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RESEARCH PLAN FOR A DOCTORAL THESIS

Visual mobile communication Camera phone photographs as communication

Description of the study

In my doctoral thesis I study visual mobile communication, especially the communicative use of camera phone photographs. I concentrate on photo messages, i.e. photographs taken with a camera phone (mobile phone with built-in digital camera) and sent to another mobile phone. A salient aspect is the convergence of phone and camera – the phone being a communication device intended mainly for interpersonal communication, and, on the other hand, the camera being a device devoid of any means to directly communicate with other people. From this disparity rises the central question in my research: *how does the convergence of photography and mobile phone communication affect our communicational and photographic practices.*¹

I will contribute to communication theory by presenting the concept of *mobile interpersonal photographic communication*, which, in my view, constitutes a new genre in communication. This new genre is worth studying as it can turn out to be a rather significant change in both visual communication and mobile phone communication. Prior to its integration with the mobile phone, the camera has not been a telecommunication device. And, vice versa, telephone communication has never been visual until the arrival of second-generation mobile phones and camera phones in particular.

With a questionnaire I have gathered data from 54 students and 37 staff members at the Arcada University of Applied Science in Helsinki, and augmented the data by interviewing eight of them. In addition to my own empirical study, I examine recent empirical studies concentrating on camera phone photography and photo messaging. Most of the studies can be called “design studies” – studies of technology that does not yet exist,² still they provide a lot of insights into the ways users conceive of photo messaging and the possibility to communicate visually over geographic distances. The studies have not been made in the field of communication research, but I analyze them in the context of communication theory.

¹ I will concentrate on personal photography (e.g. snapshots and family photographs), and will only shortly discuss other photographic genres, such as journalistic or art photography.

² **Koskinen, Ilpo** (2005) *Pervasive Image Capture and Sharing: Methodological Remarks*. Paper presented at Ubicomp '05 The Seventh International Conference on Ubiquitous Computing. September 11–14, 2005, Tokyo, Japan.

Background of the study

A more general term for photo message is “MMS message”; MMS stands for Multimedia Messaging Service. MMS-enabled mobile phones allow users to compose and send messages with one or more multimedia components (text, image, audio, video, animation). Sending photographs from the mobile phone via e-mail can also be classified as a form of photo messaging, although at the moment MMS messages are the most common way to perform mobile interpersonal photographic communication.

The study focuses on both mobile communication and photography. Due to the novelty of camera phones and photo messaging, research in the field is in its early stages. Until now photo messaging has been studied mainly in computer sciences and information sciences. In the field of communication studies the phenomenon has been almost totally ignored, at least according to my observations. Therefore my doctoral thesis has an important role in introducing visual mobile communication and the concept of photo messaging to communication studies.

My hypothesis is that photo messages are turning visual communication and photography in particular into a more interpersonal direction. It is much easier to communicate with a camera phone (telephone) than with an ordinary camera apparatus. The phone enables immediate and interpersonal communication, and the same characteristics can be found in mobile photographic communication. What distinguishes the camera phone from a camera is the fact that the photograph can be sent immediately to someone else. The different uses of “traditional” personal photographs (taken with a standard camera) have been classified as documentation, memory support, and definition of cultural membership.³ Personal photographs are thus intended mainly to be documents or conservers of memories, something to return to later, even after many years.

Photo messages, on the other hand, are characterised by their transience – they are often sent forward almost instantaneously after taking the photograph, and not always saved for future reference. Photo messages are momentary, immediate and ephemeral messages sent in a certain situation to some specific person or a small group of people, and therefore can be described as a form of *interpersonal communication*.

³ **Chalfen, Richard** (1987) *Snapshot Versions of Life*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

Methodology

The recent changes in mobile communication (the turn into more visual communication) and photography (photographic telecommunication) form the core of my study, and, in my view, photo messaging is the area where these transitions converge.

I conjoin the study of mobile communication and photography by means of communication theory, particularly the transmission/ritual model of communication formulated by James Carey⁴. In the ritual model communication is typified by such concepts as togetherness, participation, and partnership. By contrast, in the transmission model communication is perceived as one-way transfer of messages, and defined by terms such as sending, transmitting, or giving information to others.

Based on previous research it can be concluded that photo messaging is strongly connected to the ritual model of communication. Research subjects have explained that they use their mobile phones to send pictures of daily life to members of their intimate sphere for information, but even more for connection.⁵ They use photo messages to establish a photographic connection without necessarily any great need to transmit explicit information.

