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Mobile Connections: An exploration of the place of mobile phones in friendship relations

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Abstract

This paper explores the place and meaning of mobile phones within friendship relations amongst young Pakistani-British women and men. In particular it focuses on the ways in which friendship relations are transformed and reconfigured through new mobile phone technologies; and how ‘doing’ friendship on the mobile uncovers significant insight into contemporary youth cultures of masculinity and femininity. Although the majority of young people of the ‘multimedia generation’ have fully engaged with the mobile telephony revolution, there is no work which grounds mobile phone use within theoretical perspectives on friendship, in particular in different peer group cultures. We draw upon new empirical data from research in the North East of England to explore young people’s perceptions and uses of mobile phones. The resulting narratives reveal interesting gendered practices of connectivity and sociability amongst the sample group and important dimensions of developing peer group identities, including diverse performance of femininities and masculinities. Building on these ideas, this paper aims to make a theoretical contribution to debates on friendship and mobile phone use. In particular, we argue for the need to ground the empirical study of young people and mobile phones more firmly within social theory: a development that contributes towards a sharpening of theoretical perspectives on mobile technologies.
Key Words

Mobile phones, Friendship, Gender, Ethnicity, Masculinities / femininities, Cultures of use, Connectivity, Intimacy

Introduction

This paper explores the place and meaning of mobile phones within friendship relations amongst young Pakistani-British people. In particular it focuses on the embedding of mobiles in the micro-social worlds of friendship and intimate relations; the ways in which friendship is being reconfigured through new mobile phone technologies; and how ‘doing’ friendship on the mobile phone reveals significant insight into diverse cultures of masculinity and femininity. The majority of young people of the ‘multimedia generation’ have fully engaged with the mobile telephony revolution, with over 90% of young British people aged between 16 and 24 having access to one or more mobile phones (Ofcom, 2006). There has been a large amount of work which identifies the appeal and usage of mobile phones for and by young people and it is well established that mobile phones are important tools in the development and maintenance of peer networks in terms of coordinating everyday life, communication and the sharing of information (for a comprehensive overview see Ling, 2004). However, there is limited work which grounds mobile phone use within sociological perspectives on friendship, in particular with a focus on different peer group cultures. We draw upon empirical data from a research project in the North East of England where focus groups were carried out to explore young Pakistani-British people’s perceptions of mobile phones. The resulting narratives revealed interesting gendered practices of connectivity and
communication amongst the sample group. In this paper we argue that new information and communication technologies are having significant effects on the development, maintenance and performance of young people’s friendships and that mobiles are a key site through which gendered social relations between peers can be observed. Similarly, exploring gendered use of mobile phones reveals important dimensions of cultural identities within the peer group, including diverse performance of femininities and masculinities.

Our analysis of mobile phones and friendship is grounded in the thesis that technology and social relations are mutually shaping and that these relations are gendered (Wajcman, 2004; Gill & Grint, 1995). Most recently, some feminist theorists of technology, inspired by debates on intersectionality and difference, have put forward the view that we need to look more critically at the gender-technology relation and develop an understanding of the ways in which a multiplicity of social relations including age, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality and technology shape one another (Kennedy, 2005). Analysis of our data shows that use of mobiles are shaped by friendship relations and in turn that these relationships are shaped by diverse configurations of masculinity and femininity which are reworked across time and context. Our Pakistani-British participants share common experiences of connectedness with other British youth, but also engage in technological practices shaped by diverse cultural values and norms, suggesting that such practices are embedded in particular socio-technological cultures of use and behaviour. For example, whilst men used mobiles primarily to arrange activities with friends, women’s use of mobiles demonstrated the creation and maintenance of a space devoted to ‘doing friendship’ which reflects well known traditional gendered
friendship roles. Yet, the young women and men also draw upon diverse cultural identifications and meanings as part of their self-identity and these are experienced and practiced in everyday life, including in their relationship with technology and with their friends. Group discussions about, for example, language use on the mobile phone reveal the ways in which they enact and perform identity and sociability within the friendship group. Here ethnicity emerges as an important part of belonging to particular friendship groups where modes and meanings of communication are shared. Developing these ideas, this paper aims to make a theoretical contribution to debates on friendship and mobile phone use. In particular, we argue for the need to ground the empirical study of young people and mobile phones more firmly within sociological theory to sharpen theoretical perspectives on mobile technologies. Additionally, debates about friendship could be enriched by a critical focus on diversity and the use of new communication technologies such as mobile phones in developing and maintaining friendships.

