Texters not Talkers:
Phone Call Aversion among Mobile Phone Users

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that there are two types of mobile phone user. The study focused on the interactional experience of mobile phone calls and text messages. The research involved 32 UK mobile phone users and included extended interviews, 24-hour communication diaries, mobile phone bills and an analysis of text messages. The sample was evenly divided between men and women, and between two age bands, 21 - 34 years and over 35 years. In line with earlier work by Reid and Reid (2005a), two different groups emerged from the research: Talkers, who prefer talking on the phone, but use text messages as a convenient complementary medium, and Texters, who are uncomfortable on the phone and prefer to send text messages. The paper explains the distinction between the two groups in terms of phone aversion, and relates this to difficulties in the presentation of self. For those who are phone averse, SMS is a ground-breaking technology, providing the remote social connection that they cannot enjoy in phone calls.

1. Introduction

This paper examines and develops the distinction drawn by Reid and Reid (2005a) between two types of mobile phone user: Talkers, who prefer to make calls, and Texters, who prefer to send text messages. Reid and Reid found that a preference for either calls or texts split their sample roughly in half. The research described here: refines their distinction, distinguishing between preference based on intrinsic and extrinsic factors; replicates their findings in small-scale qualitative research with UK adult respondents; and explains this polarisation in terms of phone aversion and problems with presentation of self. For Talkers, phone calls are the primary function of

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their mobile phones, with text messages as an important complementary affordance, but for Texters, who actively dislike phone calls, text messages are the raison d'être of their mobile phones. The research suggests that there are individual differences in the phenomenological experience of phone calls, and that a specific group of mobile phone users are unable to enjoy this form of social interaction. Whereas Talkers used both mobile phone calls and SMS, Texters primarily used their phones for texting. They found SMS particularly valuable, because it enabled the remote social contact that they do not enjoy with land or mobile phone calls.

The first text message was sent in the UK in 1992, but the technology was originally developed to enable operators to communicate with users, and was limited to intra-network communication until 1999 (BBC, 2002). The rapid growth of SMS (Short Message Service) was not anticipated by the industry, which in 1999 was predicting convergence and the disappearance of the medium within three years. However, SMS growth has continued, with an average annual growth rate of nearly 30% over the last five years. In 2006, 42 billion text messages were sent in the UK; this is approximately 4 texts sent or received, per person, per day (Text.it, 2007). Although SMS usage in the UK is skewed towards younger users, 70% of all mobile phone users text at least once a week (Ofcom, 2006). The sustained growth of SMS reflects its interactional advantages; this paper suggests that these are particularly important for those who find phone calls difficult.

The paper is organised as follows. I briefly review previous relevant research on mobile phone interaction before describing the research method. This is followed by the research findings and a discussion of their implications.

2. Previous Research on Mobile Phone Interaction

Several authors suggest that mobile phone calls and text messages can nurture social bonds (Ling & Yttri, 2002; Grinter & Eldridge, 2001; Pertierra, 2005). The increased contact facilitated by mobile phone calls increases intimacy in relationships (Fortunati, 2000), reinforcing social bonds between close friends (Geser, 2005). Mobile phones are frequently used to make "phatic calls" (Haddon, 2000) or "social grooming calls" (Ling & Haddon, 2001), where making the call is more important than what is said (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2006). Previous research suggests that the key characteristics of SMS are its asynchrony and lack of intrusiveness (Ling, 2004; Geser,

2005). Like mobile phone calls, text messages are used for maintaining contact and intimacy (Thurlow, 2003; Rheingold, 2003; Prøitz, 2005; Ling & Yttri, 2002). As Ito and Okabe (2005c, p. 265) observe, text messages can be a "means of experiencing a sense of private contact and co-presence with a loved one". In close relationships, the connectedness enabled by a combination of media, including text messages, email, and mobile phone calls, can develop into a continuous or "connected presence" (Licoppe, 2004). Several studies indicate that SMS is mainly used with close ties (Matsuda, 2005; Harper, 2003; Smoreda & Thomas, 2001). Reid and Reid (2005b) suggest that texting primarily occurs within small "text circles". In their online survey they found that, on average, their respondents had twelve contacts whom they texted regularly.

Reid and Reid (2005a) introduce the terms "Texters" and "Talkers", classifying their respondents on the basis of their expressed preference for text messages or phone calls. This measure split their (mainly student) sample roughly in half, and was correlated with significant differences in usage, attitudes and personality. Texters scored significantly higher on the Russell Loneliness (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980) and the Leary Interaction Anxiousness (1983) scales, and were significantly more likely to think that SMS had improved their social relationships. These findings are especially interesting given that earlier uses and gratifications research (Wei & Lo, 2006) found that those who were less socially connected on the Russell Loneliness scale (1980), were significantly *less* likely to use *mobile phone calls* for affective gratifications. This suggests that SMS may be particularly important for those who are less socially connected, affording remote affective connection. The distinction between Texters and Talkers is taken further and developed in this paper.

