

The Construction of the Mobile Experience: the Role of Advertising Campaigns in the Appropriation of Mobile Phone Technologies

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Introduction: Advertising Discourse and Domestication Processes

The current approach to the social uses of the mobile phone tends to emphasize their private nature, restricting the configuration of their shared image to those meanings performed in personal and group interaction rituals. The use of the idea of domestication is a good example of this prevalence given to the role of social private actors in the appropriation of the mobile phone. Domestication originally referred to the process of socio-cultural appropriation of technologies in the context of the family home (Silverstone *et al.*, 1992; Silverstone, 1994; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996). In this paper we intend to revise the term for the field of mobile phone technology appropriation by focusing on the role that commercial discourses play in the construction of a coherent imaginary of these technologies.

Two conceptual choices mark our critique of the current literature on domestication: the first is to open the appropriation process to other cultural spaces beyond the strict

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limits of the home, which seems almost obvious when approaching mobile technologies (Haddon, 2000). The second choice is to consider appropriation as a part of consumption processes, and, hence, as a simultaneously public and private process. Our aim is to verify the oft-presupposed complicity between institutional and non-institutional discourses and to clarify the way in which they cooperate to connect the imaginary of mobile phone technologies to the concrete 'biography of objects' (Kopytoff, 1986).

Consumption is a cultural phenomenon that increasingly involves specific forms of appropriation, re-structuration and transformation of meaning practices with regard to things and symbols (Appadurai, 1986). This approach to consumption as a meaning negotiation process seems especially relevant in the case of mobile phone technologies, in which appropriation by users must face a significant complexity derived from their strange condition with regard to standardized practices and meanings.

Following Ibáñez (1994), we understand advertising as a prevalent institutional discourse in the context of consumption practices. Through advertising, institutional actors pose and disseminate changing proposals of meaning frames attached to functional instructions, suggestions and evocative analogies. Its symbolic resources, however, are not only social contexts of use or mere plain representations of values, but life episodes, biographic anecdotes and experiential instructions. By means of advertising discourse, products, services or brands become not just things, behaviours or names that ultimately serve the purpose of satisfying needs or desires for consumers, but systems of meanings and practices that involve social rituals and discourses (Baudrillard, 1981; Appadurai, 1986; Featherstone, 2001). Advertising discourse transforms practices, objects and subjects into signs that are used as parts of a cultural conversation. In this way, products and services become the medium through which brands and consumers construct each other in terms of social interaction.

Advertising Experiences and Experiencing Identities

Understanding consumption as a meaning negotiation process between institutional and non-institutional discourses asks for a kind of 'common language' by means of which they represent—and thus recognize—each other. That coherent code allows translating the institutional discursive axis (the use of the product or service, the social image of the brand) to the social discursive axis (interaction patterns and values) and vice versa. The presentation of *recognizable experiences* related to objects, uses and lifestyles operates in our understanding as the 'common code' for institutional and non-institutional discourses.

On the side of institutional discourses, Pine & Gilmore (1999), Rifkin (2000) and Schmitt (1999) observe an experiential turn in marketing strategies. In a context of increasingly undifferentiated products and services, the influence of multi-level commercialization strategies developed in cultural industries and the adaptive potential introduced by ICTs have moved the focus of consumption dynamics from property to access (Rifkin, 2000) so that the value of consumption lies less in owning a product than in having access to its use. In such a context the assets of a brand lie

rather in its capability to generate loyal customers than in its capacity to generate products. Consequently, companies turn their attention to the way in which consumers experience their products and services, codifying the access to goods or services in terms of experiences that link brand imagery to customers' social imagery through values, emotions and identity markers.

On the side of non-institutional discourses, biographies and identities (related to both objects and subjects) are codified in terms of significant experiences, that is, life events which involve meanings, emotions, uses and interactions which are registered and integrated into what Giddens (1991) calls the narratives of the self.

In the case of mobile phones, advertising discourses usually focus on the social interaction nature of the mobile experience and on the transparency of experiential mediation (accessing mediated experiences equates to experiencing them). Brand or campaign slogans constitute a good example of this: 'connecting people', 'experience life', 'don't miss a moment', 'see new, hear new, feel new', 'the vivacity of life', or 'live it!'.

From a functional point of view, advertisements are addressed to produce discursive coherence between institutional and non-institutional discourses, becoming a sort of meeting point where advertisers' meaning proposals and social context-situated meaning practices confront their symbolic imaginaries and represent each other. This kind of discursive mediation is the key element of MacCannell's (1976) concept of cultural experiences.