Friendship, identity and mobile phone use

It is well-established that many young people are heavily dependent upon their friends for social support and self-identity (Pahl, 2000). Adolescence is a time when young people experiment with friendship and learn about new and different types of personal relationships. It is also a period during which young people engage in reflexive identity work (Giddens, 1991; McRobbie, 2000; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003). Traditional features of industrial society, such as class, community and family (although they still have resonance) are seen as decreasing in influence, and relationships with strangers, encountered through greater national and global flows of people and cultures, are taking
on greater significance. There is continuing debate about the nature of contemporary personal relationships, particularly around the types of relationships replacing traditional bonds of solidarity formed around community and neighbourhood (Savage et al., 2005; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Whilst some postmodern theorists postulate that contemporary personal ties are more fragile, superficial and transient than ever before (Bauman, 2003), others maintain that friendships have become increasingly significant as ‘sites of activity giving life meaning’ (Allan, 1998: 699). Indeed Spencer & Pahl (2006) observe that although individuals tend to have more fluid networks of intimates, characterised by greater choice and diversity regarding whom they associate with, and the duration, meaning and purpose of the tie, they are, nonetheless, committed to maintaining enduring and meaningful solidarities.

A further characteristic of this change is linked with increased reflexivity and ‘individualization’ in the processes of identity formation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001), resulting in young individuals experiencing greater choice and determination in the construction of the ‘project of self’, which includes choice of friends and intimates (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). In this context there are new possibilities for femininities and masculinities which blend with more traditional representations of gendered identities (Nayak, 2003; Frosh et al., 2002). The concepts of masculinity and femininity are defined here as constructed, performed and contested aspects of identity which are embodied and experienced both individually and solidaristically. Friendship is one arena in which young people’s identities are constructed and negotiated around performance of different expressions of masculinity and femininity (Green, 1998; Nardi, 1992). Another key site in which identities and personal relations are shaped is that of
technology use. Our research corroborates the notion that mobiles are significant in the maintenance of peer groups’ social networks and in the production of young people’s identity projects.

There is now a sizeable body of literature on young people and mobile phone use which demonstrates that young people in the UK and elsewhere are at the forefront of mobile phone adoption and use (Ling, 2004). Mobiles have been conceptualised as a technology of connectivity (as well as technologies of safety and emancipation) enabling users to connect with family and friends throughout the day and night (Campbell, 2006). The place of technology in the maintenance of friendship and personal relations has a long history, with technological advancements associated with modernity making contact between both proximate and more remote friendships less expensive, faster and easier (Adams, 1998; Marvin, 1988). Recent research on ‘mobilities’ and networks has shown that although people are travelling more, they are also more connected through communication technologies, which raises interesting questions about geographical and emotional proximity and the extent to which people require face-to-face contact to feel emotionally close to friends and family (Larsen et al., 2006). Young people’s friendships are also thought to have undergone significant changes, with friendships being maintained, and in some cases formed, through digital media enabling young people to stay in touch with friends both locally and globally with relative ease (Abbott, 2004). Mobile phone contact was important for our participants who had ties both locally and in Pakistan and they often used text messaging as an economical means of staying in touch with their globally dispersed network of relatives and friends. This links with recent sociological interest in the
centrality of friendship within personal communities (as opposed to those configured around work or place-based communities) which are more geographically dispersed and subject to change across the life course (Pahl, 2000: 2). As Delanty (2003) observes: ‘Friendship may be seen as a flexible and de-territorial kind of community that can be mobilised easily depending on circumstances, and can exist on ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ levels…’ (Delanty, 2003: 144). However, such debates also raise related concerns about the quality of friendship relations in a social context where, it is claimed, individuals are less trusting of others and less committed to long-term and meaningful relationships (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). This in turn evokes questions about the role and place of communication technologies. Do mobile phones facilitate the increase of more personalised and flexible relationships configured around individualised networks? How fleeting and transient are young people’s ties listed within their mobile phone address books? Is a text message a ‘superficial’ form of connectivity or do mobiles facilitate continuity and commitment to our personal communities of belonging via enhanced, and often perpetual, connectivity?