In mobile phone calls an individual is simultaneously involved in two interactions (Licoppe & Heurtin, 2002; Puro, 2002); this can create role conflict (Geser, 2005) as different roles become salient at the same time. Several authors suggest that Goffman's concept of presentation of self is useful for conceptualising role conflict in mobile phone interaction. In "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (1959), Goffman introduced a dramaturgical metaphor: interaction is a performance in which the self is presented to others. Individuals present different roles, adapting their manner and appearance to differentiate their roles. Physical settings are relevant, with different roles performed in the "front" and "back" regions of the "stage". Ling follows Meyrowitz (1985), and uses Goffman's stage metaphor to explain the juggling of concurrent interactions in mobile phone calls (Ling, 1997; 2005a). Fortunati (2005)

reports research on the presentation of self in mobile communication, and claims that mobile phone calls expose the different roles that people play. Whereas mobile phone calls can complicate the presentation of self, Oksman and Turtainen (2006) claim that SMS helps teenagers to control "face-work", facilitating their presentation of self. I develop this, arguing that problems with presentation of self in phone calls help to explain why some people prefer to send text messages.

This study differs from much of the existing research on SMS in three ways. Firstly, whereas many empirical studies have focused on teenagers (e.g. Selian & Srivastava, 2004; Ito & Okabe, 2005b; Oksman & Turtiainen, 2006), the respondents in this research were adults. Secondly, research on mobile phones has tended to focus on *either* mobile phone calls *or* text messages; in contrast, this research compared the two media. Finally, empirical work on SMS has concentrated on text message language (Kasesniemi & Rautianen, 2002; Thurlow, 2003; Hård af Segerstad, 2005; Ling, 2005b) and on SMS reciprocation norms (Kasesniemi & Rautianen, 2002; Ito & Okabe, 2005a; Laursen, 2005; Licoppe & Smoreda, 2006). In contrast, this research focused on the *experience* of SMS interaction, comparing it with the experience of mobile phone call interaction. This changes the research focus from mobile phone usage behaviour, and from the content and form of text messages, to user perceptions of these two media as social activities in their own right, rather than merely as means of communication.

3. Research Approach and Method

Mobile phones combine two different communication channels in one device and therefore, theoretically, on any occasion users have a choice between the two media. This should increase users' awareness of the differences between the two forms of interaction. Exploiting this heightened awareness, the research focused on users' perceptions of the differences between the experience of mobile phone calls and SMS. The research question was: "*To what extent do people perceive differences in the interactional characteristics of different channels of communication? Is this relevant to choice and usage?*" The original objective of the research was to compare perceptions of mobile phone call and text message interaction, rather than to explore Reid and Reid's distinction between two types of mobile phone user. However, during the research it became apparent that there were individual differences in the way that the

two mobile phone channels are perceived, and that Reid and Reid's distinction was pertinent.

Open-ended (Silverman, 1997) qualitative interviews were selected as the main research method, because the research concerned respondents' perceptions of interaction and their rationalisation of choices. The research primarily consisted of 2 - 2½ hour long interviews with 32 UK mobile phone users. The interviews were supplemented by an analysis of 24-hour communication diaries completed by respondents on the day before their interviews, 278 text messages[1] collected from the interviewees, and respondents' mobile phone bills where available[2]. King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) claim that random selection is not generally appropriate in small sample research, and advocate purposeful selection to maximize variation in the range of explanatory variables. To control the variance between respondents, the research sample was based on a quota, which divided respondents by gender, and into two age groups, 21 - 34 and over 35. It is advisable to choose a homogenous sample (Kuzel, 1999) to facilitate analysis and reduce extraneous variation in the data. To increase homogeneity, all respondents were over 21 years, lived in the UK and spent at least £15 per month on their mobile phones (industry sources at O2 and BT indicate that about 75% of UK users spend £15 or more per month). The need for homogeneity has to be balanced with the need to include a range of people with different demographics and lifestyles, to increase the insights provided by the research (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Consequently, the sample was deliberately selected to include a wide variation in terms of class, income, education level and presence of children.

Most of the research interviews took place between April and September 2005. Respondents were asked to complete diaries on the day before the interview, recording all their non face-to-face communication. These were a useful resource, but may have primed participants, encouraging them to reflect on, rationalize, and construct their communication use. Interviewees were asked to save all the text messages sent or received on the day before the interview. During the interviews the researcher collected text messages that had been saved on respondents' phones, both from the previous day and from earlier exchanges. These were either transcribed or forwarded to her mobile phone. Materials used during the interviews included

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[1] The number of text messages collected from respondents varied. Some had many messages saved on their phones, whereas others had phones that could store only a few messages. Consequently the sample is indicative rather than representative of respondents' messages.
[2] The seven respondents who had "pay as you go" phones did not receive mobile phone bills. A further three respondents had bills paid directly by their employers and six were unable, or reluctant, to provide copies.

communication media cards, based on repertory grid analysis (Kelly, 1955); social circle drawings (Pahl & Spencer, 2004); and Blob Tree diagrams (Wilson, 1991). The interview transcripts and the text messages were both coded using Atlas-ti. All names have been anonymised.

