

Mobile Phone – “Mue Tue”

An Extension of the Hand: A Cool Brand and the Cool Self in Everyday Lives

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Just as young Finns who have adopted the term “*Kanny*”, which refers to an extension of the hand, as a synonym for their cell phones, young Thais call their mobile phones “*Mue Tue*” which is similar to the Finnish *Kanny*.¹ This paper will investigate how Thai youth make meaning of *Mue Tue* in their everyday lives. Additionally, the paper examines the incorporation of 2.5 G² mobile phone technology into social interaction, reflecting Thai youth’s cultural identities, lifestyles, social norms, and values.³ The investigation of mobile phone interactions alongside issues of using a “cool” brand is discussed here in terms of the reason why a cool brand expresses a cool self, which is relevant to consumption patterns and consumerism. For Thai youth, being cool is mostly connected to self-actualization and wealth. This investigation applies an ethnographical and semiotical approach to the connection between culture and a system of meaning; this approach is known as *ethnographic semiotics*.⁴

The analysis of the material data probes the abovementioned social interactions within the subculture among Teens and Tweens⁵ who use a cool brand to show their modernity in communication, as reflected in hi-tech mobile phone functions, in different social settings and the blurred boundaries of public and private spaces. The meaning of the mobile phone in terms of necessity, luxury, modernity, and fashion is problematic among Thai youth, and this has brought about social and cultural changes and the over-consumption of mobile phones.

However, technological innovations and the power of marketing have continuously shaped mobile phone consumption among youth. Mobile phone diffusion and adoption are determined by family, peer group, technology itself, and advertising. This further illuminates not only the mobile phone experience in the context of technological determinism and social shaping, but also the contradiction of the global and the local in communication technology.

¹ To some extent, I am regarding technology as an embodiment of taste and fashion. For more on this concept, see Oksman, V. and Rautiainen, P. in “Extension of the Hand: Children’s and Teenagers’ Relationship With the Mobile Phone in Finland”, in *Mediating the Human Body: Technology, Communication, and Fashion*, ed. by Leopoldina Fortunati, James E. Katz and Raimonda Riccini, (2003) where children’s and teenagers’ use of the mobile telephone is treated as a cultural and social phenomenon.

² In Harkin, J., *Mobilisation: The Growing Public Interest in Mobile Technology* (2003), the diffusion of 2.5G mobile phone technology is called “the age of digital phone; SMS and MMS”.

³ I am here adopting the perspective of Dant, T., *Material Culture in the Social World* (1999), which sees the mobile phone as part of electronic material culture.

⁴ Worth, Sol, " Toward an ethnographic semiotic",
<http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/wava/worth/sethnosem.html>.

⁵ Michman, D. R., Mazze, M. E. and Greco, J. A., *Lifestyle Marketing: Reaching the New American Consumer*, Praeger, 2003.