Feminizing the Mobile: Gender Scripting of Mobiles in North America

Leslie Regan Shade

A lively body of feminist research has examined how communication technologies have been gendered through their social uses—often unintended—and their design (Chabaud-Rychter, 1994; Cowan, 1985; Horowitz & Mohun, 1998; Lupton, 1993; Olzenziel, 1999). The telephone is particularly illustrative. Rakow (1992) and Moyal’s (1992) research demonstrated that women’s primary use of the telephone was for community bonding and family ‘kin keeping’ while Martin’s (1991) study of Bell Telephone during the early twentieth century in Canada emphasized its move from a business tool for men to its feminization, achieved via women’s labour as operators and their creation of a viable social culture.

Telephone technology and design have changed considerably to appeal to female consumers, reflecting its status as an indispensable domestic artefact, including stylistic trends (colours—plain black to pale hues), design (the Princess telephone) and technological innovations (push-button to portables) (Lupton, 1993). The mobile telephone is increasingly designed and marketed to appeal to women and female teenagers. Whether through the creation of features and accessories (ringtones, wallpaper, faceplates, camera phone, wireless synergies) or through branded phones of high-end fashion designers, the design of the mobile reflects a distinctive feminization. This mimics efforts in the 1990s when media corporations and entrepreneurs feminized the Internet through the creation of popular content that privileged and encouraged women’s consumption, rather than production or critical analysis (Shade, 2002).

Using the concept of the gender script (Rommes, 2002; van Oost, 2003), this paper sketches the feminization of the design and marketing of mobile phones in the North American context through an analysis of selected print advertisements appearing in women’s and teen magazines. Despite their high penetration of broadband, Canada and the United States lag behind other developed countries in their uptake of mobile phones because both countries are well served by solid landline infrastructures. OECD

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statistics for 2004 indicate that the United States had 62 mobile subscribers per 100 inhabitants, and Canada 47; this contrasts with the OECD average of 72, with 109 in Sweden, 102 in the United Kingdom, 96 in Finland, and 72 in Japan (OECD, 2005). Unlike Europe and Asia, a distinctive mobile culture is nascent, and marketing the mobile for women and female teenagers in Canada and the United States is thus opportunistic and timely for mobile manufacturers and wireless carriers.

This paper first provides a brief overview of international scholarship on uses and perception of mobiles by women and teenagers. The next section explicates the gender script and examines selected print ads for mobile phones appearing in North American women’s and teen magazines. How can we go beyond gender scripts that essentialize women and their uses of mobiles? The paper concludes with reflections towards this end.

Exploring Mobiles and Gender

Empirical studies on women and mobile phones focus on their everyday uses across cultural contexts. The ITU (2004) notes that mobiles are increasingly used by urban youth and women in developing countries, and are positioned for ‘everyday life’ through entertainment and lifestyle applications. Castells et al., (2004) remark that, globally, mobile adoption amongst females is increasing, with subtle national differences in appropriation of services; Japan, South Korea, and China target female consumers through commercial campaigns and design of distinctive handsets and service plans (p. 152). Plant’s research for Motorola illustrated how men and women use the mobile for public display—for competitive advantage, status symbol, or to signal self-containment; female teenagers ‘are particularly aware of the fashion aspects of their mobiles, competing to acquire the latest, coolest models and to customize them in the latest, coolest ways’ (Plant, 2003, p. 44). Customization includes ringtones, sticking logos and graphics on the phone, or attaching jewellery and trinkets.

Research on the creation of a distinctive youth mobile culture in Scandinavia and Japan (Caronia, 2005; Fortunati, 2002; Ling, 2004; Ito et al., 2005; Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004) emphasizes a preoccupation with stylistic trends in design and applications, many coded as masculine and feminine. In Norway, Skog (2002) comments that ‘the mobile phone companies seem to design phones to match the traditional female and the male cultures’, while Wilska (2003) in Finland writes that ‘trendy and impulsive consumption styles (that are usually regarded as “women’s stuff”) are connected to technology enthusiasm, which is usually seen as a “typical male” thing’.

