

Mo-Bonding: Beyond Communication

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Abstract- New and emerging modes of mobile phone communication building on voice and text such as photographs, email, internet, social networks and geo-tagging are emphasising the increasing complexity, combinations of communication and issues of mode selection within extended conversations. Such choice and selection appears to be related to both emotional and situational context and be part of a much larger identity and relationship 'play'. This in turns begs the question whether the significance of these activities goes beyond individual items of communication to the 'core' of relationships, bonds or ties and may be better described as something 'beyond' communication- in this paper the author suggests and defines the term 'Mo-Bonding' as being a useful descriptor of this phenomena.

The growth in person to person communication has over the last two decades multiplied exponentially. Much has been made of how this expansion links to the prevalence and awe inspiring growth of the now seemingly ubiquitous mobile phone and over the last decade or so the parallel development of the internet. This has not occurred in some kind of vacuum, rather it is part of a social change that has been gathering pace over several decades, changes well described as 'distances between places and people again seem to be dramatically reducing..time and space are dematerialising, as people, machines, images, information, power, money , ideas are all, we might say 'on the move'¹ as such they represent the increasing speed, mobility and complexity of modern life. This complexity is often linked to technological change and progress. In part mobile communication is seen as a technological response to social change, in part it is itself a catalyst that helps bring about increasing mobility, in other words it is both cause and effect. After all it is not so long ago that the idea of instant communication across vast distances was the province of gods, today the 'hoi polloi of the twenty-first century enjoy ease of communication far beyond the ken of the nineteenth centuries richest potentate'². Indeed it appears the more we can communicate the more we will and do communicate. If we just take the mobile phone as an example, already as we move through the first decade of this century the potential for communication from this single device continues to grow, first we saw text added to voice, then photographs and now email and internet access. The communication 'possibilities' increase for each of us as individuals as we communicate one to one and increasingly with mobile access to social networks one to many, some times combined with geo-tagging and the sharing and 'mashing' of both given and user generated content. Such 'possibilities' provide us with the ability to build rich tapestries of communication, using several modes of contact in a single extended conversation, indeed as we explore in this paper the conscious selection of mode can say much about the emotional involvement or content of the specific communication. Of course accessing and mobilising these possibilities requires the exercise of choice, how do we choose when to speak, when to text or indeed send a picture? Such choice is, as I will demonstrate, related to the nature of bond or relationship, content and context of the

sender and recipient. Using and controlling this rich fabric of 'opportunity' in a variety of social relationships and settings requires its own special learned or developed behaviours in so doing I will suggest that to talk in terms of behaviours merely in terms of 'communication', whilst previously appropriate does not now begin to capture the richness and complexity of current mobile device centric behaviours. Instead as a term to capture this complexity I will introduce and develop the concept of 'Mo-Bonding', this will be used to describe the manner and purpose for which we create complex multi mode conversations and engagements to build and sustain our closest relationships and in turn create our own self-identities.

Over the course of this paper and by recourse to new empirical research and the earlier work of other commentators I will explore how individuals 'Mo-Bond' with peer to peer groups, inter-family and inter-generational groups, additionally I will demonstrate how bonding goes beyond more limited notions of communication, is heavily orientated towards sharing and reciprocity and places the mobile device at the centre of the overlap between virtual and direct physical bonds and relationships. As such 'Mo-Bonding' is more than a term for the way in which we establish and maintain relationships, rather it is the active way in which we form and sustain our individual identities. Figure 1 provides a graphic illustration of this, it shows the centrality of family and close friends to the identity and life of a 12 year old female³ and how they are surrounded by a complex 'spaghetti' of communication modes and forms all