4. Individual Differences: Texters versus Talkers

Although all respondents made mobile phone calls and sent text messages, there was a considerable variation both between their relative usage of these channels, and in their perceptions of the advantages of the two channels. Cognizant of Reid and Reid's (2005a) distinction between Talkers and Texters, the research compared respondents' attitudes to texting and calling. However, whereas Reid and Reid used a question about *preference* to define their two categories, this research distinguished between preference based on the intrinsic interactional characteristics of the medium, and preference based on extrinsic factors, such as price or contract allowances. Respondents were also asked how comfortable they felt, relatively, face-to-face, on the phone, or when texting. This was a relatively sensitive issue, because some respondents were embarrassed about their inadequacy on the phone. On occasion, an informant's discomfort with calls only emerged towards the end of an interview, in response to direct probing, contradicting his earlier comments. In addition to respondents' attitudes, the research probed relative usage of the two media (both claimed and as evidenced by their communication diaries and mobile phone bills).

Respondents fell into two groups: the majority were most comfortable when interacting face-to-face, then during calls and then when texting (two had no preference). Five of those who were most comfortable with calls, nevertheless texted, usually because of cost. However, a substantial minority of twelve were most comfortable when texting, usually *followed* by face-to-face interaction, with phone calls as the channel in which they were least comfortable. Note the asymmetry in that Texters generally prefer texting even to face-to-face communication, whereas Talkers are most comfortable communicating face-to-face; this pattern was also found by Reid and Reid (2005a).

Mobile phone bills, where available, and diaries supported claimed relative usage, although there was a degree of exaggeration. Mobile phone contracts in the UK are generally designed for Talkers, with a basic allowance of calls. Texters who had

contracts were not using their call allocation each month, and some had accumulated a large number of "free" minutes. In addition, whereas Talkers' bills often showed long calls, Texters' calls were typically less than 30 seconds in duration. For example, Kevin had an allowance of 500 minutes; in fact his bill showed that he had not used any minutes in the previous month. In contrast Dee had used 497 minutes of her 500 minute allowance. The communication diaries confirmed these patterns of usage. For instance, Dee's diary showed that on the day before the interview she had made five mobile phone calls, but had sent no text messages, although she had received two text messages. In contrast, Kevin's diary showed that he had had two extended text message exchanges, and had sent two further text messages (one in reply to a mobile phone call that he had missed), but he had not made any phone calls.

The term "Texter", which was introduced by Reid and Reid (2005a), is somewhat misleading because all respondents texted and nearly all were enthusiastic about text messages. Text messages had many advantages: they were quick and easy to send and did not disrupt the ongoing activities of the sender; they did not intrude on the recipient or others in their vicinity; they were inexpensive; they were private; and they afforded a slower, more open ended form of communication. However, Texters were particularly enthusiastic about texting and frequently compared text message interaction favourably with phone calls, whereas Talkers explained their use of text messages mainly in terms of speed, lack of intrusion, cost and the specific communication task. For instance, Ella, whom I categorised as a Texter, explained that she found it "easier to get across" what she wanted to say with text messages, because, "With text you don't have any strained kind of silences, you can just be to the point and don't have to worry about anything else." Quinton also preferred text messages, and explained:

> Quinton: There's that **cloak of slight anonymity**? I don't know if that's correct, but, but certainly, um. It's you send it, you get a response back, you send and response back. It's, it's much, **you're in control more** perhaps though.
>
> (bold emphasis added)

Texters appeared to be uncomfortable when on the phone, whether mobile or landline. The degree of discomfort varied, but three respondents were extremely phone averse. Zoe greeted the researcher with the words "I'm a phone-o-phobic". Throughout the interview she explained her strategies for avoiding calls. She unplugged the answer phone on her landline, to avoid having to call people back, and

made excuses to get off the phone, even when talking to her mother or sister. Zoe had a particular problem with strangers:

> Zoe: Even if I want a Chinese, I have to either go and ask my next door neighbour "Can you ring this up for me?" Or if there's someone in the house they can do it. I can't do it. I can <u>not</u> ring up and order food, over the phone.

Yves shared her attitude to phone calls. If the job agency rang him to arrange an interview, he would not take the call, but would use the call as a cue to go there physically, to avoid having to speak on the phone. The only local phone numbers on his phone bill were a taxi company, a pizza delivery company, and his home number. In addition he had made two 35 second calls to a relative in Blackpool, and had made three foreign calls, because he was concerned that he wasn't getting a reply to his text messages. Although Yves said that he had no local friends, through a dating site on the Internet he has built up a network of friends throughout the world, with whom he exchanges text messages, emails, and MSN chat. Kevin also hated talking on the phone. If his mother called he would visit her, rather than return her call. He met his long term girlfriend in an Internet chat room. They meet rarely and do not speak on the phone, despite using each other's phone number to send several text messages every day.

> Kevin: The only time I've spoken to her on the phone was "I'm at the airport waiting for you. Where are you?"
> Ruth: So, not at all as emotionally close, as you are with texts, on the phone?
> Kevin: No.
> Ruth: But yet face-to-face?
> Kevin: Face-to-face emotionally close, text messages –
> Ruth: Why?
> Kevin: I don't know. Neither of us has ever phoned each other.

