5

Mobile Phones as Fashion Statements: The Co-creation of Mobile Communication's Public Meaning

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5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores public mobile communication technology as front-stage and back-stage phenomena. We explore the design aesthetics of the mobile phone from the standpoint of its commercial origins and public consumption, emphasizing fashion and identity in the co-creation and consumption of mobile communication technology. The mobile phone in this context is analyzed as both a physical icon and an item of decorative display related to fashion and design. We begin by noting how the early telephone, because it enabled people to communicate efficiently over distance, served as a status symbol. We then highlight the role of fashion and display to show how the symbolic meaning of telecommunication has been evolving. In terms of fashion, we look at the way in which fashion and style have been used to promote the mobile phone by industry. In terms of display, we look at the collateral promotion of other products by reference to the mobile phone and body–technology relationship. Finally, we examine co-constructions that extend beyond the narrow, utilitarian purposes for which the mobile phone was originally designed to show how novel links are forged to deeper psychological and existential processes. That is, the mobile phone is strongly connected with ingrained human perceptions of distance, power, status and identity.

A few words concerning formal theory may be in order. Among the most prominent and influential sub-perspectives of the functionalist school are the "domestication" and "uses and gratifications" perspectives. They have been frequently employed by earlier researchers on mobile

communication (e.g. Leung and Wei, 1999, 2000; Haddon, 2003; Wei and Lo, 2003). Indeed, they continue to exert substantial influence despite some criticism of their logical clarity. In this chapter, by contrast, we emphasize the expressive and symbolic dimensions of technology. These dimensions seem critical in understanding the reception and use of mobile communication technology. Indeed, in some cases they may actually supersede utilitarian motives in their importance (Pedersen, 2005). Certainly this view has been argued by Fortunati and her associates generally (Fortunati et al., 2003) and more narrowly in what has been dubbed the Apparatgeist theoretical perspective (Katz and Aakhus, 2002). From the expressive perspective, many mobile phone users are engaging in the same impulse that led to cosmetics and jewelry at civilization's dawn. The mobile phone thus becomes a device that is not merely a tool but as well a miniature aesthetic statement about its owner. In an edited volume, *Machines that Become Us: the Social Context of Personal Communication* (Katz, 2003), the sense of "machines becoming us" was used to capture the idea that the mobile phone could be our personal miniature representative. It was also used in the sense of "becoming" as in complementing and enhancing one's appearance. Fashion, Simmel (1957 [1904]) argued, encourages modification and adoption to individual needs. As Veblen (1934 [1899]) and others have pointed out, wearing of fashionable attire enables individuals to separate themselves from their family, to develop a more distinct identity and a more unique sense of self, and yet to maintain an affiliation with the prestigious aggregate (Fortunati, 1993; Lobet-Maris, 2003). Individuals can use fashion to tailor the social response they desire (Steele, 1997). Fashion then is a form of communication as well as an indicator of status and power. Taken together, these various senses of the word "becoming," can be thought of as links between technologies of communication and aesthetic traditions, which in turn are part of the cultural and hierarchy-producing processes.

5.2 Communication over Distance as a Status Marker

Until family recently, communication over great distance was in all societies extraordinarily expensive if not downright impossible. Only supernatural beings or an occasional shaman were considered capable of such feats. Greek mythology did not even attribute this power to most of its pantheon. Against this backdrop, it is little wonder that those with access to modern communication innovations become imbued with status. This was true of the early telephone itself when it was first deployed more than 100 years ago. It is also true for the early era of the mobile phone. The devices were described in terms that suggested they were a "rich man's toy" (Marvin, 1987; Katz, 1999), which also alludes to the gendered as well as socio-economic aspects of early adopters.

From another perspective, though, early adopters were of interest since they were also the cutting edge showing the rest of society what was likely to become an everyday technology. As is true for many other technologies, such as air conditioning, automobiles and computers, early adopters were in a sense living in the near future – they were already experiencing, to a greater or lesser extent, what life would be like for subsequent adopters. Early adopters were by their experiences and behavior also helping shape and drive the future. How they chose to use the technology and how they re-configured their own interactional repertoires in light of their experiences and choices were also creating (and sometimes foreclosing) norms and practices that would be available eventually to the bulk of subsequent users.