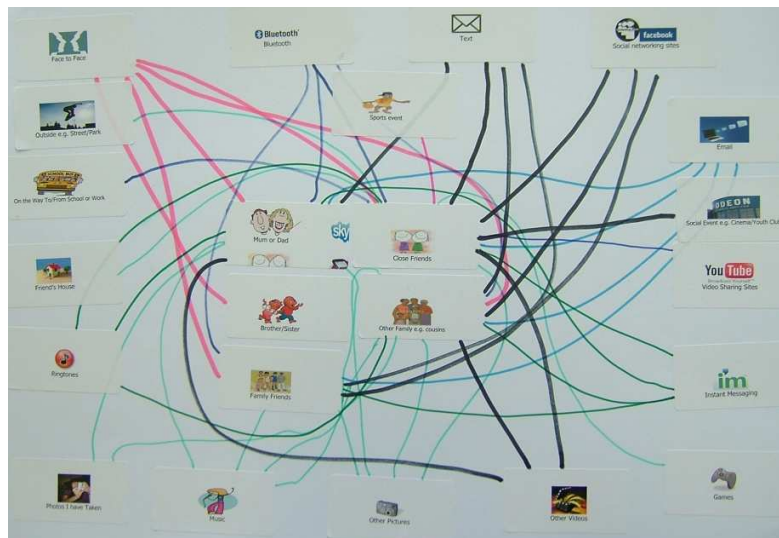


Figure 1

accessed via her mobile device, in a variety of locations. The illustration combines direct person to person contact with, more broadcast modes such as Facebook and sharing opportunities such as photographs, music and video. Figure 2 illustrates a similar complex profile but this time for a 22 year

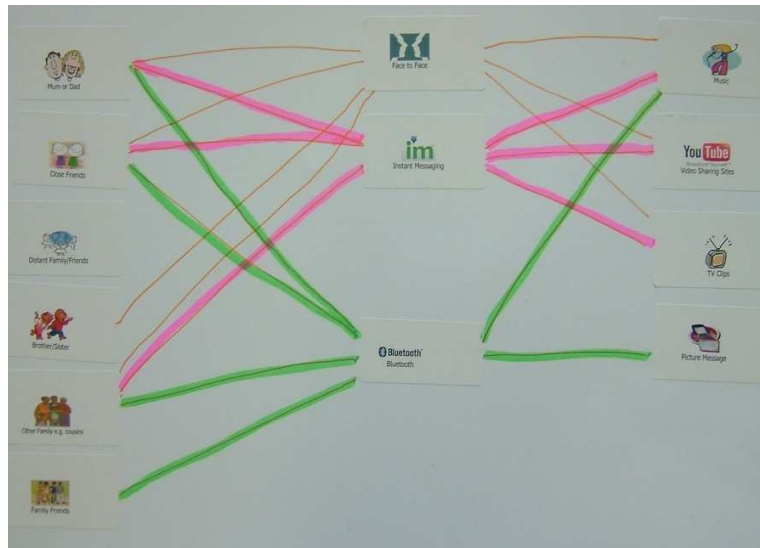


Figure 2

old female. Of interest here is the contrast between mobile phone use for both voice and text and the more limited use of landlines, email and instant messaging. Similar pictures for several other individuals illustrated that each tapestry of bonding is personal to the individual and does itself represent a clear form of ‘user creation’, in other words whilst currently user generated content receives much public and media attention it should be seen as just part of the way in which individuals shape technologies, modes of contact, media and content to represent the individual. So whilst ‘Mo-Bonding’ has a set of generalisable characteristics, each individual’s tapestry of bonding is unique to themselves, as indeed is their individual identity.