Cultural experiences refer to the kinds of experiences that constitute consumption practices, and, subsequently, commercial and media discourses. According to previous work (Thompson, 1995; Ritzer, 1999; Aguado, 2002) we understand cultural experiences as social meaning constructs that link social imaginaries with life events in terms of access and consumption. An intuitive way to understand cultural experiences is to observe the way they work in tourism and leisure: a theme park or a tourist site organizes the structure, nature and time of consumers' experiences constituting simultaneously the main resource for their realization (Richards, 2001). The processes through which cultural experiences are formed involve three relevant elements: experiential frames, mediations and experiential realizations.

Experiential frames are meaning structures that evoke—and allow reproduction of—experiences in terms of meaning interactions. They operate as sense-making patterns with regard to interaction situations and include *markers* (signs and objects that communicate the performing nature of the situation), *scenarios* (arrangements of objects and spaces in order to evoke meaning structures), *demonstrations* (actions, roles and situations linked to experiences) and *meta-experiences* (instructions about the appropriate interactions with environment in order to successfully reproduce experiences).

Experiential realizations refer to the concrete experience of consumers and involve their participation in the embodiment of an experiential frame within a given situation. Experiential realizations include the *appropriation of meanings* through emotions and shared values, the *coordination of meaning patterns* in communities of practice, the *evaluation* of the experience with regard to its biographical coherence,

and the *register of the experience* in order to ensure its biographical insertion, its authentication and its sharing with others.

Both concepts are inspired by the theoretical work of Goffman (1963) and Garfinkel (1967). Experiential realizations take place in situations of interaction as a part of the confluence between actors' biographies and the biography of things (Kopytoff, 1986). Experiential frames play a relevant role in the definition of interaction situations, thus contributing to build meaning nets that coordinate actions and interpretations. Experiential frames are produced and reproduced through discourses and, consequently, the encounter between experiential frames and experiential realizations always involves some form of mediation.

Mediation works as a coherence producer between experiential frames and experiential realizations. Mediation refers to any agency that (re)presents experiential frames and attributes values to them, making them recognizable to users in terms of interaction situations and identity differentiation. It is almost self-evident in this context to point to advertising discourse as a prevalent mediating agent in the context of experience consumption, and, consequently, as a relevant part of the appropriation process (Haddon, 1998).

Advertising Mobile Phones: Discursive Strategies, Experiential Frames and Experiential Realizations

In the following section we present the general outcomes of a research on the impact of advertising campaigns in the appropriation of mobile phone technologies. The fieldwork and analysis was out between June and December 2005 as part of wider research on experiential mediation and ITC appropriation developed by the Research Group on Communication, Culture and Technology at the University of Murcia (Spain). The theoretical framework and the general hypothesis follow the assumptions outlined in the preceding sections, placing emphasis on advertising discourse as a mediation agent between experiential frames and experiential realizations in the context of the commercialization of experience.

Methodology

Our aim was to look at (a) how ads represent the experience of mobile phone technology; and (b) how users perceive the coherence between their everyday use of mobile phones and their perception of the experiential frames presented in advertising discourse about mobile phones. In doing so, we compared the results of a discourse analysis on a sample of TV and press ads with a series of three discussions with mobile phone users belonging to different age groups. The sample for the discourse analysis included 25 TV commercials and 25 press ads, dating from the period 2003–2005. Eight of them were part of international campaigns and the remainder were part of national campaigns from Spain, Portugal, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Japan and Argentina. Due to their small presence, their local nature

and their limited impact on audiences (CMT, 2005), the selected sample excluded ads by mobile content providers. Consequently, the sample for the discourse analysis included TV and press ads from the period 2003–2005 by manufacturers (Nokia, Motorola, Samsung, LG, Panasonic, Sony-Ericsson) and operators (Vodafone, Orange, Movistar, Amena, Nextel, T-Mobile and Universal Mobile).

Discussions were distributed in three age groups, each of eight informants. The informants of these groups were all experienced mobile phone users. The first group included people aged 15–19. The second group comprised young adults aged 20–35. Informants who were aged 45 years or older constituted the third group. The guidelines for the group interviews were twofold: they were asked for comments on their everyday experience with mobile phones, as well as comments on a series of five TV ads and five press ads selected from the discourse analysis sample. Accordingly, the intersection between the institutional and non-institutional discourses was investigated from two perspectives: firstly, at the level of the discussion groups (on the basis of the informants' freely offered comments on ads, as in campaign post-tests); secondly, at the level of discourse analysis of both the sample of ads and the transcripts of discussions.

