

The Mobile Identity:  
Social effects of mobile devices on identity formation

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Consider for a moment, a chain of cause and effect. One can say that tools of expression, such as the spoken word, gives shape to our thoughts. And in turn, since our thought patterns shape our identity, one can easily infer that expression is an essential part of identity formation. To take this a step further, if one considers the primary goal of all mobile technologies is to allow users to express themselves to others at great distances, then the conclusion can be drawn that the usage of mobile devices, in particular cell and smart phones, play a key role to identity formation. Furthermore, while the formation of identity can be affected by the feedback one receives from one's surroundings, the mobile device extends that surrounding beyond the physical experience, returning feedback from much greater distances. This indicates that mobile devices have become a keystone in changing the way users identify themselves. Not only do users express their identity through their choice of device just as they would of any other accessory, but they also articulate and find confirmation of their identity through the usage of these devices, sometimes to the point of sustaining a believable alternate ego.

One blog named Daily Mobile posted a great caricature of iPhone versus Android versus Blackberry users. (See Appendix A) In the cartoon, it showed how each phone user typically looks like, how they see themselves, and how the other brand users see them. For example, the Android user sees himself as a genius, while the iPhone user sees him as the stereotypical geek, while Blackberry users see him as a poor college pizza delivery boy. While each of these perceptions are carefully cultivated by the companies themselves (such as RIM products being positioned for business users), consumers have appropriated those brand images to identity themselves with. In

“Corporate Narratives of Information Society: Making Up the Mobile Consumer Subject” (2006), Moisander and Eriksson examines the way Nokia’s strategic narrative typecast characters.

“At a closer look, the end-users of Nokia’s products would seem to be some sort of knowledge workers or other professional actors in the fast-moving and flexible “electronic organizations” of future “global e-business”. They demand multiple mobile handsets and services that are personalized to their (firms’) precise needs.

Consumers, the customers in the domestic markets, are given a more passive role of using the evolving mobile applications for home shopping, entertainment or “infotainment”, and interpersonal communication—as well as “updating” their mobile devices every two years or so, as new models are launched in the market.”

(Moisander & Eriksson, 265)

In fact, mobile manufacturers are now selling much more devices but instead, are selling the lifestyle that goes with their product.

On a personal level, this is all the more true. Many of my friends in computer science that are pro-open source software (such as the insistence to use only Linux as the operating system) are interested only in Android devices for several reasons. Some state that it is because it is less proprietary than Apple software, while some others indicate that they prefer Android because it is easier to “root”. However, at the end of the day, many will admit that it is because they agree with the value in which Android represents – supporting the independent, “small guy” innovative culture.. Meanwhile, my workplace, TELUS, insists only on using BlackBerry because it supports corporate

enterprise use much better while many of my coworkers that are not developers often insist on having a personal iPhone as well. Finally, when I recently attained a Windows 7 phone assigned to me by work, many of my friends that are Android users made joking comments about my identity as a traitor to my developer identity and only forgive me when I explain the phone was not my choice. Like the cloths I wear, the mobile device I carry seems to have become symbolic of my identity, whether I choose to or not.

Despite the phone's symbolic nature, the device's features themselves also facilitate identify formation in a completely different way. First however, it is important to note that part of identity formation is through social relation, not only as people are affected by external dialogue with others, but also in that articulation of that identity helps to solidify it. While traditionally, this is applicable only to interactions in the immediate surroundings or in an extended virtual environment within the physical confines of one's own home, this has changed drastically with mobile technology. By enabling people to connect with others further than their immediate environment while on the go, mobile technologies, in particular the smart phone devices, have blurred the line between virtual and physical environments, increasing the amount of social influence one receives at any given moment.

In *Smart Mobs: The next social revolution* (2002), Howard Rheingold explores how mobile device capabilities such as texting influence "the level of the individual personality, where cognitive and identity-related issues emerge". (Rheingold, p.24) Referring to Erving Goffman's concept of identity construction by using public performances, Rheingold refers to the usage of SMS as a public performance where

“the choice of who to send it to and how to respond, are used by young people today as the raw material for identity and group-shaping activities”. (Rheingold, 25) Extending Rheingold’s SMS example, users now can also access their social networks via mobile applications such as Facebook and Twitter, communicating with their wider network at any time. For example, a user shopping alone can now take a photo of the item they are interested in, post it to their social network and get instantaneous feedback not only from their real life network, but also from their online or virtual network. Many of my friends and coworkers have “disconnect anxiety”, that is they feel a need to be connected to others at all times through their mobile device. The need to constantly check Facebook or constantly tweet is common within our generation. All of this constant dialogue augments the dialogue happening in a user’s immediate surrounding and impacts identity formation in much the same way SMS does.