Gendering mobile sociability

Whilst use of new technologies play an important role in the maintenance of young people’s local and remote personal relationships, the gendered aspects of this remain less well explored. Drawing upon the thesis that technology and gendered social relations are mutually constructed and constitutive (Wajcman, 2004; Gill & Grint, 1995), and a recognition of the heterogeneity of young men’s and women’s relationships with technology (Kennedy, 2005), we suggest that the mobile phone is an
important site of social change which reveals interesting findings about related reconfigurations of feminine and masculine identities. We build upon earlier research on the telephone which demonstrated the phone as a gendered technology and underscored the importance of fixed line telephones in the maintenance of friendship and intimate relations, particularly for women (Rakow, 1992; Frissen, 1995; Ling, 1998; Smoreda & Licoppe, 2000). They identified a ‘dynamic, feminine culture of the telephone’ where the telephone is, ‘…part of a cultural shaping process; it is part of the discourses in which gender identities are constructed…’ (Moyal, 1992: 87). Thus, women were frequent talkers with both family and (often female) friends but they were also crucial actors in the system of social support maintained through phone use. While the general gender-technology argument posits that men have a strong relationship with technology and that women have a non-relationship or fear of technology (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Knights, 2004), use of the telephone is seen as subverting this dichotomy (Lohan, 2001)iii. Lohan’s research on men and the telephone demonstrates the complexities of men’s relationships with this ‘mundane’ domestic technology, illustrating both men’s enjoyment of, and resistance towards, telephone conversation. This highlights the processes by which masculinities are deconstructed and reconstructed in their changing relationships with technological artefacts. More importantly, this work has challenged one dimensional theorising of gender and technology, outlining a far more complex picture of gendered relationships with technology. Additionally, Rakow (1992: 87) found that although women were carrying out critical social support via the telephone, women’s ‘talk’ was often devalued as ‘chat’ or ‘gossip’. However, as recent debates about the changing nature of communities and ‘the local’ suggest, women’s ‘gossip’ remains a key social process in cementing community, family and friendship ties.
(Morgan, 2005). Although women’s increased participation in paid work necessarily reduces their daily face-to-face interaction with neighbours and kin, women continue to hold communities together through both formal and informal networks of intimacy and support (Charles and Davies, 2005). Increasingly, this connectedness is achieved through new ICTs including the internet and email (Hampton, 2007; Adams, 1998). Despite some trivialisation of women’s telephone behaviour therefore, it can be argued that it forms the backbone of social connectedness and communication.

Although there has been some valuable work on the mutual shaping of gender and mobile phones, this remains limited tending to focus on mobiles within the family and household. A notable exception is the work of Lemish and Cohen (2005) who observed that mobiles are changing some of the more traditional relationships between technology use and gender by encouraging men to talk more and women to use more innovative technologies, whilst simultaneously reinforcing others by constituting a ‘site’ where traditional gender identities are cemented. Thus whilst in our own research we have identified the mobile as an important part of the ‘culture of the bedroom’ wherein teenage girls create an independent space for leisure and friendship within the domestic realm (McRobbie & Garber, 1976), mobiles also enable some young women to negotiate new freedoms outside of the home through the maintenance of contact with parents from remote locations (Campbell, 2006). Much less is known about the impact of the mobile phone on young men’s use of time and space, but our data suggests that although mobiles are very important in young male networks there are significant gender differences in terms of use and meaning. This paper makes a contribution to the
under-theorised area of mobile phones and gendered friendship, offering insights on different cultures of masculinity and femininity which remain under-explored.

**Methodology**

This paper draws upon findings from a qualitative pilot study of mobile phone use and the meanings attached to this particular technology for young Pakistani-British women and men. Research participants were recruited from a town in the North East of England between December 2004 and April 2005. Discussion focuses upon six women’s and three men’s focus groups involving 47 participants aged between 14 and 25 years (29 women and 18 men). All participants were born in the UK and self-identified as Pakistani, Pakistani-British, and Asian-British. They also identified collectively as ‘Asian’ men and women, reflecting the different subject positions that individuals adopt (Alexander, 2000). One of the focus groups consisted of young mothers who met at a local community centre to offer support and friendship. Participants are mostly third generation, and were at the time of the research in full-time education, in employment or seeking work, or looking after family and children. The focus group method was adopted to enable participants to reflect, comment on and generate ideas about their use and perceptions of mobile phones in an interactive and dynamic group setting (Krueger and Casey, 1997). Focus groups provide a unique opportunity to witness peer co-construction of meaning whilst simultaneously recognising that individual perceptions may be different. To this end, the data was systematically analysed for emergent themes related to group interaction, co-construction of meaning and individual narratives.
All but two of the younger women owned one or more mobile phones. Two 15 year olds were involuntary non-users, in the sense that they wanted mobile phones of their own but were not permitted by parents until they were older. They did, however, have access to older sibling’s phones, demonstrating that the use / non-use dichotomy is inadequate for capturing the complexities surrounding use of and access to technologies.

Respondents were accessed through ‘community assistants’, (two female and one male) key informants residing in the local communities who provided advice on cultural and gender sensitive aspects of the research, found appropriate venues, sought parental consent where necessary and encouraged participants to attend the focus groups. Although the majority of participants are bi or multi – lingual, interviews were conducted in English because respondents indicated this preference. We employed a young Pakistani British man to conduct the male focus groups, to facilitate a close rapport and explore the intersections between ethnicity, masculinity and mobile use.