With regard to the sample of ads, a discriminatory pre-selection was made on the basis of two differentiating criteria: perceived advertiser's intention (the purpose of the ad) and perceived focus in the argumentative structure of ads (where the advertisers placed stress on persuasion). Three communication patterns were consequently discriminated: *competitive ads*, *narrative ads* and *illustrative ads*.

The first category includes advertisements aimed at exclusively differentiating the product or service from competitors. Competitive ads qualify objects through functional values typical of the social representation of technologies, such as ease of use, quality, comfort, safety, price, and so on. They often involve classical advertising discursive forms such as comparison, exhibition and information. Discursive representation restricts technological values to the concrete purchasing interest. Due to this contingent nature and their limited reference to the social imagery of mobile phone use, competitive ads were excluded from the sample.

Narrative ads, secondly, involve discourses organized through socially and biographically situated interaction frames. They aim to socialize the uses of mobile phone technology concerning interaction rituals, lifestyles and person-linked aesthetics in reference to both individual and collective identity. Discursive forms prevalent in these cases are performance and presentation, depending on whether the emphasis is placed on the social situation or on its conditions for viability (aesthetics or lifestyle as a precondition for successful social relations). Discursive representation resorts here to social interactions, and the mobile phone is presented, so to speak, as a 'medium with a human face'. This pattern is illustrated by Nokia campaigns that place emphasis on visually representing the brand slogan ('Connecting people') or camera phone ads that emphasize social situations in which available camera use affects the meaning of interactions.

Illustrative ads involve discourses simultaneously structured upon objects and concrete interactions, both aiming at socially explaining the uses of mobile phone

technology. In this case, advertising discourse connects technology-centred functional values (design, usability, functional versatility) to consumer identity-centred values (aesthetics, identity markers, lifestyles). The stress is placed on the interaction *with* technology rather than in the social interaction *through* technology. As such, it demands a previous clear delimitation of targets in terms of consumer profile classification and standard situations in which interaction with technology makes a difference.

The kinds of ads selected for the discourse analysis sample and for the discussion groups fit both narrative and illustrative categories.

Discursive Strategies

Discursive strategies refer to the way in which texts connect products or services to social interaction and identity frames. The function of the advertising discourse is to assimilate the symbolic connotations of both the social interactions and the objects, dealing with them as interpretable signs. Assimilation works as evocative analogy by presentation of a meaning frame (connotations of the mobile phone technologies) through the symbolic resources of the other (connotations of social interactions). The experiential frames presented this way act as guiding lines for both the discursive coherence and the concrete experience of the product or service. As a result of the sample analysis and discussion group perceptions, we identified four different discursive strategies:

- **Aesthetic assimilation:** the experiential frame is posed through the aesthetic characterization of the mobile phone device, the user-target presented or the formal dimension of the advertising text. The mobile phone is presented as an exclusive portable product strongly attached to one's identity in terms of everyday use or as a part of one's body. Implicit experiential analogies to watches, pens, perfumes, clothing or jewels are common in these cases. Such analogies are built through evident context-of-use substitution: a picture of a phone hanging on the walls of an art museum (Samsung SGH-T500); a phone hanging on a woman's neck (Motorola V3); a phone lying with make-up, mirror and perfumes on a dressing table (Samsung A800). Also through the meaningful use of inter-textual visual aesthetics: using the visual code of perfume ads, advertisers underline the body-attached nature of the mobile phone and its value in identity presentation. Or finally through the aesthetic coherence between the user-target characterization and the object (as in Nokia's 7280 collection series).
- **Biographic assimilation:** the experiential frame is posed through the performance of meaningful life episodes that simultaneously involve lifestyles and recognizable context-situated social interactions. This tends to fuse social use rituals and consumption rituals, merging the emotional and interactional consequences of both. Examples of this discursive strategy include ads presenting romantic messaging situations (Nokia 7650), friends joking with ringtones (Movistar, Orange), and

people using mobile phone lights in concerts (Movistar). The stress in these cases is placed on the positive characterization of the social interaction—and less so on the functional operation, which, in turn, constitutes the base for the following discursive strategy.