Whilst this paper is primarily concerned with an exploration of the behaviours that constitute ‘Mo-Bonding’, as these behaviours derive their importance from the ‘play’ of identity creation and representation it is important to briefly explore identity creation in this context. Many studies have shown that much communication and on-line interaction is closely correlated to identity performance (Turkle, 1995; Markham,1998;Sunden,2003:Thomas,2004),indeed they have argued that the new opportunities afforded through new technologies, modes and contents have created not just new identity performances but at some levels ‘a new kind of person’ ⁴. These ‘plays’ represent opportunities rising from the rapid growth in alternative communication opportunities/technologies to ‘face to face’ contact, however one must be careful of an overly crude interpretation of this as in fact much non- ‘face to face’ mediated contact is built upon sustaining or even deepening relationships that have a very strong ‘face to face’ availability, indeed there is a considerable body of research that demonstrates that the heaviest communication contact relates to daily or at least frequent physical proximity, the data interpreted in this paper builds upon this view. A second alternative position sees such identity plays as more socially rooted, changes in economic, political and social order having both global and local impact have created the desire to create and maintain new kinds of social networks ⁵, this requires both the development of communication tools and probably more significantly new social identities; identities that are more accurately defined by lifestyle, media consumption and affinity spaces than by the more

traditional markers of race, class, gender and place.⁶ In either case the link and opportunities afforded by technologies and multi-modal communication for identity creation and performance are well established. Again implicit in both lines is the notion that there is an actual or imagined audience that prompts us to think about what we wish to show.⁷ Identity performance, then, inevitably involves a sense of audience: an audience to whom one is presenting a particular narrative (or narratives) of the self.⁸ In this context Slater⁹ distinguishes between “self-presentation” and “self-representation”, self presentation being how we present ourselves without reflection or intention in the moment; self-representation entails some reflection or intentionality. Much of what we are discussing in this paper contains notions of intentionality, although it should be borne in mind that a photograph taken by another and for example posted on a website does not necessarily possess this intentionality (at least for the subject), we are as one would say ‘caught off guard’. However behind this is the more complex ‘affordabilities’ of particular technologies and the modes of contact they make available. The identities that are performed are of course limited during any performance by the modal environment ie email, text voice etc and the nature of relationship (familiarity of affinity) to the other or others. Although choices are available they are constrained by the affordances of a particular medium and the social conventions that emerge around that particular form of communication¹⁰. Here the continuing and mutating power of the mobile phone is well exemplified as it combines several differing communication modes, text, voice, pictures, email or virtual social networks etc in one place, located on the person, with their differing ‘conventions’ in one ‘ever present’ device, as such it allows the individual to construct identity using differing forms of modal manner working in support of one another, this notion of marrying content, mode and convention to build complex fabrics is the essence of ‘Mo-Bonding’. Key to this is, as Wellman suggests, the person rather than the place becomes the locus of connectivity, ‘with the internet and the mobile phone, messages come to people, not the other way round. Individuals are connected by their phones, but their phone is not tied to a place and its environment (such as family or office).¹¹ So ‘to a certain extent this communication has been abstracted from the constraints of physical space-people can be reached anytime, anyplace’¹² indeed all becomes ‘permeated with communicative relationships which transcend system boundaries’¹³, as such identity becomes entwined with availability, participation and memory or storage; identity changes (as new memories are introduced and old memories fade away), but the persistence of memory allows us to reconcile old and new identities and the fact different people may have different memories about the same person leads to the concept of presentations discussed earlier¹⁴. Of course this identity ‘play’ takes place within the context of relationship building and sustaining, in other words through bonding with varying degrees of intensity or ‘tightness’. Here, following Ainsworth (1989)¹⁵ we may define social bonding as a tie between two or more individuals that is relatively stable over time and across contexts, a highly organised and dynamic memory structure that produces a relatively stable affinity for another individual¹⁶. As can be seen ‘Mo-Bonding’ speaks directly to context, memory and the ability to demonstrate intensity or importance through conscious mode selection.