Since communication over distance and mobility were seen as status symbols, it might be expected that possession of the power of mobile communication technology would be something seen as desirable. This would be especially the case when the technology bestowed upon the possessor: (1) the ability to reach others at the convenience of the possessor and (2) that aid or assistance could be summoned by the possessor. To the extent both of these conditions obtain, maximally "anywhere, anytime," the status of the possessor increases. The rationale for this claim is detailed in Katz (1999), but may be summarized here in terms accreting in the hands of the possessor power and security. Both of these attributes are highly desirable both psychologically and interpersonally [as argued by Maslow (1954) among many others].

5.3 Telephone as Aesthetic Expression

Although powers of distant communication and control of tools of communication technology are status symbols, it is also the case that the telephone itself has developed within a context of the machine age. In particular, certain aesthetic ideas, such as Modernism, have become incorporated the telephone as part of its design thesis. In fact, the phone is often portrayed and understood as part of the future (advanced, streamlined) world. Modernism [see Everdell (1997) for a review of Modernism], which became increasingly powerful throughout the first two-thirds of the 20th century, represents a sharp break with the adherence to traditional design motifs and modalities. That is, it wanted to replace tradition, which was most typically drawn from Classical and Medieval worlds. This old world would be replaced by a new one that emphasized spare stylization, streamlining and a design ethos dictating that form should follow function, and nothing more.

When Modernism as an aesthetic idea was formulated at the end of the 19th century, the telephone was a significant element in considerations of how the industrial and scientific ages were affecting perceptions of

history, art and experience. The power of instantaneous command, which the telephone conferred, often figured in the leitmotif of the modern perspective. Early telephones initially embodied the fancy embroidery of the Victorian and Edwardian eras – not only was this fanciness a leitmotif of the era, but it also worked to disguise the proletarian principles of a machine in what should have been an elegant and tasteful setting such as one's home or office (Marvin, 1986). However, like all other sophisticated 20th and 21st century technological objects, it was captured (and largely dominated) in terms of its design by the Modernist impulse.

An extreme form of Modernism, known as Futurism, influenced many perceptions of the telephone and its meaning. As an ideological stance, Futurism emphasized speed, streamlining and rapid motion. Excessively embroidered artifacts and handicraft products were to be dispensed with and, if possible, destroyed. Futurism's prime exponent was Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944), who propounded his views in a 1909 manifesto, *Le Futurisme*. His credo included that "the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed." Futurism and related movements made themselves quickly felt through much of the industrialized world, and remain starkly visible and timely, and is especially reflected in the design of telecommunication technology.

It is worth recalling that the base of Modernism and Futurism is based on the idea of the machine. This dialectic leads to tension between humans (with thoughts and feelings) and machine (perceived as having power and endurance). As one scholar has written, "Futurism was the first attempt in the 20th century to reinvent life as it was being transfixed by new technologies and conceive of a new race in the form of machine-extended man" (Carey, 1993). There is indeed a long-standing theme in intellectual life of robots merging with humans (Katz, 2003) (a trend that appears a step closer to realization when one considers the headset wearing mobile phone user increasingly prevalent on city streets).

Nowadays, of course, the telephone has become mobile – it is taken out of our "back stage" areas of the home to the "front stage" of public life, where many onlookers can observe the self-presentation of others. The design of the mobile phone, lead by the Modernist impulse, has become part of its possessor's fashion and personal expression. In the following sections, we examine how the industry has been marketing this device as a modernistic item to the public, as well as how the public perceives it, focusing on the role of fashion and display.

5.4 Futuristic and Modern: Industry's Presentation of the Mobile Phone to the Public

Much of the public presentation of the mobile phone has been carefully crafted. This, obviously, is also typical of other commercialized products

(Himmelstein, 1994). In this section, we seek to add to the understanding of the themes that have been highlighted in the design of the mobile phone and in mobile phone ad campaigns.

When a usable mobile phone burst upon the scene in the late 1980s, it appeared to the public as a highly futuristic and sophisticated technology. It was an emblem of the rich and important, though not yet the famous. Interestingly, it appears that designers of the early Motorola StarTac clamshell mobile phone were inspired by the communicator of the TV series *Star Trek*; certainly the name chosen for the line, "StarTac", reinforces this belief when juxtaposed with the name "Start Trek" (Bormanis, undated).

