

Living with mobile phones in Brazil

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Photo 1: A university student looks up a mobile phone number in her handset's phonebook before using a payphone to actually make a call. Still a common scene in Brazil, where due to the high cost of subscription rates and phone calls eighty per cent of mobile phones operate on the "pay as you go" system. However, a large percentage of Brazilians trade their handsets for newer ones every year.

In Brazil, according to the Brazilian Telecommunications Agency, ever since the beginning of mobile telephony services in 1990, the number of subscribers has increased at astonishing rates: from 4.6 million in 1997 to 124 million in February 2008, to a total population of 182 million. Nowadays, the Brazilian mobile service teledensity rate – that is, the number of mobile telephones in use per 100 inhabitants – is 65,09. In the country's capital, Brasilia, there are more mobile phones than there are people.

The ubiquity of mobile phones in Brazilian everyday life has captured the imagination of the media, which has published many different reports in newspapers and magazines. In August 2005, one of the most important Brazilian weekly magazines ran a cover headline on how mobile phones are changing the ways in which people socialize and work, among other issues. Those included the social and cultural impacts of mobile phone adoption and usage, and the work of a couple of social scientists doing research on it – Richard Ling and Mizuko Ito – was cited. Having come from a media studies background and in hopes of doing my PhD in Anthropology, that immediately caught my attention as a possible original research subject in the context of Brazilian academia. I started my PhD studies in March 2006, with a project entitled "The world in your hands: an anthropological

study of mobile phones". This is an ongoing project, and what I want to share here, in outline form, are some of the very first findings of the initial part of my fieldwork, carried out in the first semester of 2007. I will resume fieldwork in the second semester of 2008 through to the first months of 2009. My main field is a low-income neighbourhood in the city of Florianopolis.

My thesis object of investigation can be defined as the study of the person-object uses and relations that occur through mobile phones. The thesis main objective is to investigate the role of this artifact, taken as a symbol of contemporaneity, in the construction of identities and new forms of sociability. Departing from the premiss that globalized contemporary culture is strongly influenced by the consumption of information and communication technologies, which are locally appropriated in different ways, my thesis is that mobile phones play an important role in the construction of imaginaries, identities and the social world in Brazilian culture as well. I argue that mobile phones constitute a lifestyle, a way of being in the world – mediated by technology – ever more characteristic of contemporaneity. Following Miller and Horst dialectical approach in their ethnography of the Jamaican mobile phone (1), my aim is not to investigate Brazilians and their mobile phones as separate entities, but rather as processes. Therefore, my thesis will investigate such processes taking into account the relations and practices regarding people and their mobile phones in the context of Brazilian culture, aiming at understanding the cultural logic of such processes and practices in the perspective of a globalized consumer society. In this sense, some important questions arise: what is implied in the relationship of Brazilians to their mobile phones? What are the specificities of Brazilian culture when it comes to the local appropriation of a global technology? What imaginaries are activated in the representations made about mobile phones? How can the consumption associated with cell phones contribute to the construction of self or group identities? What role do categories such as class and gender, for instance, play in such processes? How to understand the cultural logic that commands their consumption?

The comments to follow are a result of my observations in public places, as well as seven in-depth interviews carried out between January and May 2007 with individuals of middle-class and low-income groups, aged between twenty to around forty years of age, in the cities of Blumenau and Florianopolis, in the Brazilian southern state of Santa Catarina. I also use data from the social networking website Orkut as a privileged means of access to both discourses on new cultural practices deriving from the use of mobiles and the social imaginary that circulates about mobile phones in Brazil. There are over a thousand virtual communities about mobile phones on Orkut, as shown by their search engine when the keywords "mobile" or "mobile phones" are entered. However, it was not possible to determine the exact figure.

Two main issues emerge from these first findings: first, the role of mobile phones in the symbolic inclusion of social agents in what they conceive to be "modern". Second, the relations between mobile phones and corporality, as well as the emotional side implicated in the person-mobile phone relationship. An important aspect to be considered refers to the existence, at times, of an affective relationship between individuals and their devices; also, the dependence or addiction to mobile phone and the content stored in them (2). The relation between mobile phones and corporality has yet another very relevant aspect which is, obviously, connected to identity: fashion.

Informants generally were unanimous in affirming that those who do own a mobile phone are

“modern, part of their times, are in the world” and those who do not, or possess an older model (often referred to as “tijolao” - “the big brick” or “patacao” – this last one meaning something near “bulky”) are often looked down at, or subject to questions such as “Aren’t you ashamed of having such a phone?”, thus diminishing their possibilities of interaction in social networks. In Orkut, for instance, there’s indeed a community named “Are you ashamed of my phone?”. Such community deals with the comments of those who own “the infamous brick” phones, considered by many to be a “white weapon” and, last but not least, whose mobile phone was already the target of “nasty jokes”. Gabriela, a twenty-four year-old fashion designer, says that before trading her old phone for a newer model she kept it ringing inside her purse. She did this so as not to risk embarrassment or “feel ashamed” (lose face) in public places.

