Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture
Volume 3 Number 1
 doi: 10.1386/iscc.3.1.39_1

MIKKO VILLI

Visual chitchat: The use of camera phones in visual interpersonal communication

ABSTRACT

Photography and photo sharing nowadays form an important part of mobile phone communication, as evidenced by the rather ubiquitous camera phone. The purpose of the article is to examine how the practices of mobile phone communication influence the sharing of camera phone photographs. In pursuing this goal, the ritual view of communication, formulated by James W. Carey, is utilized as a theoretical framework. According to the ritual view, communication serves in sustaining contact between communicators, without placing importance on the information that is exchanged. The conclusion in the article is that ritual communication is evident in how camera phone photographs are captured and communicated in order to maintain social cohesion among a group or among individuals. In addition to a theoretically oriented analysis, the article utilizes results from a qualitative study focusing on the mobile photo sharing practices of a group of Finnish camera phone users.

KEYWORDS

visual communication
mobile communication
interpersonal communication
photography
camera phone
photo messaging
ritual communication

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication is a fundamental feature of mobile phone communication, which for a long time was about connecting people, mostly two at a time. Nowadays, to a degree, the use of modern mobile phones, the so-called smart phones in particular, has diverged from interpersonal communication, and people now use the device for such tasks as information retrieval

or gaming. Thus, an important part of the use of the mobile phone occurs without involving any direct communication with other people. Examples of this include using the phone for listening to music or the radio, navigating with the help of a built-in GPS receiver or browsing the web. Earlier, a phone would have been quite useless without another person with whom to communicate.

Another way in which mobile communication has changed has to do with the fact that the mobile phone as a communication device is no longer limited to just transmitting voice, as is exemplified by the rather ubiquitous camera phone. In parallel to introducing visual communication to the realm of telephone communication, the camera phone has incorporated interpersonal communication more firmly into photography, or better, photographic communication. In order to shed light on the novel interpersonal aspects of photographic communication, I address the question, *how do the practices of mobile phone communication influence visual interpersonal communication?*

In the article, I concentrate in particular on photo messaging – a form of communication in which photographs taken with a camera phone are sent directly from the mobile phone. A common technological application for photo messaging is MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service). In addition, photo messaging is increasingly realized via e-mail, IM (instant messaging) and other Internet-based media. The justification for calling photo messages 'messages' is that they are sent, not shown. Although immaterial and digital at every stage, photo messages appear to be concrete messages that move from one place to another (for instance from a mobile phone in Australia to a phone in Finland) (Villi 2007: 52). A photo message is, in a formalist sense, a photograph (Batchen 1999: 12, 20, 176); yet, at the same time, it is a photograph shaped very much by its communicative uses and thus dependent on specific cultural practices.

An important motivation for my study is that the emphasis in communication studies has been on verbal communication at the expense of visual communication (Becker 2004: 149–50). In my view, it is critical to study visual communication, especially in the context of interpersonal communication. Visual interpersonal communication is a quite rare line of study; prior research on interpersonal communication has mainly focused on verbal communication. Knapp et al. (2002: 10) note that 'interpersonal communication scholars still do not agree on whether it is important to examine nonverbal as well as verbal behaviour or whether both parties to the interaction have to speak'. In addition, 'non-verbal interpersonal communication' often refers to gestures, body movements and facial expressions – body language – in face-to-face communication situations (Burgoon and Hoobler 2002: 243), but not to the use of photographs or other images in communication. The need for research on visual interpersonal communication is also emphasized by the fact that the studies on visual communication, especially on photography, have not focused much on interpersonal communication. One obvious reason for this omission is that the camera as a communication device has not been able to provide a direct interpersonal link between individuals. When interpersonal communication has occurred around photographs, it has mostly taken the form of verbal commentary; images have more been a subject than a medium of interpersonal communication (Villi 2010: 67). Paradoxically, this article also includes verbal accounts of visual interpersonal communication.

As a theoretical framework, I utilize the *ritual view of communication*, formulated by communication theorist James W. Carey (1989: 15–18). Carey

derives the foundation of his framework from the remarks on communication made by John Dewey. In the ritual view, communication is defined as the maintenance of society in time – not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs. Communication is then firmly connected to relations between people, and it is a means of producing and maintaining communality and community. The ritual view exploits the mutual roots of the terms commonness, communion, community and communication.