In terms of handsets themselves, we believe that manufacturers from the outset were aware that they wanted to have an explicit futuristic and high-status design stance for the mobile telephone. Although this cannot be demonstrated directly because the archives of the design processes of mobile phone manufacturers remain proprietary, certainly there is scattered evidence to support this view. For instance, there have been various public discussions by leaders of design teams. Thus, Alastair Curtis, director of a Nokia design group, has said, "Design has been one of the key elements in the products from Day 1" (Swartz, 2003). Frank Nuovo, Nokia's chief designer, indicated that his design ethos is based on elegant simplicity, relying on high-end accessories as inspiration (Hafner, 1999). Of a specific handset device – Motorola's StarTac, the wildly popular clamshell design of the 1990s – a Motorola designer said, "We wanted a phone that would be visible enough to express something about you … It started as a couture product" (Oehmke, 1999).

A modern, futuristic design impulse has been strongly articulated in the advertising campaigns for mobile communication, according to several scholarly studies of mobile phone ads. For instance, based on semiotic analysis, Pajnik and Lesjak-Tušek (2002) suggest that the image of what they define interchangeably as "Modernity" and "Western values" are important themes in mobile phone ads deployed in Slovenia. In another study on China, conducted by Zhang and Harwood (2004), it appears that household appliances, including telephones and computers, are often associated with "modern" in advertising themes. According to Zhang and Harwood, although the TV advertising of these new technologies also employs traditional cultural values [e.g. family (and societal identity)] in conjunction with "modern" theme, it is noteworthy that "modernity" was one of the most frequently used value themes in recent Chinese TV advertising. In an analysis of the famous "1984" Macintosh advertisement, Stein (2002) argues that the ad employed the "freedom" and "revolution" rhetoric, which set a tone of later advertising for other new technologies such as for Microsoft and mobile phones.

These studies underscore the fact that the mobile is presented to the public via this medium as an embodiment of youth, modernism and

futurism. They indicate a consistent presence of "modern", "cutting-edge" and "futuristic" themes in the way sophisticated consumer technologies are represented to various national cultures. Were these themes lacking in appeal to consumers, it is implausible that marketers would continue to spend lavishly on them. In other words, modernity resonates in the minds of the consumer and therefore sells. What continues to be sold is what is continued to be designed. Contrarily, despite ad blitzes, if something does not catch on with the public, it disappears. (This situation is exemplified by aggressively merchandized products which, despite being highly promoted, have failed. Examples include "new Coca-Cola" and the thick diet beverage "Metrical".) Indeed, a significant part of the argument is that the ads do not consistently trick or force people into thinking they want something as much as they do as capitalize upon latent desires or suggest new ones. However, the motive has to appeal to the consumer and serves the consumer interests. This line of reasoning is contrary to those who say that such ads are hegemonic moves by media/advertising industries to foster consumerism and certain social values. People seem to like these themes on their own.

Nonetheless, the industry has also sought to be sure that the public would understand the technology to be of high status and socially desirable. Nokia provides a good example of this process as it participates in the production of numerous Hollywood films and programs. The futuristic image was intentionally supplemented with one of status. Thus, as part of a product placement scheme, Nokia phones appeared on popular TV shows (*Beverly Hills 90210*; *Friends*) and were distributed gratis to Hollywood stars in an effort to build cachet (Oehmke,1999). Nokia paid handsomely to have a special model shown off in a James Bond film, and also in the first *The Matrix* film (which featured the Nokia 8110). Additionally, Nokia has paid for product placements in the films *Charlie's Angels* and *Minority Report* and also TV shows such as *The X-Files* and *The Sopranos* (Snellman, 2003). Said a Nokia marketing vice president, "If Tom Cruise transmits crucial evidence with his Nokia phone, many viewers may realize they need a camera phone too" (Snellman, 2003).

Nokia is not the only mobile phone manufacturer which is aware of the importance of influencing public images of the mobile phone. Observing Nokia's success, Sony Ericsson was able to displace Nokia in a subsequent Bond film, *Die Another Day*, while Samsung was the mobile phone star in the sequel *Matrix Reloaded*. For one cycle of the Emmy's, Nokia sent their newest mobile phone to all the Emmy award winners. These efforts have paid off in brand status and recognition. Interbrand, a consulting firm, says that its research shows that Nokia is the 11th most recognized brand, and that it even ranks ahead of Mercedes-Benz. Said one Interbrand official: Nokia is "selling an image, not technology … They're very good at technology, but image is the key" (Hafner, 1999).

So, up to this point, we have argued that the mobile phone has been presented to the public as a modern and image-enhancing technology. It is not only presented as modern and cutting-edge, however. As we argue in the next section, the mobile phone has also been marketed as a high-fashion item.