**Masculine cultures of connectivity**

For all of the men in the sample, the mobile had become embedded in their organisation and performance of friendship, although mobile phones occupied different places in their lives. Within the research settings, groups of male friends were in agreement about the importance of mobile contact with each another, demonstrating the construction of collective norms and values around technology use and making contact. Mobiles were carried and utilised mobiles everywhere and at all times, mainly for short voice calls and to text message friends and family for coordinating daily activities, including arranging places and times to meet. Although overarching themes of ‘connectedness’
and ‘availability’ are present in the data from both the women’s and men’s groups, their constructions of mobile connectivity are gendered, with men and women presenting different meanings of connectedness related to the performance of masculine and feminine identities and values (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 1996).

One example of this was centred upon the performance of being a ‘well-connected businessman’ with extensive social networks and contacts. This group of men had been friends with each other for many years and after having left school, most had gone into their family businesses in the local area. Mobiles were represented here as a ‘necessity’ for maintaining contact across multiple social ties, including business associates and they continued to take ‘business’ calls during the focus group discussion itself. Often these networks were broad and overlapping and featured a large number of instrumental ties, linking with research which suggests that since men’s lives are typically more public than women’s, this ‘[brings] them into contact with a wide range of others through their work and leisure’ (Allan, 1996: 93), as the following dialogue shows:

**Tahir:** When they first came out it was like ‘ah I’ve got a mobile’, but now it’s more a necessity isn’t… I’m sat here, if I didn’t have a mobile how’s anyone supposed to get in contact with ya? Whether you’re in the house or office.

**Naeem:** Even if you’re chatting to someone and they say ‘what’s your number?’ automatically you give your mobile number, everyone expects you to have one.
Green (2002) has observed how mobile availability becomes normative which is evidenced in our data by the men making themselves available at all times related to the observable social status of being connected to professional networks. This may also reflect the increasing intersection of work and home spaces through use of new technologies (Collinson & Hearn, 1996: 66). This particular type of masculine socio-technological identity also echoes early associations (in Western countries) of mobile technologies with social status (Wajcman, 2004); technologies mostly owned by white, male, middle class city-based executives, appropriated and reconfigured by the young Pakistani-British men in an urban post-industrial context. It also demonstrates the salience and continuity of some types of dominant ideological masculine images which are then appropriated and reworked across time and within different social contexts.

**Men resisting connectivity**

In the same group, alternative identities were also presented when some participants appeared to avoid or resist ‘endless connection’. Here the research context itself was used as a space in which two friends within the group publicly aired a disagreement about one friend’s absence from the network:

Ali: When I texted him yesterday saying you know tomorrow we’ve got a meeting… he didn’t reply…

Irfan: Well I didn’t get no message.

Ali: Yeah ya did.

Irfan: You didn’t send me one yesterday.
Ali: Well your phone must not be up to date.
Irfan: It’s O2 media.

Networks of mobile connectivity require a commitment to participation and an individual’s absence from a network can invoke sanctions from other group members (Green, 2002). Members of a mobile network learn and negotiate the new norms of contact. Making oneself available to friends is managed through the development of ‘rules of engagement’ where understandings between parties, in this case between friends, are negotiated. Non-reciprocation can, however, evoke anxiety and concern about the well being and whereabouts of the non-contactable person. Furthermore, there is an interesting tension here between Irfan’s need to reinforce his gendered status as the owner of the latest brand of mobile technology (a key facet of his techno-identity) and his avoidance of contact with his friend, which may also signal the existence of particular types of masculinities within a peer group characterised by cultures of availability and connectedness. The data further suggests that Ali’s taunt about the datedness of his friend’s mobile acts as a foil for his feelings of rejection because this type of public display of emotion falls outside the acceptable mode of masculine behaviour within this peer group.

Thus, in spite of high adoption rates and levels of use amongst young people, the dialogue above raises questions about the assumed popularity of perpetual connectivity, particularly for the men in the sample. Whereas the group above presented themselves as ‘connected businessmen’, analysis of exchanges between a group of male students draws our attention towards the contradictions and complexities of adhering to a
particular culture of masculine sociability and the broader social pressures of virtual communication. Here the mobile leads to increased communication between friends, which was viewed as beneficial but also burdensome at times.

Nazir: [I’d] rather… switch it off most times like, sometimes… my phone’s ringing… ‘how you doing mate?’ and then you… stop talking to him and then like five minutes later it… rings again and you’re like right I’m not answering the bloody phone… You feel like as soon as… someone calls… you have to go and do something… I’d rather like watch TV and stay in.

Interviewer: Do [you] all feel like that?

