Mobile Technology and Social Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Cell phones and mobile technology has created a new level of social identity in which a person does not have to physically be present to categorize themselves or play a role expected when they perceive themselves as part of a group. In addition, group norms, values, and communication can influence an individual that may not be physically present; or, conversely, individuals can influence group norms, values, and communication (Campbell & Park, 2008; Sugiyama, 2011) from a distance. Mobile technology can also blur lines between groups or create new group boundaries through influence from outside of the physical community or group (Fortunati, 2002; Sugiyama). This access to other groups within non-physical social spaces also allows individuals to construct a potential social identity to become part of a group to which an individual might aspire. In other words, mobile technology allows for a constructed social identity based on social asperations rather than physical social inclusion.

When discussing social identity, it is important to understand the two leading theories of identity in groups. The first, *Social Identity Theory*, focuses on the self-placement or self-categorization of an individual which leads to self-identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). The focus of Social Identity Theory is for an individual and perceived group members to establish the boundaries between groups (intergroup relationships) in order to create a sense of identity in relationship to those perceived as the *in-group* (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stets & Burke). In other words, individuals accept and take on the values, beliefs, behaviors, norms, communication styles, appearance, and knowledge (epistemology) of the group with whom the individual would like to identify (Stets & Burke; Skitka, 2003). Depending on the field of research, the terms used to identify the group with which individuals want to identify may be a *reference group* (consumer behavior), the *in-group* (sociology, education), a *community* (sociology, human development), a *profession* (education, business), or a *community of practice* (education).

The second theory, *Identity Theory*, comes from the perspective of the individual and the perceived role the individual has within a group (Stets & Burke, 2000). This theory addresses the intragroup relationships and the behavior of an individual to maintain status within a group (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). In analyzing social structures within a group, Identity Theory tries to explain the "complex interrelatedness" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 227) of group member perceived roles and status.

In both theories, social identity both influences and is influenced by social structures through perceived standards established by the group. Group categories and roles are negotiated through the social interaction of group members. An individual may have a number of self-identities depending on group membership and will access the social identity that is salient for a given situation (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Skitka, 2003). When self-identity is constructed through the use of mobile technology, the connection to the group is psychological rather than physical.

Social identity can be constructed in virtual spaces as well as traditional social spaces. This chapter will discuss the influence of mobile technology on the formation of social identity, the

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identification of social identity through mobile technology use, and the impact of ubiquitious mobile use on creating social norms and identity within groups distributed across boundaries and social spaces.

OVERVIEW

In looking at the current literature on social identity and mobile technology, there has been a lot of theory building since 2000. However, there are fewer studies that are research based, providing insight into the relationship between mobile technology and social identity, and the effect mobile technology has on social identity creation.

One of the first series of systematic studies on social identity and mobile technology can be traced to research at the Institute for Research in Economics and Business Administration (SNF) by Per Pedersen, Herborn Nysveen, and Helge Thorbjornsen (2003). Rich Ling also was one of the first researchers in social identity and mobile technology and later collaborated with Per Pedersen in 2003-2004 on the topic. Other researchers and institutions that have been active in this topic include Scott Campbell at the University of Michigan; James Katz, former director of the Center for Mobile Communication Studies at Rutgers University; the Annenberg Research Network on International Communication lead by Manuel Castells at the University of Southern California; and Leopoldi Fortunati at the University of Udine, Italy.

Three themes from multiple disciplines (including sociology, consumer behavior, and communication) have emerged in regards to social identity and mobile technology.

1. The mobile phone is an extension of the individual and establishes an individual's social identity through choice of service/device, fashion/appearance, and even the use of mobile technology (Fortunati, 2002; Katz & Sugiyama, 2006; Pederson, Herbjorn, & Thorbjornsen, 2003; Yoon, 2010).
2. Mobile technology is used to create and maintain social networks and a feeling of belonging within reference groups, social networks, and aspired social networks (Srivastava, 2005; Vanden Abeele & Roe, 2013). Mobile technology creates different levels of intimacy (including barriers to close intimacy) through different mobile technology uses, behavioral norms, modes/social media choices, and language/symbols (Doring & Poschl, 2009; Julsrud & Bakke, 2009; Licoppe, 2008; Rettie, 2008).
3. Mobile technology crosses temporal, physical, cultural, and power boundaries to create status (or lack thereof) within a community (Srivastava, 2005; Sugiyama, 2011; Wallis, 2011). These social boundaries are fluid and situational. As a result, there is constant reconstruction of "self" and "community" that mobile cell phones, especially, allow which is not found in face to face and computer mediated communication (private, public, and personal) (Campbell, Ling, & Bayer, 2014; Campbell & Park, 2008; Cumiskey, 2011; Wallis).

Researchers have identified three different social spaces within which mobile interaction takes place: private, public, and personal (Campbell & Park, 2008). These social spaces may be constructed psychologically or based on relational interactions with those perceived as being part of the in-group (Cumiskey, 2011). Behavior within these social spaces are determined by the salient social identity established by group boundaries, and the environment, social norms, perceived distance and status between members of the in-group and out-group. These ritual patterns both establish social identity through the use of mobile technology and are influenced by social interaction that are the result of social roles dictated by groups using mobile technology (Campbell, Ling, & Bayer, 2014).

As Campbell and Park (2008) explain, an individual may communicate via cell phone in a public space, but that communication may be pri-