5.5 Fashion Imaging in Contemporary Mobile Phone Ads

The whole issue of jewelry and fashion is, of course, heavily laden with gender-specific connotations. The topic is worthy of separate treatment and we can only refer the reader to some relevant publications at this juncture (Rakow, 1992; Katz, 1999; David, 2004). However, here we can note that the active but feminine and always youthful girl is an iconic image for the promotion of mobile phones.

The emphasis on stylish design, elite status and fashion appears to have been a central part of marketing. There is no sign of the trend abating in terms of marketing mobiles as exclusive fashion and trend-setting style items. A press release of 1 July 2004 from Motorola claims that "New York City Elite Flip Over the New Motorola A630". The release bubbles on: "Staged on the rooftop of New York City's exclusive Hotel, top celebrities and style leaders were among the first to witness the unveiling of the next 'must have' mobile device from Motorola …" (Motorola, 2004).

Three recent mobile phone ads also underscore the continuing importance of fashion in the public presentation of the technology. These ads do not constitute a representative sample, but rather are chosen as illustrations; nonetheless, in our subjective judgment they are typical of the ads we have encountered.

The first photograph (Figure 5.1) is set in Budapest airport, taken in June 2004. It shows a pedestrian passing in front of a lit billboard-style ad. The ad depicts two high-fashion items: a luxury watch and a designer purse, accompanied by a Siemens phone. The equivalence is clear. As the photograph was being taken, a stylish lady, engaged with her own mobile phone, passed in front of the billboard ad and is captured in the foreground.

Another image in that emphasizes the fashion display of the mobile phone is shown in Figure 5.2. This figure includes an ad that depicts a mobile phone handset displayed literally as a piece of body jewelry. In this case the mobile phone could be interpreted as a belly-button pendant or piercing. It would certainly seem that the advertiser (in this case Motorola) is seeking to give its product an edgy and ultra-hip image consonant with current fashion. The possible appeal of body piercing as a form of risk and youthful status, which in this case is associated with mobile phone use, should not go unnoticed.

Figure 5.1 Mobile phone handset ad in Budapest airport, 2004. Source: collection of the author.
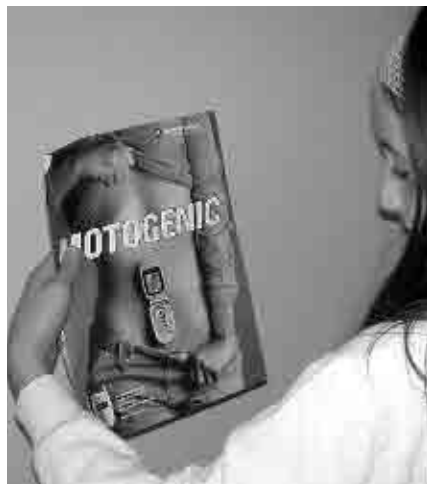

Figure 5.2 An individual examining a mobile phone handset ad, 2004.

The larger visual environment can be substantially saturated by mobile phone ads. This seems particularly true in terms of airports, as suggested previously in Figure 5.1. However, the lateral space of an airport can provide a unique environment within which to promote mobile phones. For instance, the long corridors can be used to project extended images of mobile phones as statements of fashion and lifestyle. This is depicted in Figure 5.3, taken in July 2004. It shows a series of ads in Schiphol airport (The Netherlands). The ad depicts a group of girls on a beach sun

Figure 5.3 Mobile phone network ad displayed at Schiphol airport (The Netherlands), July 2004.

bathing; they would seem to be active, hip, daring and hedonistic. The linking of their phones and bodies emphasizes the social and clique nature of a mobile-leisure lifestyle. The close collocation of the bodies suggests far greater intimacy than is generally observed in Western Europe and North America (Goffman, 1974, 1979).

Although by no means definitive evidence, nonetheless taken together these recent images provide reasonable grounds to believe that fashion and body display are important aspects in the depictions by advertisers to sell mobile phones.

Fashion remains, then, an important aspect to mobile phone design and merchandizing. Yet not all attempts lead to success. To illustrate, we can cite IBM's effort in early 2000 wherein it created a line of digital jewelry including at one point earrings containing tiny mobile phones; despite the attractiveness of the fashion jewelry, it did not function well and was abandoned (Kharif, 2002). This example suggests that consumers need more than commercially driven appeals to fashion alone to be persuaded to buy a mobile phone.

Next we turn to the reception of the mobile phone by consumers, highlighting the perceptions of users and the way they modify the technology to serve as identity objects.