Similarly, the affective relationship becomes evident when social agents dedicate human feelings to mobile phones. Examples include love, hatred, shame, and jealousy. There are even those who attribute their mobile phone a name. There are some Orkut communities which support the argument exposed above, such as: “I love my mobile”; “I hate my mobile”; and “My mobile has got a name!” (“This community is for those who love their mobile phone so much and feel to close to it that ended up giving them a name! Those people who, upon losing their mobile phone, go out in the street and cry out its name!!!”). Affective relationship and technological dependence, in their varied nuances, find a convergence point in the argument that the mobile phone is compared to life itself. This argument becomes explicit in one of the most popular online communities on Orkut, “I can’t live without a mobile phone”, which has more than sixty-two thousand members. Following the same line of thought, I could also find “I don’t live without my mobile phone”, with 1,800 members, and “I never let go of my mobile phone”, whose presentation text states that that’s a community “for those who never let go of their mobile phone – not even for sleeping... while taking a shower have their mobiles with them... for those who let their pet starve but never ever let their mobile phone run out of battery...”.

Vania, a cleaner in her mid-thirties who lives in a low-income community in Florianopolis, feels that changing from the status of have-not to owning a phone is something to be proud of. She got her first mobile phone in mid-2005, as a gift from the lady she worked for. Her quote shows how she perceives the possession of a mobile phone as an important part of what means to be “someone”: “Mobiles, I never had one, never had, and I couldn’t wait to get one, because I thought everyone has one, so why can’t I? But God is so good, so good, God is just, then I worked in a house. I worked in a house, as a cleaner, the lady loved me, so... [...] and then I always kept thinking like oh my God, will I ever have a mobile phone? Who knows, for God nothing is impossible. [...] Then I went there on Tuesday to work and she said to me “Mrs. Vania, I gave a present for you” and I replied “A present? What will you give me?” “I have a mobile phone for you, do you want it?”. Then I said out loud: “Oh my dear Lord, this is wonderful... Now I’m really someone, I’m posh!” Oh my God, and I was all jumping up and down because of the mobile phone. Then she gave it to me, with the charger and everything, it was really useful. But mind you: I don’t know how to use the phone. The only thing I know: to open it, or to press this or that button.”

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~~Photo 2: Vania in her living room with her two handsets, rarely used for making calls – the second got from her husband. Vania's sons, aged nine and eleven, sometimes ask their mother to borrow her mobile phone when going out with friends. She laughs when she tells me her sons prefer the newer model (on the right-hand side of picture): "This one here they really don't want; they say it is ugly. They say phew Mom, what an ugly thing. People don't use it anymore, Mom".~~

Regarding the relation of mobile phones to fashion, the varied range of handsets available, the multiplicity of accessories to be used with them, and the dissemination of its use among all social classes attest to its impact on identitary productions. As they become fashion accessories – to be personalized according to the owner – mobile phones end up constituting, as Katz (3) argues – rather enthusiastically - “[...] miniature homunculi of the person, holding not only one's access to the larger world but one's identity, self-knowledge and future plans as well” (2006:175). In this sense, Paula, a thirty year old advertising executive and university teacher, explains how she “grooms” her mobile like she grooms herself and likes to have it always with her: “I believe that by looking at someone's mobile one can see something of the owner in it. Me, for example. I've always liked glittery and sparkling things: sparkling earrings, rings, of course my mobile phone also had to be sparkling, you know... I think it is sort of an extension of myself...”

Similarly, there are other online communities on Orkut dedicated to people who are fond of discussing about mobile phone adornment practices. There are, for instance, one entitled “I love mobile phone charms” and also “This mobile phone has style”, whose text goes “Charms, trendy covers, charms with fluffy animal toys, screensavers, photographs, stickers, personalised ringtones, etc., is your mobile phone just like that? Do you just love updating it? Then take part in this community...” There are also very popular communities, such as “My mobile phone is adorned” which has more than a thousand members.

The centrality acquired by mobile phones in Brazilian's everyday life reveals its consolidation as an important form of inclusion of social actors in the fast, fluid and mobile dynamics of contemporaneity. Owning a mobile phone has become a way of being in the world – mediated by technology – which seems to be increasingly more important in contemporary culture. Based on these first findings of my fieldwork, which highlight the importance of the possession – but not necessarily of the actual use, as Vania's case shows - I argue that, rather than mere technical objects, mobile phones in Brazil are used as social objects. One of the ways to do so is to treat the mobile phone as a fashion accessory, important in one's self-presentation. But this seems to be only the tip of the iceberg. As my research moves further and my understanding of the subject deepens, I hope to advance more in the comprehension of which cultural metaphors are connected to Brazilians and their mobile phones.

If you are researching a similar subject or would like to leave a comment, I'd really appreciate to hear from you.

(1) MILLER, Daniel; HORST, H. *The Cell Phone: an Anthropology of Communication*. Oxford; Berg, 2006.

(2) LASEN, Amparo. *Affective technologies: emotions and mobile phones*. Surrey: The Digital World Research Centre, 2004. Retrieved from: . Access on: 20 abr. 2007.

(3) KATZ, James E. *Magic in the air: mobile communication and the transformation of social life*. New Brunswick, N.J.; London: Transaction, 2006.