Moreover, not only is the immediate feedback from user’s social network affecting identity, but the very ability to broadcast information about oneself is itself an additional trait of identity formation. In “The Consumer as Foucauldian ‘Object of Knowledge’”, Ashlee Humphreys applies Foucault’s prisoner’s always-being-watch paradigm to Amazon.com’s consumers as reviewers. The culture of paranoia, or fear of always being watched, has now turned into the culture of narcissist where users want to be watched because it is an acknowledgement of the user’s identity or even simply, existence. Besides Amazon.com, the same could be said of other social networking services such as status updates and wall posts in Facebook, tweets in Twitter about one’s action or checking-in of Foursquare. All of this is an expression of one’s identity in one shape or form. As discussed by Rheingold in reference to Goffman’s work,

“...people improvise public performances as a way of composing an identity in the presenter’s own mind as well as others” (Rheingold, 25). Therefore, this expression helps the individual confirm the identity that has been constructed from environmental influences. For example, Twitter is a part of establishing a personal brand that I use often especially during conferences, partly to share information, but also to establish myself as a source of information in subjects of social media and web design. Through Twitter and other similar social media sites such as Quora, I seek to emphasize on my identity as a designer and a geek, putting on one of Goffman’s “public performances”.

These public performances are often expressions of the individual’s predominant identity but more than often, it is the establishment of an alternate ego. In fact, many of my friends as well as popular bloggers in the Vancouver community choose to have more than one account in social media sites, one for their business identity and another for personal identity. While both identities may be extension of the same person, the two may be so distinctively different that no one realizes it is the same person. Others take this even further by doing it on purpose, creating fictional identities. Adriana de Souza e Silva & Daniel M. Sutko writes about hybrid reality games that uses mobile devices and the effects on the player’s identity in “Playing Life and Living Play: How Hybrid Reality Games Reframe Space, Play, and the Ordinary” (2008). Players have their own avatars and merge daily to-do tasks with the games in a variety of ways and in the paper, Silva and Sutko emphasize on the play between anonymity and surveillance that allow the development of an alternate reality.

“In the tension between anonymity and surveillance, the player can find both the freedom to play with one’s identity and safety in knowing that others are also

observing. In [Day of Figurines, one of the hybrid reality games], through anonymity, players are afforded the opportunity to explore other identities (while keeping their own “safe”), and through surveillance in ILF, players can feel comfortable knowing that they are not alone in the city space.”(Silva & Sutko, 456)

While I have not personally played a hybrid reality game, it is not very different than other rpgs that are primarily played on computers. For example, for several years, I had an alternate ego within Second Life, completed with an occupation as a DJ in a club. My alternate ego completed with her own relationships, were maintained not only within Second Life, but also through Google talk, accessible to me through my smart phone anywhere, anytime. This allowed my character to maintain relationships with people around the world despite different time zones, even as I am interacting with my friends in real life.

This presents an interesting phenomenon as in many ways I started to feel closer to my alternate ego and her relationships more than those that I interact with on a daily basis face to face. The formation of identity became dependant on a mobile device and the interactions on that device always had the potential to replace the day-to-day face – to-face interactions. In fact, one of my closest friend who has had drastic effects on the development my identity, is someone I keep in touch with through mobile technology much more frequently than actually having in-person interactions despite both of us living in the same city. The danger of replacing meaningful face-to-face social interactivity with mobile connections is always present and is a fine balance that must be consciously maintained. To identify oneself by relationships that never had any

tangible form can easily become an identity of isolation, not grounded in reality. This was something I began to discover during my time as my alternate ego in Second Life and more so, when I would be having dinner with friends, but would be on my phone, chatting with my character's friends in instant messengers. While the formation of identity has been influenced greatly not only by the carrying of the device itself, but by providing mobility to online relationships, it is important to remain vigilant that it does not become the only channel of identity formation.

In conclusion, mobile devices have definitely provided new facets that factor into identity formation through providing additional dimensions of communication with communities that are not usually accessible by users. Not only is there a new accessory users can use as symbolic of their identity, but these new dimensions have created new platforms in which identities can be shaped and confirmed through dialogue at great distances. The chain of cause and effect now has a new medium in which to take place.



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Appendix A

The image shows stereotypes of various smart phone users and how they see each other. While the caricatures are done in jest, the cartoon depicts accurately the kinds of identities users are adopting to when they choose their smart phones.



Figure A1: Comparison of stereotypical smart phone users, how they see themselves and each other