5.6 Consumer Perception and Reception

How does the public perceive mobile communication technology? There is some evidence that the public does evaluate it in terms of fashion and status, i.e. in the same way that the mobile phone industry also thinks the public perceives it. (The reader is reminded that it is the case that there is a reciprocal process of negotiating meanings between an industry that is seeking to frame the technology and the public that responds to, adopts, and modifies further the technology.) The importance of fashion in the consumer mind is suggested by some indicators based on our focus group interview and some of our surveys.

In 2001, we conducted a focus group interview with college students at a US university. Most of the participants said that they did not think of the mobile phone as a fashion item at first. However, a college student from Korea said that, "For our culture, cell phone is a part of the fashion thing. Yes, especially for younger generation, it kind of tells your personality, and it tells many things." Interestingly, this statement prompted other participants to reconsider their original response, and they started talking about how young people use the mobile phone for fashion. A female participant said, "for younger generation, they don't need cell phone, because they are not in college. High school, middle school ... because I see younger kids having cell phone. I think they think it fashion." And another participant followed by saying, "It's changing. People are switching their phones ... I don't' know, I think some people are trying to be cool about it, I think."

We observed some ambivalent feeling about how to understand the mobile phone and fashion in this focus group. They sense some association between the growingly ubiquitous mobile phone around them and fashion, but the association did not seem to be so clear in their mind. There seemed to be a kind of "third-person effect" operating. So that whereas they see themselves using the mobile phone for necessity, they see others as having a style dimension to their evaluations. This suggests that the mobile phone, in young people's discourse, takes on the role of a fashion accessory that is in great demand as a status symbol. A national survey taken in 2004 of youngsters in the USA concluded that for 8–10-year-olds the mobile phone is "as much a status symbol as a communications device". (Selingo, 2004).

In 2002, we explored the relationship between the timing of the mobile phone adoption and the importance of the aesthetic dimension of the phone (Katz and Sugiyama, to be published). The results indicated that American youths who adopted mobile phones earlier were more likely to think that the style of the mobile phone would be an important factor in selecting their own mobile phone. A similar trend was found in the sample group of Japanese youths (Katz and Sugiyama, to be published). In

addition, our research showed that both US and Japanese heavy mobile phone users valued style more relative to non/light users. Moreover, Japanese heavy users even preferred style over battery life. If we consider battery life of the mobile phone as a functional aspect and style as an aesthetic aspect, our research seems to suggest that many buyers, especially early adopters and heavy users among youth, trade off functionality willingly for attractive styling. (Of course the mobile phone is not unique in this regard, since many people choose aesthetic or fashion appeal over functionality in many areas, including in their personal relationships, and even political candidate selection, but the point is that there is an affective as well as instrumental motive at work here.)

In a 2004 poll of our own, we surveyed a class of Rutgers undergraduate students about their attitudes towards mobile communication and fashion. The class was for non-technologists in the subject of information and technology and most students were about 20 years old; fortuitously, exactly 100 students (out of about 114 students attending that day) completed the survey, so percentages and number of respondents align exactly. Although, like the above surveys, the poll is not representative of all Rutgers students, it may shed some light on the relative frequency and intensity of attitudes towards mobile phone fashion. As indicated by in Figure 5.4, over half of the students agreed with the statement that "my mobile phone should look cool" and of those about half (i.e. 25) also indicated that they notice the fashionableness of the mobile phones of their friends. (The category of "agree" and "strongly agree" were collapsed for the purposes of this analysis.) In other words, about one-quarter of the
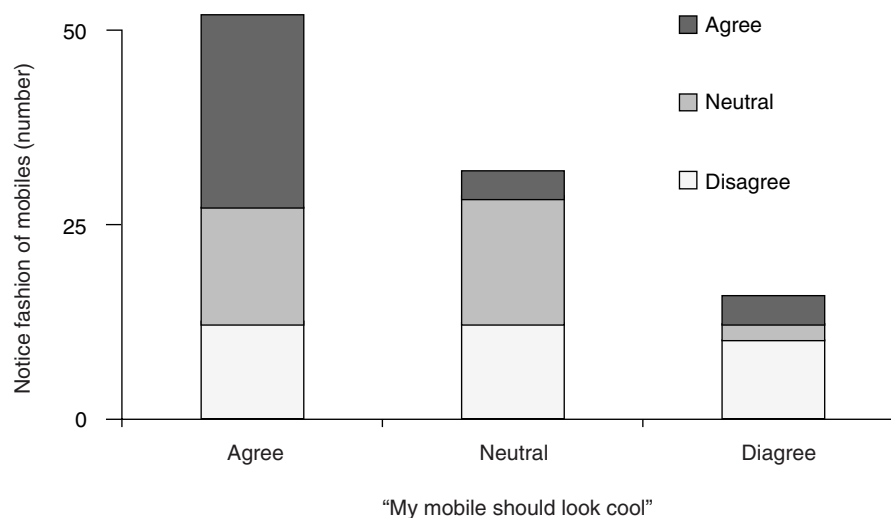