- **Functional assimilation:** the experiential frame is posed in terms of a demonstrative exemplification. Social interaction remains in the background. The purpose of the performance is thus to instruct about the procedures of use, putting it in the context of both social and cultural values: the kinds of interactions in which it is operative, and the social and identity values derived from its use. A meaningful example of such a discursive strategy can be observed in those imaging phone campaigns in which instructive performances of socially situated use are presented. Sony-Ericsson E530 and Nokia N90 ads, for instance, emphasize the availability and ease of use of the high-quality camera function through a hyper-realistic spectacular exhibition of people capturing visually shocking events (a bear catching a salmon in a wild river, or a baby doing a somersault while playing on a trampoline). In the case of camera phone ads it is important to notice that values such as ease of use and image quality are merged in the characterization of the mobile phone as a transparent medium (Baudrillard, 1983). In this way, suggesting a desired assimilation between reality and its representation relates to the mediating social use of imaging mobile phone technology, as a kind of hyper-realization (Lasen, 2002; Rivière, 2005; Goggin, 2005).
- **Metaphoric assimilation:** the experiential frame is posed through visual metaphors that refer to a given key-value derived from the individual, or, to a lesser extent, social use of the mobile phone, the operator's service, or the multimedia content. The social or individual value performed by evocative analogy is substituted by the impact of spectacular representations that prefigure the added value upon which the message is built. A good example of this discursive strategy is the T-Mobile campaign about changeable monthly instalments according to the user's convenience. The campaign slogan ('you always know what is coming?') is emphasized by a visual metaphoric performance in which a man walks along the street safely anticipating unexpected events (a piano falling from a moving work, a car crashing through a shop window, etc.). Advertising discourses on mobile phone content (games, music, ringtones, videos, and news) also tend to resort to visual metaphors in order to represent the experience derived from their consumption. Beyond some lifestyle connotations, social interaction context remains obviated. Conversely, this discursive strategy tends to underline individual, emotional or even sensorial experiences that present a conception of the mobile phone close to that of nomadic privacy devices such as Walkmans, MP3 players, and game consoles (Araujo de Souza, 2004).

Mobile Phone Experiential Frames and Realizations

According to the sample analysis, advertising discourses distribute mobile phone experiential frames in four significant levels shown to partially overlap with the four

differentiated discursive strategies presented above. Most of the connotations derived from these four levels are easily recognized as relevant marks of the mobile phone social imagery, consequently finding their correlate in focus group discourses:

- Identity experience: the mobile phone device is a part of one's body and, consequently, it is also an important part of the aesthetics of one's personal identity, both in its interactional and visual dimensions. Seemingly corresponding to previous research (Ling, 2001, 2004; Scifo, 2005), discussion participants from groups one and two as well as qualified professionals in groups three and four were shown to be more sensitive to experiencing their mobile use in terms of identity markers. However, the vast majority of participants agreed that they could not live without their phones and that, after its functionalities, the look of the mobile phone was relevant for them. Finally, a general consensus on the increasing similarities between mobile phones and identity-attached portable goods, such as watches, was reached. Both in advertising discourses and in discussions it was not only the physical aspect of the device that was related to identity presentation rituals; the way it is used in social interactions was also considered relevant in regard to lifestyles and role assumption.
- Control experience: the mobile phone is an inclusive and always-available technology device. In this sense, the mobile phone is experienced as a sort of 'meta-device', a device that includes a set of integrated technology devices with multi-level functionalities. Though conversation is still a highly relevant function, the mobile phone is no longer a 'phone'. With the exception of two participants in group four (aged 56 and 62), all of those interviewed admitted to intensive use of functions other than conversation. The younger members of groups one and two absolutely refused to consider a hypothetical portable voice-connection device as a mobile phone. Users experience the inclusive and available multi-functional condition under the same logic of control that characterizes other integrated portable multi-functional devices. At a metaphoric level we could say that mobile phones are like Swiss Army knives: they constitute a portable repository of functional resources that allow control of unexpected situations or events. The semantic connection between design and multi-functionality, which characterizes advertising discourses in the sample directly, relates here to the users' experiential connection between the mobile phone's identity relevance and functional capabilities.
- Social group experience: the mobile phone is essentially a social tool through which one can experience group interactions in new or more intense ways. Newness and intensity are the common values that merge the emotional implications of mobile phone social connotations. Mobile phones provide users with new ways of interacting—images, instant messaging, group chats, sound clips, or group calls—as well as enhancing standard social interactions through availability, instant coordination, or virtual permanent presence: 'through a single ring I'm telling I'm with him' (Cristina, 24). To the role of affective and emotional dimensions of social group experience, advertising discourse adds a dimension of professional interaction, where the same values of newness and intensity are related to efficacy and comfort.