“Sometimes I text my mum because, just in case when I’m out I’m telling her when I’m getting back” (female, 12), *“you can communicate with grandchildren. If I send a text you might well answer”* (female 77)¹⁷, the first of these quotations demonstrates the use of text as update, as a form of reassurance and expectation management strategy. In the second quotation the grandparent had consciously acquired

texting skills; this was seen as the most acceptable way of increasing her contact with her grandchildren, to have repeatedly personally voice telephoned to their mobiles would have been considered intrusive by the child and embarrassing for the grandparent. Whilst different they both represent person to person close inter family, inter generational relationships. In contrast when talking about sharing photographs on-line and the use of social networking sites the following two adolescents are referring to more general relationships with friends *“to show our friends I think...its like an on-line scrap book I think cos we all sort of comment”* (female 17), and *“Facebook, its more for social networking and contacting people, you know just keeping up to date”* (male 17). Both represent differing forms of bonds; both are important for the ‘play’ of identity within relationships. The quality of these relationship ties or bonds has usually been assessed through the strength of such ties¹⁸; these are normally associated with a combination of factors such as perceived closeness, intimacy and trust. Weaker ties are therefore evinced in more casual relationships and in sparser exchanges.¹⁹ The mobile phone allows the individual to consistently make choices as to the content, context and form of interaction, so supporting a spread of relationships/bonds from the weak to the intense.

To examine some practical examples of ‘Mo-Bonding’ we will explore so recent data. The following data is drawn from two surveys each of approximately 100 qualitative and 1000 quantitative respondents (Mobile Access, 2008, Youth Futures, 2008) undertaken in the UK. As we will demonstrate increasingly most relationships are supported via multi-mode ‘Mo-Bonding’, these are personal and vary from individual to individual although it is possible to determine some overall general patterns. As examples we will examine just two relationship typologies, inter-generational within families and closer friends or peer to peer groups.

Inter-generation within families

If we examine intergenerational relationships between parents over 45 and children under 25 years of age the data clearly demonstrates the continuing importance of voice contact with 85% of the under 25 sample rating voice contact to their parents as the most important use of voice calls, this was fully reciprocated by the parent group with 81% of parents over 45 (this was their highest single usage overall including all mobile modes of contact for non-business use) placing voice calls to children as the prime use of voice contact. Of these calls for children the prime reason for calling was to catch up, to update on an activity or simply to chat about something they had been doing *“you know am not sure what I say sometimes, just to chat, bring them up to date, suppose just to hear mums voice, you know”* (female, 18). Interestingly parents over 45 saw the call as more about making and changing arrangements with catching up playing a secondary role *“at times I think we sort ourselves out better over the phone than when we’re together, stupid really but that’s the way it is”* (male 45). We found an altogether lower level

of communication between parents under 45 with young children; parents in this age group ranking voice calls only 4th behind calls to friends, other family and their own parents (a similar ranking is in play for texts but text is given slightly more importance, see later). This should not be taken as mobile communication not being important rather that in overall percentage terms the ages of the younger children leads to far reduced traffic.

The importance of the parent child relationship to parents over 45 is well demonstrated by their use of texts, 80% rank texting to children as their most important destination for text, very similar to the data for voice, the parent child relationship is completely plural moving between text and voice seamlessly. For children, whilst texting to parents remains important it drops to second in ranking behind friends (indeed text to friends account for the single highest ranking and percentage, ranked first with 90%); nonetheless text forms a vital part of maintaining close bonds. Both groups agree that the primary use of text is 'catching up' indicating that texts are playing a far from functional role, although it appears likely that many of the contacts are similar in nature to the 'update' quotation earlier in the paper. Voice or text is selected based on habitually formed patterns of inter-person contact and dependent upon the emotional or subject complexity of the contact *"if I was just letting them know something, like where I am then it would be a text, if it was a bit more special perhaps voice, although sometimes I'd rather do things by text anyway"* (male 19). What we do see clearly is 'reciprocity' of contact, a text from one generation is mirrored by a return text and likewise with voice calls. Indeed this mirrors overall usage with high voice or text users receiving similar high volumes; for most of us the more we communicated outwards the more we receive inwards.