Figure 5.4 Fashion attitudes towards mobiles. *N* = 100 Rutgers students, April 2004.

students surveyed appear to be actively engaged in a fashion assessment of mobile phones. This would seem to be a striking figure, although it bears repeating that this is not a representative sample and cannot tell us to what extent, if any, the campaigns of the mobile phone industry has influence on the perception and attitudes of the students. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that there is a similarity between the way in which the industry has been promoting the mobile phone and the way in which young users perceive it. At the other end of the spectrum, however, we must mention that 10 students disagreed with the statements, apparently rejecting interest in the fashionableness of the mobile phones of both themselves and their friends. Of course, we never meant to suggest that all users view the mobile phone as a fashion or status symbols, which they clearly do not. Rather, it is the case that many do, and that this perception is important for the commercial success of companies and also the use of public space and the condition of individual lives. We turn our attention to this topic next.

5.7 Promotion of Luxury and User Enhancement

Buyers of mobile phones may be clustered into two broad categories. First are those who purchase one simply as a communication tool, claiming to care little about its appearance or symbolism. Although immensely important to the overall market, this cluster is not the focus of this chapter. Second are those who buy one in part because of the status that a design, logo or brand imparts. They are the group to which the preceding discussion concerning style is addressed. Many mobile phone adopters seek to individualize them, personalize them and integrate them into their own local cultural meaning. Within this second approach, the concept of having the device be a symbol of individuality is important. "Our primary concern is to tailor products as much to the individual as possible", according to Alastair Curtis, director of Nokia's design group. "The phone is an extension of your identity" (Swartz, 2003). People respond, often making a conscious choice of the style of their mobile phone (Ling, 2003; Oksman and Rautiainen, 2003). This process has been investigated in other domains in terms of consumerism and identity (Massaris, 1997). Just in the same way that people employ "fashion" to express their identity (e.g. Davis, 1992; Crane, 2000), they consume the mobile phone.

In order to underscore the element of prestige in a technology that is becoming omnipresent, there has been a figurative arms race towards ever more lavish mobile phones. One approach, from the London-based boutique company Vertu, has been the marketing of specially made high-end phones, which are also a form of expensive jewelry. This fashion item has a platinum casing and a sapphire crystal screen. (It is also designed so that the phone's internal technology can be easily updated.) The price is

about $26,000. It is worth noting in this context that Vertu was formed by Nokia in 2002, clearly a part of its fashion–luxury initiative. Motorola recently launched a clamshell V600 model that offers interchangeable covers studded with clear Swarovski crystals, and offers a variety of fashion handbags in which to carry its phones. Nokia's recently introduced 7200 model offers fabric covers that have analysts calling it the Louis Vuitton phone. While the emphasis on luxury is not a guarantee of success, it nonetheless shows that at least the handset manufacturers are persuaded that such an approach will appeal to an important market segment.

The phenomenon of transforming the mobile phone into high-fashion jewelry is also observable in other parts of the world. Gem-encrusted handsets have become extremely popular in China, which is experiencing rapid growth of mobile phone use. In 2000, TCL Mobile began offering diamond-studded mobile phones. TCL Mobile sold more than 12 million jeweled phones between 2001 and mid-2003 (most of which had fake gems) (Reuters Singapore, 2004).

"In Asia, phones are much more of an aspirational statement about who you are and who you want to be," Scott Durchslag, a Motorola corporate vice president said. TCL Mobile's managing director, Wan Ming Jian, asserts that in Asia, "attaching jewelry on the phone adds a cultural and spiritual dimension to the product." In further describing the popularity of jeweled phones, Mr Wan said that, "to many Chinese, precious stones symbolize esteem, good fortune, peace and love. So jeweled mobile phones are not just communication tools, they also act as lucky charms" (Reuters Singapore, 2004). This reinforces the importance of the cultural setting in considering the meaning of the mobile phone.