Zoe, Kevin and Yves are at the extreme end of the Texters spectrum. Their attitudes to phone calls are somewhat surprising, given that the research respondents all spent over £15 per month on their mobile phones, and had volunteered as subjects for research, which was clearly described as being about mobile phones. As Kevin said, "The only thing that surprises me, about me, is why I even bothered getting a mobile phone in the first place". Others shared their attitudes, but were less extreme, sometimes being relatively comfortable when talking to close contacts or strangers, but not with those in between.

Although Texters disliked phone calls, they were enthusiastic about their mobile phones and text messages clearly played a major role in their social lives. This is supported by an analysis of the text messages collected. These were classified into two groups, instrumental and phatic[3], depending on their ostensible motive. Instrumental text messages are sent to accomplish a specific objective outside the communication, whereas in phatic communication the objective is the social interaction of the communication itself (see Figure 1 for examples of text messages classified as "phatic" and "instrumental"). Slightly over 70% of the text messages collected from Texters appeared to be phatic, indicating that their text messages have a social function. The percentage of phatic messages was slightly lower at 56% for Talkers, presumably because they also make phatic phone calls.
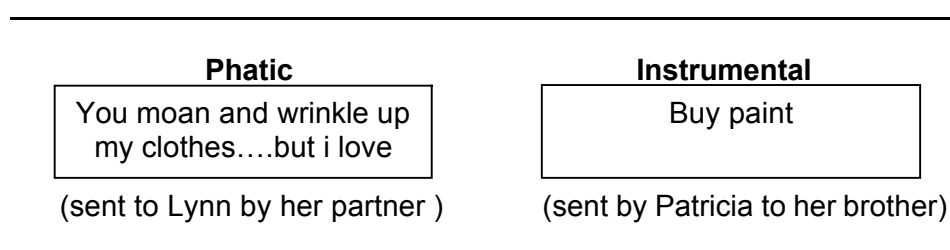
Phatic	**Instrumental**
You moan and wrinkle up my clothes….but i love	Buy paint
(sent to Lynn by her partner)	(sent by Patricia to her brother)

Figure 1. Phatic and Instrumental Text Messages

In contrast to the negative attitudes of Texters towards phone calls, Talkers positively enjoyed being on the phone, and could spend 30 minutes or more on a call. Mobile phone calls were generally shorter than landline calls, but this was price driven, where they had mobile phone contracts that allowed free off peak usage, calls were much longer. Talkers explicitly recognized a category of people whom they described as being "not good on the phone" or "not a phone person", and often avoided phoning them, choosing to text instead. Some Talkers were less keen on SMS, because they found the typing difficult or, in one case, because the respondent was dyslexic and found it difficult to compose messages. However, most Talkers enjoyed *both* phone calls and text messages. Whereas Texters avoided making phone calls, texting (or emailing) unless this was impractical, Talkers explained how they sometimes selected a particular channel for its specific interactional affordances. For instance, they made phone calls when they needed to discuss something, because they found it easier to

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[3] The seven respondents who had "pay as you go" phones did not receive mobile phone bills. A further three respondents had bills paid directly by their employers and six were unable, or reluctant, to provide copies.

resolve issues in the inactive interaction of a phone call. They also said that they made calls when they were lonely and in need of company, or when they had to deliver "bad news", because they wanted to be available to provide emotional support. Text messages were often a quick way of letting the other person know they were thinking of them without intruding, but were also used where they wished to avoid interactive communication, for instance, when apologising.

The next three sections of the paper discuss Texters in more detail, relating their phone aversion firstly, to call structure, and secondly, to presentation of self, before elucidating their attitudes by focusing on the phenomenological experience of mobile phone interaction.

4.1 Phone Aversion and Call Structure

Texters found call structure oppressive. There was a need for small talk, silences were unacceptable and finishing a call could be difficult. Both Texters and Talkers spoke about the need for small talk in phone calls: "you've got to get the whole chit-chat in there" (Tanya). This was more onerous for Texters. Fred explained: "it's very hard to make conversation … you know talking about inconsequential stuff or, you know, insignificant kind of stuff". Goffman (1981, p. 18) claims that in verbal conversation the interactants need to have "safe supplies" that is "a stock of inoffensive, ready-to-hand utterances which can be employed to fill gaps"; Texters found this difficult. Moreover, they were concerned that if they used up these comments, there would be nothing for them to talk about when they met face-to-face, as Fred commented, "if I say it all on the phone when we see each other we won't have much to talk about". The problem of small talk is compounded on the phone, because silences are unacceptable. Whereas in face-to-face interaction Texters could interact socially without having to make conversation, for example watching TV together, on the phone silences were interpreted as meaningful.

> Ruth: You said on the phone you can't be silent? Why not?
> Ulysses: Or, if you are, it's a <u>very</u> big statement. **It's a very, <u>very</u> big statement, if you're silent on the phone.** You know, they're just all the pressures are to make a noise.
> <div align="right">(bold emphasis added)</div>

Texters also found it difficult to end calls. As Kevin commented: "I've found myself thinking on a call before, 'OK we've got the information. Can we just finish the phone call now, <u>please</u>?'" Although many respondents said that some people talked for too long when on the phone, this was a particular complaint of Texters. Some Texters

seemed to be exceptionally aware of the structure of phone calls. Xavier described the structure of phone conversation, recognizing the different stages that have been identified using conversation analysis (e.g. Schegloff 1986; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; Arminen & Leinonen 2006).