The vast diversity of social interaction situations performed in mobile telephone ads is linked mostly to life episodes: at the beach with friends, the giving of Christmas presents, at the office with colleagues, at the airport for business travel, at home with children. They fulfil the double role of user instructions and socialization. The way in which these interactions are presented emphasizes the (positive) social consequences of mobile phone use, building a specific way of experiencing them. Thus, when asked whether they could imagine a personal life event that could constitute the basis of a hypothetical ad on mobile telephony, the majority of participants in the discussions answered affirmatively, posing a variety of personal anecdotes that, in essence, fit the nature of advertising discourses.

- Self-experience: the mobile phone is a medium that relates to one's everyday experiences. As such it mediates one's own access to experiences as well as those of others. As a nomadic privacy device, on the one hand, the mobile phone allows access to preformed sensory and meaning experiences in the very same terms that mass media do, adding the value of ubiquity. We could speak at this point of an incipient process of mobile phone mediatization, in the sense of an increasing convergence between mobile phone social uses and mass media content consumption standards. On the other hand, as a suitable tool for registering and managing one's everyday experiences (Ling, 2004; Rivière, 2005; Goggin, 2005), the mobile phone is posed as a medium for producing or enhancing aspects of self-perception. This includes vicarious access to mediated experiences and sharing them with others as a meaning resource in social interactions.

The use of camera phone images deserves special mention at this point. In the context of mobile phone technologies, digital images do not function as a mere memory record. Their attached-to-the-moment condition and their manipulability give them an added dimension: as an ontological proof that validates the occurrence of experienced events, and, simultaneously, as a semantic resource that can be re-contextualized in different symbolic environments. Advertising discourses on imaging phones resort to these aspects by emphasizing the ability to capture unexpected or unusual moments and the diversity of uses of the generated images (Koskinen & Kurvinen, 2005). Accordingly, the self-experience frame is deeply correlated to the identity experience frame in advertising discourses and in the perception of users. Again, it is the younger participants in groups one and two who, depending on the relevant role that the mobile phone plays in the presentation of identity, to a larger extent than their older counterparts, internalize this experiential frame.

Conclusions: The Mobile Phone as a Cultural Experience

The empirical evidence extracted from the discourse analysis of television and press ads and group interviews suggests a significant coherence between institutional and non-institutional discourses as a relevant part of mobile phone appropriation processes. An additional interesting outcome is that, while findings derived from the

discussion groups broadly fit previous work on the social uses of mobile telephony (Katz & Aarhus, 2002; Ling, 2004), so too does the advertising discourse analysis. This coherence allows the presupposing of a kind of symbolic exchange between institutional and non-institutional discourses that denies the prevalent private nature of mobile phone technology appropriation in current research, demanding a revision of the idea of domestication as a conceptual resource. The meaning context of this interdependency between private and public discourses is shown, in our view, in the form of a mediated construction of experiential frames.

Consequently, advertising discourse is not only about selling products or services, just as consumption is not only about buying or using products and services. People gather media discourses and transform consumption proposals into meaningful social practices. In their turn, campaign designers gather social practices and meanings from everyday life in order to adapt them to the experiential imagery of the product or brand, thus contributing to the production of new meanings and practices. The role of advertising and its convergence with other discourse forms in the cultural industries (such as entertainment or news) constitutes, then, a key element in the process of constructing a cultural imaginary of the mobile phone.

Furthermore, both discourse producers—advertisers and users—are strategically aware of this coherence. The permanent reference in advertising to social interaction frames is understood by users as a strategic selection and representation of their own discourse on the social use of mobile phone technologies. In other words, interviewed users think that what ads say about mobile phones is essentially coherent with their experience of them, taking for granted that advertisers represent social experiences for the purpose of selling.

In this sense, advertising discourses about mobile phones do not deal mainly with technologies, prices or services, but with emotions (which are transmitted and shared), social situations of interaction (related to security, availability, and personal identity), individual and collective experiences (fun, romance, and friendship) or technology-related values (such as efficiency or design). The socio-cultural impact of mobile phone technologies is always implicit in the advertising discourse as a matter of mediation between the concrete experience of users and the experiential frame implemented by technology designers. This mediation operates in both senses, providing instructions for the appropriate use of meanings and objects, and inserting in the cultural imagery of the commercialized object or service those social symbolic and instrumental transformations operative in communities of meaning and practice.

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