Although certain styles of the mobile phone are associated with high-fashion and prestigious brands, of course anything done by style leaders is subject to co-optation by the hoi polloi, thus diluting the brand's status value (which is always a challenge to fashion as Veblen noted). Nowadays it is common in department stores to see jewelry for adorning a mobile phone. (Notably, these items are offered not in the electronics section but in the jewelry section.) Street fairs too are a venue for mobile phone enhancements. As popular as these items are in the USA, they are even more so in Korea and other Asian countries.

Clearly, a growing segment of the public purchases these ready-made, futuristic-looking devices but then personalizes them. That is, they alter the appearance of the device to make it more individually meaningful and symbolic within their cultural contexts. Pasted-on photos, colored plates, dangling antenna ornaments and fake jewels are common "after-market" enhancements added by users. "With the colors, symbols, patterns and brands people choose, they are associating themselves with the meaning conveyed by them," according to Chris Conley, an assistant professor of design at the Illinois Institute of Technology (Swett, 2002).

Again, it is worthwhile reminding the reader that the mobile phone is not unique in this regard, since other consumer items are also enhanced and customized by users, including bicycles, jeans and backpacks. Still, the extent and meaningfulness of personalization, and also the substantial outlays of money and time to create the mobile enhancement culture, are potentially a worthwhile topic of investigation.

On the one hand, artisans and crafts people create their own enhancements. For example, one of our students brought from her trip to Namibia a hand-carved Sony-brand mobile phone which was purchased at an outdoor market in Namibia – it was a replica of a cell phone hand-carved from wood (and made before the Sony–Ericsson partnership, so there was no Sony branded mobile phone yet in existence). Was it a toy? Perhaps. Certainly other commercial enterprises have used the mobile phone as toy for babies and young children, promoting its "cool" image.

There is much collateral exploitation of the mobile phone from other quarters. For instance, a fast-selling fashion item in the USA among early teenaged girls is a make-up kit styled to look like a sleek, small mobile phone. It is realistic looking, and without careful examination could readily fool any casual observer. The kit is shown in Figure 5.5.

In order to use the mobile phone as enhancement of the self-image, how the mobile phone is carried and displayed becomes an issue. As a result, new opportunities are created in terms of fashion and display to carry and put mobile phones into operation. These include phone devices that flash brightly when in use to signal to ambient others that the device owner is important and/or connected enough to be talking to a distant person.

The dependence and ease of use exigencies concerning the mobile phone encourage creative solutions. Clothes and backpacks have been designed to integrate conveniently the mobile phone into what we wear. Digithongs (www.digithongs.com) offers around-the-body carrier straps and describes itself as an "innovative line of cellular phone accessories created to meet the needs of women". More massive than a thong is the "Scott eVest", which is designed to hold electronic equipment in numer-
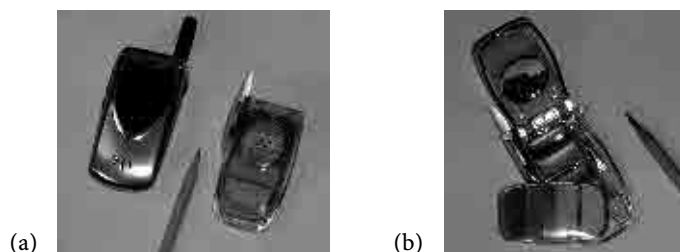

(a)   (b)

Figure 5.5 Eye-shadow makeup kit made to look like a small mobile phone, USA, May 2004. (a) Kit with Motorola V60 phone; (b) kit in open position. Source: collection of the author.

ous zip, flap and Velcro pockets. It even has additional pockets inside some of the pockets. For headphone wires there are hidden tunnels within the clothing. Another firm, Dockers, makes the "Mobile Pant" (Newman and Wendland, 2002).

As users load themselves down with more gadgets, specialized harnesses have been created. An example of one of these, which seems to combine geek and chic, is shown in Figure 5.6. One of the authors has observed more than a half-dozen of these harnesses in the New York metropolitan area. Yet despite the plentitude of clothing enhancements and accessories, many users rely on their own creativity rather than commercial products to park their phones. Indeed, as the mobile phone becomes more commonplace, users are finding ever more convenient places on the body to park their mobile devices. A rather casual approach to mobile phone placement is illustrated in Figure 5.7, which is a photograph taken on a public tram in New Orleans (USA), May 2004.

