural and social capital. As the female respondent conveys the story of her friend's long-winded messages—who overlooked the medium's convention of word compression and conservation—we can see the importance of acknowledging and adapting the conventions (such as compression and the politics of co-presence) in the experience or, to borrow from Marshall McLuhan, "massaging" of the medium (1964). Here, the medium's message/massage is a type of hybridising of phonetics, vernacular, spoken and visual that was identified by many of the surveyed female users. When the above female respondent was asked about whether SMS was in the vein of a type of hallmark genre—whereby the generic and the personal is negotiated—she answered, 'yes, it is a compressed form of writing and it does make you revalue words. Although it can be instant, it can also be very deliberate and premeditated.' There goes the cliché about co-present immediacy and mobile phones… well, in this case, at least!

Another female respondent spoke of the gender divide in terms of male users opting towards predictive text and a more direct conveying of data rather than as an expressive form of communication. Often certain terms were used between specific people to create a type of intimacy in the text that would be lost on the outsider. One male respondent played with the predictive function that converted his name "brian" as "asian"; he now uses "asian" as his sign name with specific friends. Another female respondent commented:

"I'm not big on smiling faces; it's too generic. You want people to read the text like you would hear it—incorporating both the written and the spoken. When I read a text I read it in their voice. I try to make it a bit more personalised. Sometimes I put the generic kiss thing; I like when people make strange faces or symbols. I don't like when people use predictive text; I never use that (predictive text tends to choose wrongly)... For example, "go" becomes "in". I notice with my male texters there tends to a usage of "in" when I think they mean, "go". I don't like it because I like people's personalities to come across, to express their sense of humour."

The so-called divide between those that have mobiles and those that do not was broached with the respondents, but female respondents believed there was a difference and male respondents did not. The gendering of attitudes was also noted in the respondent's comments about mobile etiquette in public. Whilst James Fergusson believed that Australia was relatively unfazed by public mobile performance in comparison to the US or Japan, the female respondents felt otherwise. Although both male and female respondents tended not to put the phone

on silent mode they tended to lower the volume of the ringtone, and if they answered a call they spoke briefly and quietly. Of the respondents, only a handful of female respondents put their mobile on silent mode and many did not initiate phone calls unless it was imperative. The key experience identified by most respondents was a type of "self-consciousness". One female respondent stated:

"I think the correct mobile etiquette in public is brief and discrete. I use silence mode more when I am in private, rather than public, places. I usually don't have my phone on a loud ring mainly out of respect for other people's personal spaces. I don't think it should be banned; you should just act as you would normally—not talking loudly and making it brief... I don't think it is frowned upon to use your mobile in public but people do seem weary and self-conscious to use mobiles in public because—unless you're an extrovert—it is quite a self-conscious process as everyone can hear what you are saying and find out quite a bit about you (i.e. where you are going, where you have been)."

The gendering of mobile behaviour was noted by most respondents, however most noted the influence of age and class in the equation. One male respondent stated, 'I don't know the difference. It seems as if women take more phone calls and text messages than men. That's something I have just noticed but I don't know if it's true.' Another female respondent stated:

"I do think gender has a role. I could agree with the myth that males use more voice calls and tend to be more to the point in their text messaging. I suppose young females text a lot, males tend to be more familiar with the games on the phone, whilst females don't care about the games. If I were to generalise I would say that males use the calling phone function more often, females send and receive more SMS. However, I do think it is subjective—it depends on the person."

The respondents noted the function of the mobile as a type of souvenir, caching of moments or electronic diary, similar to what the postcard once signified. Many stored SMS and MMS that had personal significance. One female respondent stated:

"Yes, I do use my mobile as a form of electronic diary. But it's not quite stable because you can delete it; I know it's not that safe but because it is easy—it's with me all the time. I do use it as a way of remembering events and certain messages people have sent to me are kept for sentimental reasons. But I am aware that they could all just go very quickly and I wouldn't have a way of retrieving them."

Another respondent, this time male, stated that he kept specific messages from each one of his close pool of frequent contacts. He said, 'I don't remember people's phone numbers anymore. I have no idea, no recognition of people's numbers anymore. If I don't have my mobile

with me I couldn't communicate with anyone via a landline.' When asked how he determines which messages to save and which to delete he responded, 'If someone has text me about a dozen times I will always communicate with them via one of the saved SMS. I always use one to reply to, not necessarily the most recent one. I choose carefully which ones I save and which ones I delete.'

Issues such as age, class and ethnicity underscored the role of gender to define modes of mobile telephony in Melbourne. In this sample study I have sought to uncover some of the ways mobile customisation is signifying different forms of self-presentation, representation and identification. Within the dominance of SMS as the main form of communicating, we can see the ways in which individuals are personalising and customising the mode. As aptly identified by one respondent, SMS can be seen as a type of art form—a remediated media borrowing from the likes of postcards (especially in terms of MMS) and yet having its own conventions. Whilst SMS may be immediate it can also be deliberate and premeditated; to use the metaphor discussed by one respondent, if SMS were a book, each sentence would be a chapter. As noted by many of the respondents, SMS and MMS are not about a simple form of information dissemination or organising (Ling's "micro-coordination", 2004), most (predominantly the female) respondents commented on the importance of SMS/MMS to be reassuring, to be about a type of co-presence not unlike the postcard's 'wish you were here' status. However, in the context of SMS phonetic textuality, 'wish you were hear' might be more apt!

Conclusion—Wish you were hear

The Asia-Pacific region is marked by diverse penetration rates and modes of mobile telephony performativity (Bell 2004; Katz and Aakhus 2002; Plant 2001). In areas of high penetration-rates one can notice exponentially large usage of after-production customisation. In 3G centres such as Tokyo and Seoul one notices a cornucopia of mobile phone fashioning inside and outside the phone as users attempt to personalise the device—operating as both a site for self-identification and cultural capital for on lookers. In contrast to such data-savvy locations, 3G is yet to be fully implemented into Melbournians everyday life. No respondents had 3G mobile phones—only two out of twenty respondents in the survey had camera phones (although many stated that they were "upgrading" soon to camera phones) and only six had part MMS functions.

Whilst from the outset, Melbournians seem less embroiled in the cute character customisation frenzy as seen in such places as Tokyo and Taipei, however this is not to say that less customisation is occurring. Rather, much of the personalising and customising of mobile

phones is through the (internalised) genre and conventions of SMSing. The play with the vernacular, colloquial and dialect through phonetic textuality is as vast as the city is multicultural. Here, through implicit modes of SMS customising individuals can denote types of similarities and differences that extend beyond gender, class, age and ethnic stereotypes. Having said that, the fact that females do SMS more than males (and do so in more inventive ways) speaks about a type of relationship to orality and communication that extends the mobile phone from purely a functional technology to a tool for sociality and a discourse for remediated forms of expression. Welcome to the art of "being hear"…

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