Saleem: I think ‘cause like when you’re at the Uni, it’s more a culture thing, everyone’s got a phone and you wanna try and keep in contact with everyone but… you can’t be bothered sometimes, [I] just leave it at home on the charger.

Licoppe (2004: 135) discusses current changes from lengthier fixed line conversations to shorter, more frequent bursts of mobile communication leading to the establishment of ‘connected presence’ and ‘reassurance’ communication amongst friends. However, in the men’s groups we encountered evidence of resistance to this type of continuous contact where it was viewed as undesirable, an intrusion of private space and time. This indicates that in spite of the potential for continued presence, there are some enduring gendered practices associated with technology use. The men’s reluctance to answer the mobile resonates with earlier telephone research which demonstrated men’s
disinclination to answer the fixed-line phone in the household and some resistance to telephone conversations of significant length. In addition, ‘resistance’ reveals an interesting tension in contemporary friendship relations mediated via technology use. The mobile appears to facilitate the notion of ‘flexible’ friendship by permitting individuals to contact friends as and when they choose. Yet, contradictorily it also brings people closer to the unremitting demands of perpetual contact. There is an additional tension here between facets of the men’s public masculine identities as sociable and outgoing and their desire to stay in, watch television and have leisure ‘time for themselves’, perhaps more traditionally associated with feminine modes of leisure.

**Men’s mobile talk: It’s ‘strictly business’**

Another finding concerns the different types of gendered communication performed via mobiles. This builds upon Lohan’s research on landlines which confirmed that many of her male research participants were less participative in the ‘labour of communication’ mediated by the telephone (2001: 201-202). She describes a co-existence of traditional and modern narratives about technology-mediated communication where some men enjoyed speaking to family members on the phone and others viewed this as ‘women’s work’. In our research men’s perceptions of how they talk and text tended to differ from the women’s; their information exchange was ‘straight to the point’ and action-oriented – what Tannen (1991) defines as ‘report-talk’ involving the imparting of information and exhibition of knowledge – whereas women’s talk was often viewed as ‘gossip’ and ‘idle chat’ (Frissen, 1995). This links with other research on men’s friendship which shows that whilst men and women both desire intimacy, men identify activities as the
main focal point of friendship whereas women identify relational aspects such as ‘talking’ and sharing common ground with close friends (Nardi, 1992; Allan, 1996; Green, 1998). It appears that such gendered social relations are similarly reflected in their use of technologies, with mobile ‘gossip’ oiling the bonds of female friendship, as the following discussion illustrates,

Irfan: Women are more… social.
Tahir: I think for the women it’s just to catch up on gossip and ours is just to [see] where someone is…
Irfan: I think… men… just ring each other to see where you are [to meet up].
Tahir: Obviously if you’re [texting] to your girlfriend… then you tend to spend more time on the phone.
Irfan: Lasses use it more to gossip or you know ring each other for a natter whereas the lad’s… is strictly business, ‘right what you doing’? I don’t think I’ve rang anyone and started chatting about how they’ve been keeping.

Here the mobile phone is used instrumentally rather than expressively or emotionally and it appears that although men do talk about intimate or relational content they seem to do it face-to-face rather than on the mobile. The majority of the work of ‘doing friendship’ is carried out when they are together rather than over the phone (Nardi, 1992: 5). Contrary to Lemish and Cohen’s findings about men talking more on the mobile, our data suggests that face-to-face discussions are preferred to long conversations on the phone. This could also be related to the construction of mobile
communication by the men as ‘public’ rather than private space, juxtaposed with the
women’s perceptions of the mobile as private and personal space. Interestingly, the
women reinforced the men’s interpretations of gendered talk differences, citing brevity
as a feature of masculine conversation.

Rana: Girls, ourselves… we talk to each other [on the mobile]… they do that…
but in a manly way.
Nasreen: Yeah… but I bet it’s different from a bloke if they have a relationship
with some one.
Rana: I use it to talk to my mates and stuff… I wouldn’t have a… conversation
with me boy mates…

Rana and Nasreen confirm the ways in which this style of men’s talk becomes
renegotiated within a heterosexual relationship with the expectation that a man would
have to talk for longer to his girlfriend. This is substantiated by Smoreda and Licoppe
(2000) who found that a phone conversation between a woman and a man is longer than
that between two men. These findings reaffirm that performance of masculinity changes
with context and what constitutes acceptable mobile phone behaviour between male
friends within the peer group is not performed in the same way with female associates.