Whilst voice and text forms the vast majority of inter-generational mobile based contacts this tells only part of the story. There is a rapid growth in the use of photograph exchange, virtual social networks, instant messaging and chat, all building towards the creation of the complex bonding tapestries discussed earlier. If we take for example social networks; *"yes my mum's one of my friends on Facebook...before I knew it my Aunty was on there and all my cousins..I'm a fairly standard Facebook user, you know, a few funny profile pictures but I don't think there is anything on there that I wouldn't want my mum to see"* (Female 28). Interestingly of the under 25 sample only 9% used social networks to keep in regular touch with parents, compared with 81% as a means to keep in touch with friends. However from the older generations perspective what is becoming evident is that as parents 'learn' where their children can be found ie on social networks, they adapt their behavior to adopt this mode of contact, over 50% of the over 45 parents group used social networks at some time to talk to their children. There is an obvious mismatch between the two numbers, however this is probably explained by considering perceived importance, to the young person social networks have more importance and are far more regularly used for contacting friends, whilst in the case of the parent group social network contact still has something of a 'special' feel attached to it. This move is particularly interesting as it represents a positive 'reaching out' on the part of the older generation, a desire to maintain and continually mirror emergent communication opportunities, in this manner it broadly follows the development of texting. Likewise the exchange of photographs demonstrates a similar profile. The use of photographs can be seen as firstly one of personal chronicling, a form of memory construction: people taking mundane images of their daily lives both for themselves and others. Secondly as

communication, some events focusing primarily on content while others more on connection²⁰ The mobile phone is very much the means to 'spontaneously record and communicate experience'²¹ many of the images are recorded to be directly shared either via MMS or increasingly on social sites such as Flickr or often within the family via PC storage or dedicated internet sites. Sharing experience represents a key element of maintaining both weaker and close bonds. Sharing images are increasingly key to keeping up in one another's lives. Therefore whilst across the three generational groups studied sharing with friends was ranked first in all groups, sharing with children was ranked equal first in the over 45 parents group (60%) and sharing with parents second (49%) in the under 25 group *"you send them a picture of something you're doing, it's always fun to see what they say about it, you have to be a bit careful sometimes though"* (Male 21) and *"I know mum likes to know what I'm doing, make sure I'm having a good time, she loves photo's"* (Female 18). In this way a form of 'distant closeness' is expressed, keeping others informed about oneself. Beyond the recording and sharing of image are issues of historical recording and editorship. To a significant extent all pictures recorded and shared are edited in as much as the individual has made a conscious choice to record and share a given event. However particularly within the family and between generations there can be a very strong emphasis on storing family history photographs often with the older generation having responsibility for maintaining and ordering the family 'history', *"well my husband looks after that, he sorts them out, he's become really good at it"* (Female 49).

The examples above are far from exhaustive but do give an indication of the increasingly multi-modal nature by which we build bonds, or specifically 'Mo-Bond' within the family and between generations. Importantly we see the way in which 'aptness of mode'²², *"yes... parents phone and text, Grandma is phone, school friends text, home friends text, if I need to speak to them I'll ring them"* (Male 17), is selected to create a fit between what is represented and the audience. We also see clearly demonstrated how older members of families feel the need to enter the 'space' or modes of younger members in order to ensure continuing relationship bonding, it would appear likely that as new modal opportunities present themselves we will continually see this move between generations, a disruption, such as text or virtual social networks followed by a period of consolidation and gradual population by older generations, at first to maintain existing close bonded relationships and over time to become useful in building and sustaining broad, less coupled relationships.

Peer to Peer groups

The importance of peer groups or friends is easily illustrated when one considers that in our survey each of the three groups under 25s, 26-45 and 45 plus were asked to rank each of mobile voice, text, photograph and social networking by importance for communication to friends, parents, children, other family and communication outside family or friends groups, of the possible 12 first rankings 8 were given to friends. In the case of the under 25s three of the possible first rankings are given to friends, the fourth being voice calls to parents. Over 35% of the under 25 group contacted their main friends groups each day. In the 25-45s all the first rankings are given to friends, only in the 46 plus group do we see a significant difference with voice and text to children ranked first, other family (the extended family)