> Xavier: A phone call comes in stages, you know. … you have to obviously let them know who you are, um. Get that out the way then um you can either, uh, go along with small talk for a little bit, or you can go straight in with what you called to talk about, if it's that sort of phone call. Um, once that's out the way, bit more small talk and then tail it off, or you can say, "OK I'll see you later", if you want to make it a shorter phone call. But, um tailing tail- I don't really like the tailing off part, because of, um, it's pure jest who has to do it first and the way you do it and ahh who says goodbye first.

Xavier, much preferred texting, because he did not like small talk and he found it hard to end phone calls. Xavier is aware of call structure, but takes it for granted. He does not treat the norm for small talk as discretionary, although he has devised a strategy for reducing it during the negotiation of access at the beginning of the call (Licoppe, 2004; Arminen, 2005; Schegloff, 1986):

> Xavier: I think you have to voice it to say, "Oh I'm off yeah, my phone bill's terrible this month" and uh just. I I sometimes say, "Just a quick one" right at the beginning of the conversation, "Just a quick one" and then I get on with the phone conversation and then I get on with it with the phone conversation, yeah. And I say, "Yeah quick yeah see you later".

The need for small talk and the difficulty experienced when ending calls does not fully explain Texters' negative attitudes. Most Texters particularly disliked voicemail and answer phones (although one preferred it to actually having to talk on the phone). In the research there were nine respondents who *never* left voice messages, eight of these were Texters. This suggests that Texters' problem with audio communication is not just small talk or getting off the phone, as none of these are relevant to voicemail. Rather, they may be particularly concerned by the need for interaction ritual during phone calls, *because* they find phone calls uncomfortable.

4.2 Presentation of Self in Mobile Phone Communication

Many respondents complained about the difficulty of interpreting cues in phone conversation, because there were no visual cues. Texters seemed to be particularly conscious of this. In phone calls the loss of visual cues, such as facial expressions,

makes interpretation more difficult than in face-to-face interaction. In the next extract, Lynn, a Texter, explains this in more detail:

> Lynn: You can hear something in the tone, but you're not quite sure. You can't see the eyes, you can't see the body language. You're kind of, you're picking up on **half signals** and sometimes it can be **misinterpreted** and sometimes, um it **can give a little bit too much away**. So it's sort of, I'd rather do it face to face, I'd rather completely confront it, or kind of shy away from it than to do that middle ground if it was a difficult [situation].
>
> (bold emphasis added)

Lynn suggests that it is not only the danger of misinterpretation that concerns her; she is also worried about her lack of *control* over the expressions given off in her tone of voice. The problem with phone call interaction is not simply that there are insufficient cues, but the nature of those cues. Speakers give off many cues inadvertently in their tone of voice, slight hesitations, and choice of words. As Lynn explains, a call "can give a little bit too much away". Lynn's use of the term "half-signals" is interesting. Face-to-face interaction includes audio cues, but these are supported by visual cues. A speaker can support her verbal performance with appropriate visual cues so that, for instance, intended humour is signalled not only by intonation, but also by a rye smile, raised eyebrow or challenging glance. More importantly, in face-to-face interaction, what is *being understood* is signalled visually as well as verbally. Respondents were concerned that what was given off in phone calls might be misinterpreted; this is of less concern in face-to-face communication, because there is a continuous back channel of visual feedback on how one is coming across.

The attitudes of Texters to phone calls were summed up by Kevin:

> Kevin: Maybe it's hard work, maybe it's harder work than a face-to-face conversation. Um, there is an expectation of, of **fluffiness** in the call, which is an awful lot easier for me in person to person. And written communication doesn't have the same expectation of the sort of **bonding bit** that goes around the conversation, when you're just having an idle chat with someone. Maybe I know I'm not great, or think I'm not great at it, and want **the visual cues to back up the audio cues.**
>
> (bold emphasis added)

Kevin's references to "fluffiness" and the "bonding bit" seem to refer to a problem with presentation of self; he attributes this to his lack of competence and the need to rely on audio cues. Texters seem to find presentation of self in phone calls particularly difficult. This would explain why they feel uncomfortable on the phone, and why they dislike call structure norms that prolong the experience.

Presentation of self in SMS is rather different. There are less expressions, both given and given off, but these are more controllable than in phone calls. The interactants have more time to think about their responses and this increases their control over presentation of self (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2006). Text messages are written independently; both Texters and Talkers emphasised this aspect of SMS. It gives participants time to consider the impression they are trying to make, and is particularly useful at the beginning of romantic relationships. Carol explained how she might write a text very carefully: "you might read it about 10 times over, sort of thing, just to appear like as if you're really cool, you're just sending a casual message to a friend" whereas "the spoken word you could fumble and you could be under pressure and nervous and the wrong message might be conveyed as well".