**Mobiles as female friendship spaces**

For the young women in our sample, mobiles are a pivotal space in which ‘girl talk’
takes place in the form of both conversation and texting (Coates, 1996). Focus group
participants were often friends with each other, sharing ethnic and cultural identities and
living nearby in the local neighbourhood. Mobiles afford these women new spaces of
independence and privacy where they can converse with female friends away from the
family gaze at all times of the day, a point which we return to below. We also suggest
that there are interesting gendered differences in where and how men and women use
their mobiles to construct private spaces, with women tending to talk about use of space
in the home, notably their bedrooms, which links with theories of gendered domestic
(techno) spaces (Campbell, 2006; McRobbie & Garber, 1976):

Shamim: It gives you privacy as well doesn’t it? If you’re on the landline talking
for hours and hours obviously everyone’s coming in and out aren’t they.
They’re there wanting to use the phone, so you can sit in your bedroom
talking to people.

Miah: No one’s listening in.

Resembling Licoppe’s (2004) concept of ‘connected presence’, women’s mobile
communications include the sustained exchange of friendship texts, jokes, gossip and
general chat into the night: all aspects of ‘doing friendship’ through women’s talk,
Although women’s gossip is often trivialised, there is strong evidence to suggest that
gossip serves a beneficial social function (Goodman & Ben-Ze-ev, 1994). The young
women transmit ‘gossip’ texts, often in the form of personal and social information or
enquiry, across the mobile network to share their experiences and reinforce intimacy in
their personal relations. In the following dialogue we see the youngest women’s group
discussing the chain messages that they send to one another. Far from being superficial
and arbitrary messages, these texting conversations are devoted to the creation and maintenance of meaningful personal relationships and belonging (Tannen, 1991). The exchange of intimate ‘friendship’ messages in this particular mobile phone ritual confirms the young women’s status as close friends:

Selina: We have like friendship messages.
Saira: And pictures as well…Just like a little poem isn’t it. It’s just a bit of fun really.
Nina: It’s quite girly I think, I don’t think boys would send them.
Interviewer: What kind of things do they have in them?
Yasmin: It’s like forever friends kind of thing.

For both women and men, text messages and talk combined a mixture of languages, symbols and images, drawn from a range of cultural resources and practices (Green & Singleton, 2007). However, although the content of the texts may differ between groups of young people, the practice and display of friendship, highlighted above, is strikingly similar to that found in studies of White-British young women. For example, Hey (1997) uses the study of friendship as a base for elaborating how participation in ‘girls talk’ underpins the ways in which ‘private’ cultures of intimacy assist in the construction of diverse feminine subjectivities and forms of power. In a similar way, the creation and exchange of intimate messages through mobile phones demonstrates their meaning as arenas in which these cultures of intimacy can be developed, expressed and maintained. Studying mobile phone behaviour reveals a site where we see young women actively constructing their femininities through friendship and talk.
Young women making ‘appropriate’ connections

Women’s networks can constrain as well as empower, for example, by reinforcing traditional feminine modes of behaviour associated with respectable conduct (Green et al, 1990). This was evidenced in some of the women’s discussions about using mobile phones in ways appropriate and respectable to their faith and culture. The young women have differing interpretations of appropriate phone conduct, representing the diversity of attitudes and values within and between groups of young South Asian women. There are interesting tensions in the dialogue below related to perceptions of acceptable mobile phone behaviour which are narrated in the context of the women’s identities, faith, and cultural and family values. Some of the women, for example, are engaged in a process of ‘othering’ Asian girls who ‘abuse’ use of mobile phones by conducting romantic and secret relationships with men:

Sugra: I think it just depends on the way you use it… I know there’s some girls that abuse it in that sense that they do. Being an Asian you know it depends on your parents… I don’t think any of our parents probably are proud of girls having mobiles; it’s more of a boy’s thing ‘cos they probably think… you know girls getting involved with boys when they’re not meant to…

Shamila: No, I think with most parents and their children, it’s for both boys and girls…

Perveen: I think it depends what family you come from really…
Samina: …but… I’m allowed to have a phone and… I’m open about it… I won’t like sit in front of my parents and like just text in front of them… I’m not against them (mobiles)…[but] I am in a way… because some people just abuse it… and just use it to chat people up… some people use it properly you know in emergencies.

The girls in the group negotiate, challenge or reaffirm one another’s opinions, some voicing their resistance to the notion of a uniform code of mobile phone behaviour for ‘Asian women’ and emphasising the role of the family in setting the parameters of respectable conduct. This dialogue demonstrates their agency in continuous and critical negotiation with others including parents, siblings and peers, about appropriate usage and the regulation of the self according to perceived codes and specific discourses of South Asian female respectability (Shaw, 2000; Skeggs, 1997). Despite the diversity of views represented here, all the women quoted are engaged in (re)defining and maintaining gendered codes of social behaviour within their local community, including those of association and communication. The mobile is thus both symbolic of freedom to chat anywhere, anytime and a medium for regulating feminine conduct.