To date, little scholarly research has looked at the marketing of mobiles to women or female teens in North America (unlike studies on Italy and Scandinavia; see Zatta, 2003 and Mörtberg, 2003). Townsend (2000), reviewing early US marketing, notes its importance in shaping ideologies of mobile usage; advertising to women was often marketed to dispel security and to promote domestic ‘kin keeping’, while for men it was ‘most frequently marketed as a tool of fashion, power, and virility’ (p. 6).
Gender Scripts

Van Oost describes a ‘gender script’ as:

the representations an artifact’s designers have or construct of gender relations and gender identities—representations that they then inscribe into the materiality of that artifact. Like gender itself, which is defined as a multi-level process, gender scripts function on an individual and a symbolic level, reflecting and constructing gender differences in the division of labor. (2004, p. 195)

Van Oost used this notion of gender scripts to describe the design history of shavers for men and women, highlighting how the artefacts embodied gender. Indeed, looking at current constructions of the razor we see how gender is overtly built into their design and marketing; just think of the steely-grey and green Mach3 turbo razor for men (‘The best a man can get!’), versus the turquoise-blue Venus Divine shaver for women (‘Reveal the Goddess in you!’). Perhaps coincidentally, Motorola introduced ‘his’ and ‘her’ slim Razr phones—he was jet black, while hers was an ‘eye catching tone of pink’, and was soon, according to Motorola’s promotional material

seeded to a select group of fashion elite and Hollywood ‘it’ girls . . . its shocking measurements make it one of the slimmest phones on the market. Rich functionality, performance excellence and design innovation give the user a total sensory experience—from photo messaging to hands free connections to superlative metallic finishes.

(http://www.motorola.com/motoinfo/product/details/0,,128,00.html)

Rommes (2002) also theorizes gender script along with technological scripts and domestication as entry points to describe gendering through design, in her study of Amsterdam’s community-based computer network The Digitale Stad (Digital City). Technological scripts are defined as ‘the assumptions about the use context that are materialized in the technology, which pre-structure the use of technology . . . they attribute and delegate specific competencies, actions, and responsibilities to their envisioned users’ (Rommes, 2002, p. 15). When scripts reveal gendered patterns, they become gender scripts, which ‘may emphasize or hide, and reinforce or diminish gender differences and gender inequalities’ (Rommes, 2002, p. 18).

Domestication refers to how technology is incorporated into the everyday patterns of the users, and has been widely used by communication and feminist scholars to study the ways in which family members negotiate technologies within the household (Haddon, 2004; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). Adopting the four phases of domestication—appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion—to mobiles provides a useful framework for exploring the gendering of mobiles. Appropriation occurs through the adoption of the mobile as a necessary domestic artefact; objectification through the personalization of the mobile; incorporation through its management of daily routines; and conversion as the mobile blurs the distinction between the private, domestic sphere and the wider public sphere. The mobile is thus situated instrumentally as a facilitator of social communication, particularly for women.
Gender scripts will be used to illustrate several trends with mobiles: the mobile as a new marketing terrain (especially targeting teenage girls) and the mobile as fashion accessory and branded haute couture. It should be emphasized that this paper focuses only on mobile phone design and marketing for women and female teenagers, and does not analyse how mobiles have been ‘masculinized’ as well via design and marketing.

**Gendering and Marketing Mobiles**

Mobile phones are considered the ‘third screen’ for marketing. Digital convergence includes text messaging, integrated content, games, interactive voice response, WAP sites, ringtones/ring-back tones, viral/geo-targeting/advertising on mobile broadcast, sponsorships/subsidizing cell phone costs, and mobile telemarketing (May & Hearn, 2005). Gartner Research has estimated that Americans spent $1.2 billion in 2004 on ringtones, wallpaper and personalization services and $1.4 billion on cell phone games and entertainment (Thottam, 2005). Given their purchasing power, teenagers are the target for many of these features, with mobile media poised to ‘turn consumption into both a fashion statement and an impulse purchase’ (Siklos, 2006, p. B3). Advertising imagery and copy positions the converged mobile as a unique signifier for expressing one’s individuality through customization of features and design. Personalization is present in many advertisements, and reflects both appropriation and objectification through advertising scripts and imagery.

In Canada, Rogers Wireless teamed with MuchMusic (the Canadian equivalent of MTV), for the MuchMusic Edition Phone, with content including ‘exclusive’ private access to MuchMusic updates, a videophone to send and receive video clips, a TuneTracker (‘hold your phone up to the music for the song’s name and artist’) and the MuchMusic Factory, to create individualized ringtones. ‘Finally, a phone as individual as you are’, reads the ad copy, depicting a young teenage girl dancing solo on a stage.