Just like other fashion items, the mobile phone has become an aesthetic object that people adopt and modify according to their sense of self and group affiliation. Like other fashion items, they use the device to project a sense of identity and self into public arenas. However, in order to perform self-presentation with the mobile phone appropriate to the particular culture or social group, users need to be keen to the cultural meanings of the mobile phone, especially in an age that some marketers have dubbed "brand-morphing." ("Brand-morphing" refers to the way in which meanings of brands change across various social or cultural groups; Kates and Goh, 2003). The data we presented here suggest that not only meanings of certain brands but also the meaning of certain mobile phone designs are

Figure 5.6 E-belt wearing customer in office supply store, May 2004. Source: collection of the author.

Figure 5.7 Example of casual display of mobile phone. Source: collection of the author.

in the process of "morphing". At least to a group of people who are conscious about the style of the mobile phone, the phone is not a mere tool for convenience, but an expression of identity (Katz and Aakhus, 2002). Interestingly, consumers of the mobile phone do not seem to be happy with merely adopting the culturally appropriated meanings presented by the industry. They themselves attempt to "morph" the meanings of the mobile phone in various creative manners. Phones with expensive jewelries or the models that appear in popular movies are not the only "fashionable" phones. Pasted-on photographs, antenna ornaments, and an "ordinary" phone displayed on the body in a certain way could also become cool and fashionable. "Mobile phone morphing" occurs both by the well-calculated strategies of the industry and by the creative mind of consumers. It also occurs by the resourceful intervention of third parties or "after-market" manufacturers. Many examples may be seen in shops and markets around the world. Among the many examples in our own collection is a mobile phone earphone/microphone combination featuring a smiling kitty reflecting cuteness reminiscent of the "Hello Kitty" phenomenon (Belson and Bremner, 2003).

So, taken as a whole, we believe the evidence is strong that the creation and consumption of mobile phones becomes a multi-party process.

However, it should be abundantly clear that the style dimension is enormously important in the way the mobile phone is understood by users and audiences alike.

5.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed the fashion forms and personalization of the image of the mobile phone. What we have sought to add with this analysis is a more precise connection between an industrial ethos (marketing a futuristic status symbol) and the popular reception and co-creation of a communication technology. Moreover, we have also sought to highlight the folk artistic aesthetic and uses of what has become an exceedingly important and socially significant device. We have shown, from a folk culture dimension, a variety of artistic endeavors to co-create a device. In this way it becomes not only a communication tool but also (depending on circumstances) a status symbol and individual value statement. It is every bit as much of a fashion statement as the choice of one's clothes. And equally as the choice of clothes could include secular as well as sacred garb, so too the "fashion" statement of a mobile phone can be used for purposes ranging from the temporal to the transcendental.

This analysis is at variance with theories of mass society, and of cultural studies of oppression, both of which traditionally tend to suggest that the consumer is a passive cow, milked by large corporations. We find instead a rich weaving of adoption, modification and embroidery.

Of course we certainly understand that the mobile phone *qua* decorative endeavor is not a universal impulse; many users just accept the mobile phone as an "off-the-shelf" item. They find the phone of neither inherent interest nor intrinsic beauty. They also refrain from use and display when others are about. However, although these types of people do exist, there also appear to be vast numbers of mobile phone users who are heavily fashion conscious. Many users invest the communication object with myriad personal decorations and also personal significance.

We do not have broad-based statistical evidence as to the prevalence and consequence of these outlooks, although we hope that these data will be forthcoming. Rather, here we have presented initial and exploratory evidence to suggest another image: consumers find an exquisite technology, which fits extremely well with their values and interests, and that they adopt in droves. Nevertheless, users are more than mere consumers. They are also co-creators. They achieve this status by, after purchase, further manipulating these devices to reflect personal tastes and to represent themselves to the outside world. As in the case of audience reception theory, mobile phone users are like audiences of various mass media texts, creating, interpreting, appropriating material, to develop meaningful, personalized and culturally appropriate new texts. As such, the technology

is present in both front-stage and back-stage social processes. The mobile phone then may be seen not only as a "necessary accessory" to the body, as Fortunati (2002, p. 58) has argued. It also becomes a communication device that reflects and embodies the user, and is used to communicate effectively with the physically present audience, passive though it may be, as much as the distant interlocutor, as ethereal as it may be.

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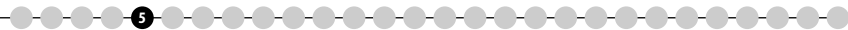
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