In contrast, men were perceived to have different freedoms related to mobile phone use and the men’s focus group narratives confirm this, suggesting that both familial and peer expectations about conduct and behaviour have gendered and cultural dimensions. This may also be linked to Shaw’s (2000) observation that young Pakistani men have fewer domestic responsibilities and spend a larger amount of their leisure time outside of the home. The young men’s narratives, both in our research and Shaw’s, reveal that
their sexual relations are perceived to be less closely monitored (especially by their parents) than those of the women. Although men do regulate their own and each other’s behaviour, such regulation is embedded within different perceptions of ‘appropriate’ masculine behaviour for particular groups of men. For example, the young men were vocal about their sexual activities and in one group showed the researcher a mobile phone video that they had captured of one of the participants ‘chatting up’ women in a local bar as a means of displaying friendship activities to her and to the others in the group. Like the vocal display of masculine prowess, the act of storing friendship ‘memories’ to display amongst the group represents some bonding aspects of masculine behaviour:

Idrees:       Yakub, why don’t you show the other mates what you were doing the other night at the club you know what I’m saying [All laughing]
Masood:      He’s wrecked, he’s wrecked! [All laughing loudly]
Idrees:      This lad here, he’s approaching a lass over there. Look she moves in with him, there he is again with some other lass. [All laughing]

By contrast, women voiced concerns about being seen to associate with inappropriate men. Their ‘silence’ on the topic of sexual relationships signals gender codes linked with gendered stigma and values regarding family honour (Izzat). The decision to withhold potentially ‘risky’ information is also related to the perceived impact of negative ‘gossip’ which is confirmed by our earlier research on leisure which found that in a particular urban neighbourhood context young Pakistani-British women’s whereabouts and activities in public were more likely than those of their male peers to
be closely scrutinised by parents and local community members, due to the role of the young women in maintaining personal reputation and that of their families (Green & Singleton, 2006; Shaw, 2000). Although the cultural specificities of the function and meaning of gossip vary, this finding also resonates with Charles and Davies’ (2005) research in Wales, which re-affirms the role of ‘gossip’ as a mechanism of community maintenance and in particular, a process of ‘social control’ for ensuring the respectable behaviour of young women. We suggest that ‘gossip’ is as effectively relayed by mobile phones as it is by face-to-face interaction (Fox, 2001). The medium may be different but the messages about appropriate gendered behaviour remain remarkably consistent.

**Mobile mums**

Transitions such as marriage and parenthood reconfigure social status for both men and women (Bailey, 1999) and discussions with the group of young married mothers revealed interesting relationships with their mobile phones which changed as they entered into marriage and motherhood. Relatedly, looking through the lens of mobile phone use exposes the ebbs and flows of personal relationships across the life-course (Allan, 1996). Shaw’s (2000) research in an Oxford-based Pakistani community shows how after marriage, intense friendships with other young women are often replaced by close relationships with husbands and female family and kin, especially mothers-in-law who assume a pivotal place in the lives of most young married women. Our findings confirm this and this change is reflected in the young mother’s mobile phone connections:
Tasleem: To be honest I don’t like ring my friends as much now… there used to be times I was on the phone all the time, me and ma friends and then nowadays I phone up once in a blue moon… They always say ‘ah you never… phone us’… I don’t go out with ma friends anymore.

Shabnam: You don’t get the time though, when you get married.

Tasleem: I mean I go out with my mother in law, and to be honest I’m out with her all day, out and about all day.

Shabnam: Yeah, there’s nobody else apart from you and your husband.

Although the mobile phone remains important to the young married women as a communicative tool and repository for personal artefacts such as pictures and contacts, it starts to be used for different purposes, illuminating their engagement with changing forms of sociality as the women move away from intensely active involvement in their female friendship groups towards their multifaceted role in the network of extended kin relations. The women’s new role in the household also requires a substantial amount of time spent on housework and caring activities. As Brah (1996) notes, patriarchal ideologies related to the domestic division of labour have a bearing on all women in the UK but these often take different cultural forms. For these young women, domestic and familial responsibilities come to the fore leaving less time for socialising with friends. The changes in mobile phone activity also resonate with Ling’s research which found that those living without a partner spent a longer time on the telephone to friends than those cohabiting with a partner or husband (Ling, 1998). We did not have any young husbands in the sample to illustrate their perspectives but this would be a fruitful area
for further research, particularly to investigate whether they continue to socialise with friends in a similar way after marriage.