The non-verbal cues in text messages are easier to control, but there is far less scope for these than in phone calls. Very few respondents used emoticons (there were just six text messages with emoticons in the text messages collected). The lack of cues in text messages means that they are often ambiguous. Respondents spoke about frequent misunderstandings, and about the problem of conveying sarcasm and humour in text messages if one didn't know the sender well. Interpretation is less problematic with messages from close friends, because they *infer* tone from their prior knowledge of the sender.

4.3 The Phenomenological Experience of Mobile Phone Interaction

Phenomenology "studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view" (Smith, 2003). The research adopted a phenomenological approach in order to understand respondents' experience of phone calls and text messages.

Respondents frequently said that the experience of phone calls was very similar to face-to-face interaction: "although you're not actually looking at each other, I suppose in a sense it still, it's face-to-face, without the faces" (Jackie). Zoe, a Texter, made the same point when explaining why she preferred text, "at least I don't have to talk to them. I know it's not. It's daft 'cos it's not face-to-face on the phone, but it is face-to-face to me". Several used the same metaphor, being on the phone was like being with the other person, but with one's eyes shut. They emphasised the synchrony and shared focus of phone conversation:

> Carol: Yes, I think the other person is there, then and there. And you're
>   both communicating **at exactly the same time.** And that person

has **stopped to speak to you and you've stopped to speak** to that person and you're both com[municating]. Like **your thoughts are together at the same time.**
(bold emphasis added)

Phone calls involved focused concurrent interaction: "you've very much more got somebody's undivided attention on the phone … than almost anything else" (Harry). In phone calls the interactants were "there together". When on the phone: "you forget actually that you're in a crowded place, you're kind of in your own little world" (Anne). Whereas this was perceived as a benefit by Talkers, for Texters the focused attention and real time interactivity of phone calls can be stressful. Some felt that they could be more easily manipulated in verbal conversation: "I hate being manipulated in conversations, absolutely loathe it" (Kevin). Lynn explained this in more detail; I had asked her about the differences between texting and calling.

Lynn: It's harder to say what you're, what you're trying to say to somebody, because **they can interrupt or they can change –** they can say something well makes, which will **make you change what you were going to say,** whereas on a text message, because it's only. It's like writing a letter, you can, you can kind of **break down exactly what you want to say and it doesn't get manipulated** [in] any way, and then you send it, and it's gone.
(bold emphasis added)

Lynn prefers to send text messages rather make phone calls, because she feels less vulnerable to manipulation. Not only does she have more time to think about what she wants with SMS, but she can say it without interruptions that may change what she says.

Respondents tended to talk about *situations* when discussing phone calls and face-to-face interactions. In phone calls and face-to-face interaction they spoke about "leaving the situation"; and complained about the difficulty of ending phone calls. These comments indicate strong situational proprieties for both phone calls and face-to-face interactions. In contrast text message conversations were not treated as situations. They did not seem to impose situational obligations; one could just ignore or delete a text message. This was a major advantage of text messages, not only for Texters, but also for Talkers in awkward circumstances or when they were busy. For instance, Patricia, a Talker, explained that rejection was less distressing in text message conversation than phone or face-to-face conversation:

> Patricia: [on the phone] you have to **leave the situation** and it's the awkwardness of, you know**, having to deal with the situation**. At the end of the day you can delete somebody's number, turn the phone off.
>
>   (bold emphasis added)

In contrast to the copresence of phone calls, when discussing text message interaction, respondents spoke of the other person as not being there, or of "distance". This can be an advantage: Olivia explained that it was easier to use endearments in text messages, because if one was rejected "it wouldn't matter 'cos you're not there". The feeling that the other person isn't "there" in text messages is especially relevant in embarrassing interactions and in new relationships. Several female respondents said that men were more romantic in SMS than when face-to-face or on the phone. Irene said that her boyfriend first told her he loved her by text: it was "much easier for him to write it than say it, also much easier for me, because I didn't have to sort of worry about what my face was doing".

For both Texters and Talkers, the arrival of a text message is usually experienced as pleasurable. The analogy with gifts (Taylor & Harper, 2003) was not supported by this research, but many interviewees described a momentary sense of elation when they heard their text message sound alert: "a little joy" (Cecil). Although text messages do not require an immediate response, most opened their messages immediately, with positive expectations. This may be because many messages are phatic. Messages from mobile phone service providers are regarded as irritating, and most had turned delivery reports off because they found it disappointing when they received confirmation of delivery rather than a reply.