In addition, I apply the theory of *mediated presence* to tie the different dimensions of photo messaging together. Photo messages can act as authentication of one's presence in a certain physical space. By sending a photo message, users aim to narrate what they are doing and experiencing right then, right there.⁶ Photo messaging can be classified as a form of mediated or communicative presence; the person at the other end of the mobile photographic connection is not physically present, yet quite concretely connected to the other.

The study of presence is central to mobile communication research. For example, Gergen⁷ describes as absent presence the state where one is physically present but at the same time absorbed by a technologically mediated world elsewhere. Ito and Okabe⁸ propose the term ambient virtual co-presence to describe the way in which people use mobile phones (especially their messaging capabilities) to maintain an ongoing

⁴ **Carey, James** (1989) *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman.

⁵ **Van House, Nancy – Davis, Marc – Ames, Morgan – Finn, Megan – Viswanathan, Vijay** (2005) *The Uses of Personal Networked Digital Imaging: An Empirical Study of Cameraphone Photos and Sharing*. In *Extended abstracts of the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI 2005)* in Portland, Oregon, April 2-7, 2005. New York: ACM Press; **Kindberg, Tim – Spasojevic, Mirjana – Fleck, Rowanne – Sellen, Abigail** (2005) *The Ubiquitous Camera: An In-depth Study of Camera Phone Use*. *IEEE Pervasive Computing*, Apr-Jun., 2005.

⁶ **Scifo, Barbara** (2005) *The Domestication of Camera-Phone and MMS Communication: The Early Experiences of Young Italians*. In Nyíri, K. (ed.) *A Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*. Vienna: Passagen Verlag.

⁷ **Gergen, Kenneth J.** (2002) *The Challenge of Absent Presence*. In *Perpetual Contact. Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance* (eds. Katz, James E. & Aakhus, Mark.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

⁸ **Ito, Mizuko & Okabe, Daisuke** (2005) *Technosocial Situations: Emergent Structuring of Mobile E-mail Use*. In *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian. Mobile Phones in Japanese Life* (eds. Ito, Mizuko, Okabe, Daisuke & Matsuda, Misa). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

background awareness of others. Other terms that have been used for the sense of presence provided by telecommunication technology are e.g. social (tele)presence,⁹ corporeal telecopresence¹⁰ and connected presence¹¹.

Also a photograph embodies the possibility of being present. Spatial immediacy can be read as the capability of a photograph to provide in itself a presence in space by being in front of the viewer as a material artefact, representing an event photographed in some other place, some time ago. Traditional photography is about presence in space and absence in time.¹² By contrast, in a photo message the feeling of absence is connected more to distance; absence is not absence in time (e.g. death), but absence in space, the intimate one being in some other place at the moment.

I divide the various dimensions of photo messaging into a six-fold table:

	Mobile communication	Photography
Time and distance	Photographic communication over distance in almost real time	Photographs as a form of contemporaneous presence; transient photographs
Interpersonal communication	Interpersonal visual communication using a mobile phone	Photographs as a form of interpersonal communication
Transmission model and ritual model	A sense of presence established by mobile communication	Photographs as connection

The theoretical background of my research is in communication studies, although the phenomenon is relatively new to the field. My study offers understanding of photo messaging and its position in people's everyday visual communication practices. I will write the dissertation in English. My supervisors are professor Merja Salo, DA, and professor Ilpo Koskinen, D.Soc.Sc., from the University of Art and Design Helsinki.

Keywords

photo message, MMS, photography, visual communication, mobile communication, camera phone, presence

⁹ **Biocca, Frank – Harms, Chad – Burgoon, Judee K.** (2003) Toward a More Robust Theory and Measure of Social Presence: Review and Suggested Criteria. *Presence*, Vol. 12, No. 5, October 2003; **Short, J., Williams, E. and Christie, B.** (1976) *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications*. London: Wiley.

¹⁰ **Zhao, Shanyang** (2001) Toward a taxonomy of copresence. Paper represented at the 4th Annual International Workshop on Presence. Philadelphia, USA - May 21-23, 2001.

¹¹ **Schroeder, Ralph** (2005) Being There Together and the Future of Connected Presence. *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, v.15 n.4; **Licoppe, Christian** (2004) 'Connected' presence: the emergence of a new repertoire for managing social relationships in a changing communication technoscape. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2004, volume 22.

¹² **Barthes, Roland** (1991) *Image, Music, Text. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath* (orig. 1977). New York: The Noonday Press.