ranked first for virtual social networking and photographs ranked first equally between friends and family. Just as the importance of immediate family is clearly emphasised to the 46plus group, the central importance of friends or peer groups to the 26-45 group is equally clear (indeed ranked second for this group in all cases is other family ie the extended family rather than parents or children). For both the under 25s and the 26-45 groups text (90% and 85% respectively) is the single most important mode of contact. However the way in which these groups mix their modes to friends is illustrated by the relatively small differences in importance between text (respectively 90% and 85%), voice (respectively 85% and 81%), social networks (respectively 82% and 64%) and photographs (respectively 61% and 74%). From the total sample with internet access 25% used their mobile phone for personal email access at least once a week and many on a daily basis, often leading to very personal usage patterns *"not phone calls actually...the IPod about 20%, I would say surfing the net maybe 40%, emails 20% and the rest is mapping because I'm always out and about"* (Male 36). Complex tapestries of contact and representation are therefore created, including both contents and communication *"to show our friends I think...it's like an online scrap book I think cos we all sort of comment"* (Female 15). Modes are constantly changed and interleaved to support differing situations and intensity of relationships, for instance when talking about social networks comments such as *"s'pose you don't have to have an actual conversation and there's no awkward silence; you can just ask them if they're alright and they can just answer"* (Female 15) are typical but compare with *"yes I have very strong views of myself and about things, if I feel strongly about something I'll tend to say it, put it across, not sure I would do this in other places"* (Female 23) which illustrates the opportunities to develop more emotionally charged positions but without the risk of direct confrontation, the mode makes the situation manageable, it can remove the emotional tariff of face to face conversation, but in turn may build dependence upon the mode *"yeah because on MSN there's no embarrassment, say whatever you want and it's not face to face so it becomes quite difficult to say stuff to some ones face"* (Female 16).

Bonding, particularly in the context of friends emphasises availability, to not be available or participating can challenge identity and group status *"if you lose you mobile phone you kind'a just don't exist, it gets really hard to know what's going on"* (Male 23) in other words to break the bonds. Such availability requires constant vigilance and connectivity *"normally on the move I am checking things, checking my Facebook...checking my MySpace"* (Female 21), it is not sufficient just to be able to receive and send, there appears to be a near constant awareness of the actions, contacts and contents of others. Such constant multi-mode connectivity, irrespective of individual location is both created by and afforded to one device, the mobile phone, hence 'Mo-Bonding'. Recent increased abilities to change modes from 'one to one' to 'one to many' communication, further extends this need for availability and connection with 17% of the under 25 group using a chat forum/programme from their mobile phones at least once a week. Similar is the growth of sites such as twitter *"4 or 5 years ago I probably would have just sent to a text to 10 names in my phone book...whereas on Twitter I can say this where I'm going to go, see you there"* (Male 26), as such we see constantly evolving complexity in modes and combinations of modes of relationship organisation and maintenance. The sharing mode of bonding appears to be growing in importance, for weaker bonds the sharing of content in more 'broadcast' mode such as public social networks may form the key mode of staying in touch, for deeper, stronger bonds this will be interleaved with a variety of specific person to person contacts, communications and sharing opportunities. 50% of