Sprint’s marketing of ringtones via their BlingTones trademark features new recordings by hiphop producers. An ad displays four exhausted women shoppers resting on a couch, shot from their necks down, laden with colourful shopping bags. Ad copy reads: ‘You’ve got the look. Now what about the sound? Make your phone your own. It’s easy.’

Nokia is a pioneer in fusing functionality, usability and fashion. Their 7280 ‘Lipstick Phone’ was heralded for being ‘small, sexy, eye-catching and cool’ (Thompson, 2005, p. 233). Nokia welcomes customization of their phones with covers, wallpapers, and ‘rhythmic ringing lights’. The Nokia 7270 folding phone features ‘chic, interchangeable fabric wraps . . . allow(s) you to impulsively change your look as often and as boldly as you please. Stay ahead of the latest trends, or simply set them yourself.’ Or, one can customize a phone with faceplates: ‘How will you express yourself’, the ad copy reads, with a photo of a young woman staring out at us, resting on her bed, with a matching shirt and faceplate. Another ad contrasts a silver phone with a nearly identical silver shoe: ‘Accessorize accordingly’ reads the copy.
Samsung’s videophone downloads, plays and e-mails video. In one ad a young woman displays the phone against a neon movie theatre marquee that reads ‘Cinema Village’. Says the ad copy: ‘Your life. Now showing... allows one to record 15 seconds of digital video and audio as you walk along the red carpet of your life.’

LG, a relatively new entrant to the mobile market, promoted its camcorder phone through ads that situate the phone as a fashion accoutrement. One ad shows a woman in a public washroom looking disdainfully away from another woman reflected in the mirror above the sink, remarking: ‘I can’t believe she has on the same phone as me.’ Another ad shows a young man at a club, with an unremarkable pick-up line to a blonde woman, presumably checking messages on her mobile: ‘That phone really brings out your eyes.’

Incorporation and conversion are reflected in ads that highlight the mobile as a tool to coordinate social engagements. mMode from AT&T Wireless combines wireless Internet with e-mail, instant messaging, games, and various content (news, weather, sports, entertainment, lifestyle, games, pictures, travel and dining). An ad displays a woman seated at a bar stool looking at her mobile, with a smiling man behind her. Says the ad copy: ‘You can use mMode to make a connection on Match Mobile, then choose a restaurant and find directions to get you there. It will even help you find the nearest ATM in case you want to go Dutch.’ Samsung’s A800 phone is the ‘perfect dining and traveling companion—it’s sleek, stylish, powerful, and it never forgets a face or a name’. Besides being a camera phone, it takes dictation ‘and you don’t even have to buy it a drink’.

Incorporation and conversion are also in play via mobile-casting; one particular example is a venture between Mott’s (an apple and fruit juice company owned by parent Cadbury Schweppes) and Epicurious.com (the recipe website for Gourmet Magazine) wherein ‘Mott’s recipe ideas and made-to-order shopping lists [are] beamed directly to your mobile phone.’ The ad in Bon Appétit Magazine shows a white, blonde woman in breezy summer white attire, shopping bags in hand, smiling blissfully at her mobile.

**Marketing the Mobile to Tweens**

Teenagers are considered the ‘sweet spot’ for mobile designers. US statistics estimate that ‘76% of young people ages 15 to 19, and 90% of people in their early 20s regularly use their cell phones for text messaging, ringtones, and games, and that enthusiasm has turned wireless data services into a significant business’ (Thottam, 2005).

Celebrity branding of mobiles for female tweens is one such trend. Single Touch pioneered the Hilary Duff phone, a prepaid handset featuring preloaded wallpaper and ringtones exclusive to the teen star. Boasting itself as the first phone catering to pre-teen girls, Mattel and Nokia launched the Barbie phone packaged with prepaid minutes, customized ring tones and faceplates (Heller, 2005). Marketed alongside the Barbie MyScene toy line, the phones are sold in US mega-retail stores Target, Toys R Us, and WalMart. Timothy J. Kilpin, senior vice-president for girls’ marketing and
design at Mattel, claims the Barbie phone ‘transcends traditional doll play—it’s steeped in entertainment. It allows girls to interact with the brand’ (Crockett & Kharif, 2005). The Nokia 3587i phone features a full-colour screen and voice dialling. Retailing for US$49.95, it comes with 30 minutes of airtime, with additional minutes sold in $5 increments. Mattel and Single Touch Interactive are creating content for the phone, including nine preloaded MyScene wallpapers, three ‘rockin’ ringtones’, and three faceplate designs. Promotional material positions the phone as a parenting device, deviously aligning its use to rewarding proper behaviour from the child, while maintaining a panoptic gaze:

Parents not only have the peace of mind knowing that they are ‘Always in touch’ with their child but they can also stay in control of phone usage by tying their child’s good behavior to added minutes via the Reward Board. Just go online [to Single Touch’s http://www.myscenemobile.com/], set a list of chores which can include making the bed, finishing homework or not arguing with your brother or sister, and place stars on the completed tasks. At the end of the week or month, parents can buy extra minutes according to the child’s list of completed tasks. (http://www.singletouch.net/brands/msm.htm)

Similarly, MGA’s popular Bratz line of nubile dolls has coordinated with Sony Ericsson for the ‘Bratz Mobile’; features allow parents to control how their children use the phone through restricting outgoing calls to pre-programmed and approved numbers only.

The Mobile as Fashion Accessory and Branded Haute Couture

Lacohée et al. (2003) argue that ‘the idea that the mobile is on constant show and is therefore a fashion accessory has fed into an advertising rhetoric of continual upgrading to avoid being shamed’ (p. 208). This sentiment was echoed by rapper mogul Sean ‘P. Diddy’ Combs in his comments to the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association convention, where he mused on the blending of hip-hop and cell phone culture: ‘It’s not about the minutes or the service . . . it’s about how the person is defined’ (Rhoads, 2005). Likewise, Munich-based fashion house Escada spokeswoman Sabine Eisenreich enthused that the mobile ‘is not just a functional thing . . . it’s become an accessory, like shoes, bags, belts or jewelry’ (Rhoads, 2005).

Industry market research is aligned with Eisenreich’s sentiments; new points of sale for mobile handsets include upscale fashion boutiques that merge haute couture designers with handset companies: Siemens/ESCADA, Nokia/Versace, Nokia/Vertui. Motorola and Samsung have coordinated with designers Diane Von Furstenberg, Anna Sui and Vivienne Westwood. Strategies utilized in the haute couturing of the mobile include co-branding of handset vendors with designers, and handsets incorporating fashion elements. Siemens and Escada launched three limited-edition cell phones; one version, Denim and Diamonds, was decorated in denim, Swarovski crystals and a string of attached pearls. According to an Escada spokeswoman, all 7,000 of the US$1,040 handsets sold out within two months (Rhoads, 2005).
Samsung is a vanguard designer for feminized mobiles. In 2002 it launched the red ‘Ladyphone’—the design mimicked a make-up compact, featuring a biorhythm calculator, a fatness function that calculates a user’s height-to-weight ratio, a calendar for keeping track of your menstrual cycle and a calorie-counting function. Enter an activity (cleaning, dishwashing, cooking, shopping) and the time spent, and the phone works out how many calories have been consumed’ (The Economist, 2002). Samsung promotional copy described the Egé phone as ‘engraved with a gold rose ... a beautiful symbol of your aristocratic dignity. Its small and compact design adds a warm glow in your hands like a precious gem’ (see http://www.samsung.com/my/products/gsm/gsm/sgh_a400.asp). Samsung also sponsored the 2002 Britney Spears concert tour. Designer Diane von Furstenberg, exclaiming that the mobile phone had become ‘part of a woman's body language’ (Rhoads, 2005), designed her Samsung namesake mobile with a replica of her 1974 Andy Warhol portrait.

In 2004 the Wall Street Journal reported that the Korean company was ‘the world’s No. 1 purveyor of high-end cellphones and the third-largest seller overall’ (Choi, 2004). Lee Ki Tae, head of Samsung's handset business, emphasizes the everyday ubiquity of the mobile: 'There isn't a single other electronic gadget you have around 24 hours a day, every day of the year ... Consumers are developing a strong emotional bond with their handsets' (ibid.). Reportedly more than 100 designers work for Samsung, and their innovative marketing strategy has showcased their products in the Guggenheim Museum and Versailles Palace.

The limited edition (1,000 sets were manufactured) Anna Sui Mobile, a combination camera/camcorder phone, was launched in conjunction with Vogue Magazine. Said Sui: 'The wireless phone is the most visible accessory and should be an extension of your personal style and essence.' A fashion spread shows a model with a Martini examining her mobile; the copy reads: 'He’s running late, so e-mail him a picture with your Anna Sui Mobile by Samsung and show him what he’s missing.' Designer Betsey Johnson, known for her flamboyant and bohemian clothes, also teamed with Samsung to create a handset and accessories ('comes complete with a matching bag for you to flaunt around town'). Said Johnson: 'It’s all about personality—you need to look for a phone with a personality that you enjoy—that matches you.'