Our study of mobile phones lays open the processes by which the young women become wives and mothers and the changes from strong peer group relations to a ‘coupled’ identity intersected by motherhood. At this moment in their lives, marital, parental and family relations are prioritised before friendship time but this may be explained by cultural differences in the value placed on friendship and family relations (Spencer & Pahl, 2006) and the difficulties that many women face of doing leisure outside the home without husbands (Green et al., 1990). The mobile can be viewed as a particularly useful technology for mothers confined to the home in terms of being able to send texts to reaffirm social ties and call people for short exchanges. However, the spaces to talk and to go out with friends become more circumscribed and have to be fitted around (married) domestic routines unlike when they were single. It may be that in spite of the promise of perpetual contact via new information and communication technologies, material and cultural constraints on face-to-face contact can lead to the weakening of the durability of some types of personal ties. Moreover, this raises serious questions about the contemporary emphasis on freedom to choose who we associate with and when (Jamieson et al., 2006).

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued for the need to ground the study of young people’s mobile phone connectivity in sociological perspectives on friendship and intimate relations. Although
the instrumental and expressive value of mobile phones is well-established, we suggest that exploring the place of mobiles in friendship relations enables an analysis of the ways in which ‘doing’ friendship is transformed and reconfigured through new mobile phone technologies. This makes a significant contribution to traditional debates around both friendship and gender and identity which are reworked in relation to new communication technologies. Our qualitative data demonstrates that mobile phones are seen as invaluable tools for maintaining virtual connectivity with friends through, for example, text and multimedia messaging and face-to-face contact through use of mobiles to organise social activities. Mobiles are, therefore, spaces in which friendship is performed and displayed. Furthermore, mobiles enable these young people to maintain their social ties across local neighbourhood and regional spaces and more remote spaces, including Pakistan, raising interesting debates about the place of new technologies in constructing a sense belonging for disaporic communities in a globalised world.

Modes of friendship, it is argued, are changing and mobiles can be seen to both facilitate these changes and support individuals to maintain enduring ties in a mobile world. There is limited evidence here or in other research to suggest that mobiles are diminishing the value placed on friendship relations or reducing / compensating for the infrequency of face-to-face encounters with friends (Licoppe, 2004). Rather for the young men and women in our study mobiles appear to enrich their friendship relations by enabling continuing presence, the exchange of digital gifts and the organisation of friendship activities, often at short notice. There is also a sense in which for some of the young people, particularly the younger professional men, mobiles fit into their busy,
fast-paced lives, enabling continuity of contact in a changing social environment. Our data demonstrates that the young Pakistani British men and women engage in similar friendship practices to other groups of young people but that their personal relationships and socio-technological practices are also shaped by age and cultural context (Spencer and Pahl, 2006).

Furthermore, modes of doing and displaying friendship through technology use remain gendered with the young men and women both contesting and affirming traditional gender roles. As Ling (1998) observes, some modes of gendered telephone sociability appear to have migrated to the mobile and the young women’s mobile talk with friends and its association with gossip remains remarkably similar to earlier work on gossip in the telephone ‘neighbourhood’ (Rakow, 1992). Although gossip is often demeaned and trivialised, the young women are in fact developing ways of doing intimate and caring relations on the mobile which will later be drawn upon in adult life (Ling, 1998). Thus, the reduction in long-term commitment to friends and family and enduring ties suggested by some social theorists as characteristic of late modernity does not resonate here. Thus, friendship and technology use are key arenas in which young people’s identities are constructed and negotiated around performance of different expressions of masculinity and femininity. Investigating these ‘mobile connections’ reveals significant insights into different youth cultures of masculinity and femininity and their modes of sociality which can change across social context, time and space.

In this paper, we make the case for the need to expand current debates on young people and technology in order to capture heterogeneity of use. This permits a more rigorous
analysis of the relationship between communication technologies and young people’s peer networks and associative processes of gendered identity formation, negotiation and performance. Such analysis enhances our understanding of mobile phone use as an important site of social change and contributes new insights about the place of new communication technologies in maintaining friendship and managing proximate and distant relations. Developing these ideas, this paper aims to make a theoretical contribution to debates on gender, friendship and mobile phone use, in particular by extending ways of thinking about heterogeneous gendered relationships with technology.
References


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Total Word Count: 8500

Our understanding of ethnicity is informed by the body of work that conceptualises ethnicity as a relational process and a mechanism of ‘boundary maintenance’ between groups (Brah, 1996). Ethnicity is not a ‘primary’ identity marker but is continuously [re] produced and negotiated with other forms of difference in varied historical settings (Alexander, 2000).

This is explored at length in Green & Singleton (2007).

Other technologies such as domestic appliances are included here but there is not space to visit this debate. See Wajcman, 2004 for an overview.

Pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

It is recognised here that the social system of Izzat is related to traditional practices which are (re) interpreted in a local community context and that differences occur in terms of how respectable behaviour is observed and practiced (Shaw, 2000).