all the under 35s claimed that the ability to share contents, both self created and 'given' via their mobile phone was of significant importance to keeping in touch with others *"if people have said 'oh, that would be a nice photo', with two button clicks you can email it to them...you can say oh I'll just email it to you now..." (Male 24)*. Of the total sample 20% connected their mobile phones in some form or another, Bluetooth, cable etc, to another device, of these 60% did so to actively share content with others. Increasingly the direct connection to sites via the internet represents key sharing and storing opportunities, indeed much such sharing activity also takes the form of storage or recording, bonding through common experience or shared memory. These on-line accounts create shared 'micro-stories' that reinforce relationships and provide important historical anchors of stability or reference points that chart the progress of relationships. As explicit 'postings' they also clearly act as broadcast 'self-representations' (as discussed earlier) of the individual and more recently via mo-blogging and geo-tagging of their actual movements. Our empirical study demonstrated a small but significant minority of individuals, primarily in the age range 18-35 beginning to diary and record their movement through space and broadcast these to their virtual social networks, geo-tagging in our examples was primarily used to assign an individual's current location to photographs which in turn were often assigned to maps and then posted to a social site *"you can click and it automatically uploads to my Flickr...it geo-tags it so you can see where I walk"* (Male 42). Some of the more advanced users were able to broadcast their movements to large audiences by means of linking several applications together *"I Jaiku'd, then Qiked.. which alerts Twitter, so immediately 300 people were aware of what I was doing. I uploaded to video to my blog within 20 minutes"* (Male 26). Often these 'broadcast' communications were accompanied by an intense number of more directed text, voice and email communications to friends taken to form a closer inner group.

Conclusion

Whilst many commentators have referred to both the communicative power and self representational characteristics of the mobile phone, in the light of new services and research they may not now be fully accounting for the 'bonding' phenomena. This paper sketches out a territory for further research and questions If, given the availability of new services accessed via mobile phones, it is not time to re-define the complex centrality of their role. With access to very recent empirical research, that demonstrates the increasing complexity of mobile phones in relationship building, the author characterises the use of the device and related services as 'Mo-Bonding'. 'Mo-Bonding' emphasises how the increasingly multi-modal opportunities for self expression and availability to and of others through the mobile phone facilitate the 'personalisation' of the very fabric of communication (the ultimate user generated experience!), it explains how content, representation and mode choice are personally and situational combined to create and sustain relationships of differing bond strengths. 'Mo-Bonding' centers mobility and communication about the person but emphasises the increasing complexity of communicative modes and how they allow users to create complex fabrics or tapestries. These, by increasingly seamlessly moving between 'broadcast' or storage and highly individualised person to person contact, combine directed communication with opportunities for experience sharing and recording, re-

remembering the individual, in so doing they emphasis the unique characteristics of the mobile phone for the creation of personal bonds.

¹ Global Complexities, J. Urry, 2003, p.2

² Perpetual Contact, Ed Katz and Aakhaus, xxi

³ Youth Futures, Social Futures Observatory, 2008

⁴ Hello World:travels in virtuality, Thomas,2004

⁵ Modernity and Self Identity:self and society in the late modern age, Giddons,1991

⁶ Multimodal Discourse:the modes and media of contemporary communication, Kress & Van Leeuwen,2001

⁷ VolatileBodies:towards a corporeal feminism, Grosz, 1994

⁸ Identity, Social Networks and Online Communications, Merchant 2006

⁹ Domestic Photography and Digital Culture, Slater, 1995

¹⁰ A Sign of the Times: looking critically at popular digital writing, Merchant,2006

¹¹ Connected Lives:the project, Wellman, Hogan, Berg et al, 2005

¹² Exploring the Implications for Social identity of the New Sociology of the Mobile Phone, Hulme & Truch,2004

¹³ Towards a Sociological Theory of the Mobile Phone, Geser,2003

¹⁴ Confidence, Trust and Identity, Cofte,2007

¹⁵ Attachment Beyond Infancy, Ainsworth,1989

¹⁶ Selective Investment Theory:recasting the Functional Significance of Close Relationships, S.Brown & M,Brown, 2006

¹⁷ Mobile Access, Centre for Study of Media Technology and Culture, 2008

¹⁸ Measuring tie Strength, Marsden & Campbell,1984

¹⁹ The Quality of Online and offline Relationships: The Role of Multiplexity and Duration of Social relationships, Mesch &Talmund,2006

²⁰ Distance Closeness: Cameraphones and Public Image Sharing, Van House, 2006

²¹ Mobile Access, Centre for Study of Media, Technology and Culture,2007

²² Gains and Losses: New forms of texts and knowledge, Kress, 2005

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