Conclusion: Mobilizing Gender?

Gender scripts can ‘illuminate how gendered user representations are an inextricably part of designing artifacts’ (Van Oost, 2003, p. 194). The description of mobile advertising in this paper highlights how women have been inscribed as particular users and consumers. Mobiles were first marketed in the 1990s to women as a tool for ‘remote mothering’ (Rakow & Navarro, 1993) or as security and safety devices for travel. As mobile penetration increases in North America—particularly amongst young women and tweens, entrepreneurs and telecom companies are counting on cross-media convergence to spark new marketing platforms on the ‘third screen’, while
they are also promoted as branded fashion accessories and as status symbols through limited edition haute couture items. The gendered scripts here, through explicit user-representations, reinforce women’s role as consumer and as object, with uses for sociability, shopping and entertainment. As Kearney argues in her analysis of popular film and television programmes in post-Second World War America, the common trope of the female teenager on the telephone was ‘not part of an attempt to eliminate teenage girls’ independence altogether, as one focused on preventing its further subversion of hetero-sexual patriarchy’ (Kearney, 2005, p. 594). Likewise, contemporary marketing of the mobile in North America reinforces femininity and hetero-normativity; the mobile is an extension of one’s stylistic sensibility, the gaze is narcissistic and competitive. These instrumental uses certainly contrast with the innovative keitai culture in Japan (Ito et al., 2005).

Jain reminds us to pay attention to ‘the ways in which objects such as cell phones come with their own disciplining networks’ (Jain, 2002, p. 424). Similar to technological scripts, disciplining is seen starkly in many of the mobiles for tweens, from parental controls that limit outbound calling to restricting the length of chat via pre-paid calling cards. Samsung’s Egeo phone, with its ‘Pink Schedule’ (menstrual calendar), Bio Rhythm, and Calories and Fatness Counter also discipline, monitor, and essentialize women through emphasizing bodily preoccupations. Camera and videophones, text messaging, ringtones, and e-mail are features built into mobiles, marketed for women in their roles as consumers and girlfriends.

Jain also challenges us to think critically about the engendering of mobiles, ‘and what these in some ways radically new embodiments mean in our thinking on subjectivity, civic action and community’ (Jain, 2002, p. 424). Are there ways that mobiles have been used for cultural production or civic participation, and are there inventive designs that could facilitate such usage?

The case of the Village Phone project in rural Bangladesh funded by the Grameen Bank has become emblematic of ICTD success stories; Aminuzzama et al.’s (2003) assessment highlights how married ‘phone ladies’ are mostly the owners, whereas most of the users are men. And, although mobiles are promoted for ‘networked individualism’ (Miyata et al., 2005), Weilenmann & Larsson (2000) have observed that teens use their mobiles collaboratively and for social purposes, and argue that ‘it is important to ground design of new mobile technology for young people, in an understanding of how teenagers’ actually use their mobile phones in their everyday lives’ (p. 2). Lee (2005) describes how young South Korean women appropriate the camera phone for cultural production, despite the prevalence of advertising that shows men snapping pictures of women: ‘these women are not the mere owners of camera phones, but performers who create various cultural meanings. They develop a more intimate relationship with technology, challenge the conventions of gaze, give meaning to what is taken, and circulate their own expressions.’

While not disavowing that fashion trends are an intrinsic facet of identity formation (particularly for young women), the challenge now is how to design mobile phones
(which are undoubtedly used by many women as a mundane tool both to support domesticity and supplement the increasingly mobile workplace) to more seamlessly integrate domestic functionalities alongside creative, cultural, playful, and perhaps even civic modes of communicating. Bell et al., (2005) argue that defamiliarizing the known within the domestic context can provoke critical and culturally sensitive perspectives on technology design. Becoming cognizant of how design and marketing incorporate stereotyped gender assumptions through gender scripts is important. While the gender scripts analysed in this paper accentuate emancipatory uses, other socio-technical networks may conceive of the mobile as less liberating. Where and how are women involved in mobile phone design, production, and manufacturing? Feminist interrogations of mobiles must thus also go beyond mere critical assessments of the consumption of mobiles, and focus on the political economic realities in their production.

References