The phenomenological experience of phoning and of texting was a difficult area to research, because respondents took these experiences for granted and found them hard to articulate. The interviews therefore included a projective exercise to elucidate the character of these experiences. At the end of the interviews, a Blob Tree diagram (Wilson, 1991) was introduced and respondents were asked to choose the figures that best illustrated what they felt when making phone calls, texting, emailing etc. Figure 2 shows Yves' Blob Tree diagram and the figures he selected for (tele)phone calls, text messages, email and instant messenger. Yves is a Texter who feels closest to the other participant when using instant messenger. He hates the phone; his feelings are reflected in the figures he chose for each communication channel.
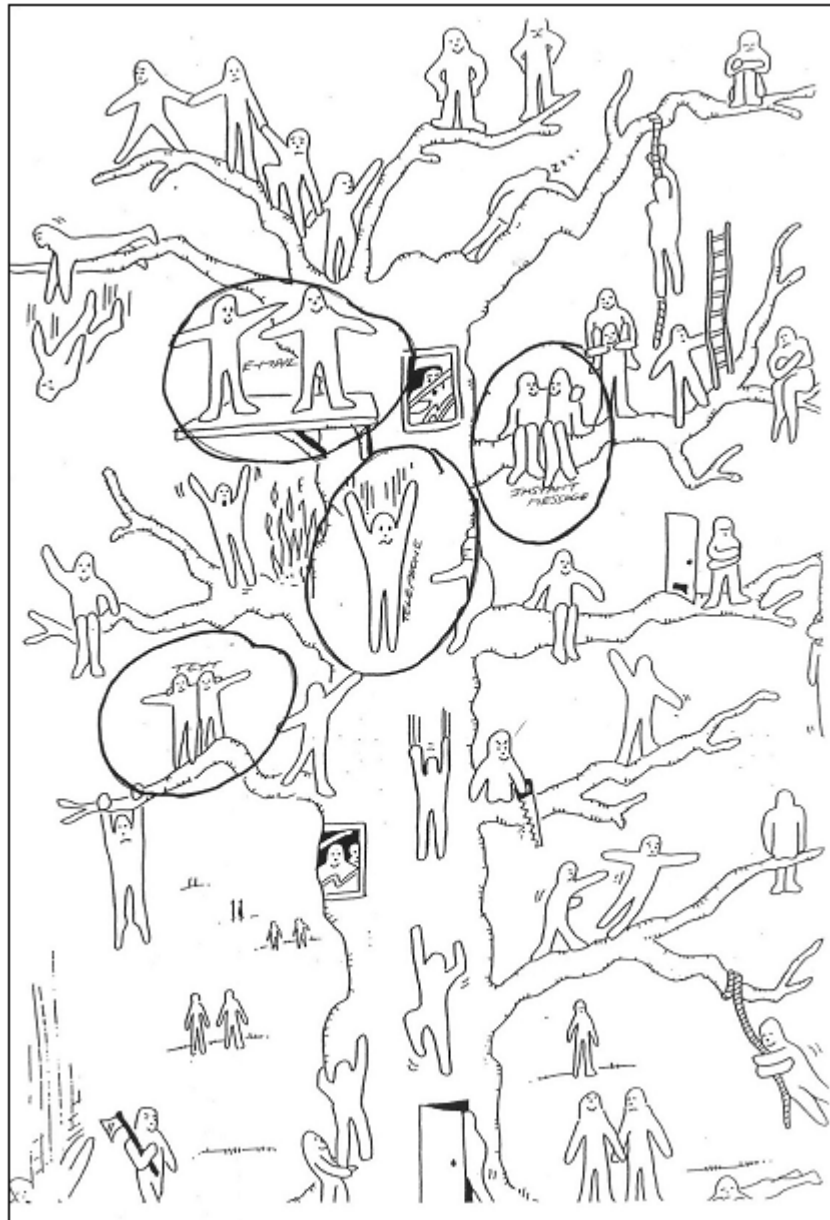
Figure 2. Yves' Blob Tree Diagram *(Illustration from Wilson, 1991)*

Respondents' choices did not show a consistent pattern for each channel as anticipated, although their choices were consistent with the views they expressed in the interviews. Instead their responses fell into two groups, with Talkers and Texters choosing different sorts of illustrations, see Figure 3. All except one of the Talkers chose intimate figures to represent the experience of being on the phone; the picture at the end of the first row was chosen most frequently. Texters, on the other hand, typically chose pictures for phone calls showing more distant figures falling, waving, or hanging, as shown in the second row, reserving the more intimate pictures for their experience of SMS. Talkers talked about how they felt close to the other person during

a phone call, whereas Texters felt more detached and sometimes anxious; the pictures they chose reflect their attitudes.

Figure 3. How Talkers and Texters Visualize Phone Calls *(Illustration from Wilson, 1991)*

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The research substantiates and explains the distinction between Texters and Talkers that was identified by Reid and Reid (2005a). Talkers preferred talking on the phone, but used text messages as a convenient complementary medium. Texters were much less comfortable on the phone, and preferred to send text messages. Both groups enjoyed sending and receiving text messages, but those classified as "Texters" exhibited varying degrees of phone aversion. Phone aversion is an important, but neglected, individual response to social interaction, which has been recognized for

nearly 50 years (LaRose, 1999), but there is relatively little research on the condition. Wurtzel and Turner (1977) suggest that 15% of the population are telephone averse; this corresponds with the 10% of the sample in this research who were extremely phone averse. Previous research on telephone aversion has focused on extreme cases. This research suggests that in a milder form it is relatively common, and has been over looked in mobile phone communication. This is surprising, given the extensive volume of research on mobile phones in the last ten years. There is a need for further research to quantify the significance and distribution of phone aversion among mobile phone users. This research included only adult mobile phone users; it is possible that phone aversion is more widespread among teenagers. In the research several respondents commented that they had outgrown previous problems with phone calls. Problems with phone calls may be something that some people grow out of; this would explain the particular appeal of texting to younger people (Ling, 2004). This is consistent with research conducted among teenagers (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2006, p. 326) that claims that text messaging helps young people to control presentation of self, enabling presentation of their "more courageous selves".

Phone calls were perceived as ongoing social situations, which demanded a prolonged, continuous performance. This makes presentation of self more challenging, because the participants feel as if they are together, interacting in real-time. Silences and hesitations are interpreted as meaningful, so that there is little time for the interactants to deliberate. In addition, in phone calls - as in ordinary conversation - there is opportunity for interruption and interjection within each conversational turn; this enables one participant to manipulate the conversation. In verbal conversation what is understood is a result of interactive co-operation between the participants (Garfinkel, 1967); one participant can coercively interpret the other, understanding what is said so as to favour a preferred interpretation, or interrupt to forestall a particular interpretation (Silverman & Torode, 1980). In contrast, the asynchrony of SMS increases individual control and reduces scope for loss of face and embarrassment. The interactants are not interacting in a shared time. Consequently, as with traditional letters, participants can think about the messages they send, choosing their words carefully and not exposing themselves to embarrassment and loss of face. However, unlike traditional written media, SMS is *quasi-synchronous*, so interactive conversation is possible.

The experience of phone calls appears to be different for the two groups identified as Talkers and Texters. Talkers enjoy phone calls and, as indicated by the Blob Tree exercise, feel a sense of connectedness with the other interactant when on the phone.

Texters, however, did not feel close to the other person when on the phone, but felt disconnected and uncomfortable. This is exacerbated by social expectations that prolong phone calls. The research suggests that Texters find presentation of self in phone calls more difficult; this makes them anxious and changes the phenomenological experience of the call.

Phone calls present a particular challenge for the presentation of self, because silence is unacceptable, and visual cues are excluded. Presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) involves projection of the self, interpretation of the self projected by the other interactant, and also a recursive mutual monitoring in which each interactant checks on the impression he is making. Each of these aspects may be implicated in the discomfort experienced by Texters in phone calls. Texters may be less able to control the audio cues they give off. This is a supposition that goes beyond the research evidence, but it is consistent with Texters' dislike voicemail, which would expose this ineptitude. Similarly, one can surmise that Texters may be less competent in the interpretation of the audio cues they receive from the other interactant. These have two functions; they help to convey what the other person is saying *and* they show an interactant how his performance is being received. In face-to-face interaction subtle facial expressions and eye contact provide continuous concurrent feedback, but in phone calls feedback is limited to intermittent verbal and paraverbal cues. Presentation of self on the phone is also complicated because there may be a concurrent face-to-face interaction and consequent role conflict (Geser, 2005). Texters find it particularly embarrassing to conduct phone calls in front of copresent others and consequently switch their phones off when in public places. Finally, it may be that Texters feel less socially adequate and therefore more aware of these challenges. A combination of these factors may be relevant, and the relevant factors may vary between different individuals. Presentation of self is a skill, as Goffman (1959) points out. The relative incompetence of Texters and/or their lack of confidence makes them vulnerable to manipulation in the ongoing interactivity of phone conversation. Presentation of self is less demanding in SMS, because it is asynchronous. This gives the interactants time to deliberate on their performance, without concurrent influence from the other interactant. For Texters, who find phone conversation awkward, SMS affords remote, safe social interaction.

There is some indication in this research that phone aversion is a symptom of a more general problem with social interaction. Texters usually preferred SMS and other written communication to *face-to-face* interaction, suggesting a degree of social

ineptitude. This is consistent with Reid and Reid's (2005b) findings that Texters scored significantly higher in terms of "loneliness" (Russell et al., 1980) and "interaction anxiousness" (Leary, 1983). However, the evidence for this may have been constrained by the research design, because all respondents had voluntarily chosen the social interaction of the interviews, indicating a degree of social confidence.

It is interesting to note that the characteristics of phone calls that seem to create phone aversion are socially rather than technologically shaped. The extended real-time continuity of phone calls, the need for small talk, and the ritualised closing, are not technical features of phone technology. There is no *technical* reason why phone calls could not be used for minimal messages such as "Goodnight", but all respondents took it for granted that this was not acceptable. The constraint of normative practice in this area is so strong that Texters would rather forgo phone calls, than infringe call structure norms. This normative practice seems to have transferred from telephone to mobile calls, although the increased cost of mobile phone calls provides an excuse for shorter calls. In contrast, the normative practices associated with letters have not been extended to text messages. This may have been technically shaped by the small screens and character limit of early phones, which made such etiquette impractical. However, although phone screens have got larger, and multi-page text messages are possible, text messages have retained their lax norms, again reflecting the role of social shaping in communication practice. While respondents took phone structure for granted, they spoke positively about the lack of normative constraint in text messages; this creates flexibility and allows users to personalise their messages.

Recognition of the distinction between Texters and Talkers is socially important, because Texters are at a substantial disadvantage in phone communication. Text messages have many advantages for all users, but for those who are phone averse, SMS is a ground-breaking technology, affording the remote social conversation that they cannot enjoy in phone calls. The recent proliferation of near-synchronous written media may facilitate the social connectedness of this section of the community.

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