The article contributes in particular to the discussion on mobile communication (e.g. Ito, Okabe and Matsuda 2005; Goggin 2006; Katz 2008; Ling 2008a), photo messaging (e.g. Scifo 2005; Rivière 2005; Koskinen 2007) and the ritual view of communication (Carey 1989; Rothenbuhler 1998; Kadmon Sella 2007). Drawing from previous research and using empirical data, I demonstrate how camera phone photographs enable a visual interpersonal connection between individuals. I argue that the dominant communicative mode in photo messaging is explained by the ritual view of communication.

In the first part of the article, I discuss the theoretical background and outline my perspective. In the latter part, I present results from a qualitative, in-depth interview study on Finnish camera phone users. In general, the studies on camera phone photography done in the social sciences (e.g. Koskinen, Kurvinen and Lehtonen 2002; Scifo 2005; Oksman 2005; Rivière 2005; Döring et al. 2006) can be characterized as interpretive: the overall aim has been to describe and understand rather than explain or predict the practices (Koskinen 2005). The study at hand shares the interpretive approach.

VISUAL INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Camera phones introduce elements to photographic communication that are characteristic of mobile phone communication: interpersonality and intimacy (Gergen 2002; de Gournay 2002: 203; Geser 2005: 25). The intimate and interpersonal traits of mobile communication can be well illustrated by the concept 'telecocoon', which Habuchi (2005) uses to refer to a sphere of intimacy that is free of geographical and temporal restraints. People who form telecocoons can be characterized as being constantly attentive to those they are closest to. Another illustrative concept is 'full-time intimate community'; it consists of frequent contacts with a select few, a round-the-clock set of relationships with an exclusive group of friends that see each other on an everyday basis (Matsuda 2005: 30). When personal photography is added to the equation, the intimate attribute of communication is further emphasized. A useful way to describe personal photography is to tie it to the 'home mode of communication' formulated by Chalfen (1987), where photographers usually know the people in their pictures and viewers usually know the photographer and, most of the time, either know or can identify the subjects of the pictures.

Thus, in camera phone communication the intimate practices of personal photography converge effortlessly with the intimate practices of mobile phone communication. Scifo (2005: 367–68) sees photography as reasserting the mobile phone's cultural identity as a medium, which intensifies communication with proximate relations. The mediated sharing of photographs supports closeness between friends and family members and functions as a way of maintaining and re-enforcing social bonds (Oksman 2006: 103; see also Döring et al. 2006: 207; Koskinen 2007: 135; Ling 2008b).

However, the camera phone is nowadays commonly used for posting photographs on the web, which is often a much more public activity than

what phone communication and personal photography conventionally represent. The online sharing of photographs has introduced a novel dimension of mass communication to personal photography, more aptly called 'publishing'. The aspect of publishing is new to telephone communication in general. Publishing is strongly connected to social media platforms on the web (such as Facebook, Flickr and Twitter) and the growing array of mobile photo apps (Villi 2013).

On the Internet, people can be 'privately public' (Lange 2008) when they openly share personal photographs that convey their private experiences (Lee 2009: 163). The growing presence of pictures on the web reveals how people move within and between the public and the private, at times being in both simultaneously (Lasén and Goméz-Cruz 2009: 213). However, empirical research indicates that most of the photographs shared on the web are intended for friends and not the general public (Matikainen 2009: 69). Thus, although the dominant interpersonal and intimate attribute of visual mobile communication is replaced, to a degree, by the aspect of publishing, the camera phone still provides the communicator with a photographic connection to the insular life.

In every case, photographs can now function as communicative objects through which people engage with each other synchronously, performing 'visual chitchat' or 'visual small-talk'. As Ling (2008b) observes, 'the almost universal access to cameras in the form of camera phones means that snapshots of different situations have become a common part of interaction'. The theme of visual interpersonal communication can be elaborated by discussing the idea of 'pictorial conversation'. This can be defined as a dialogue with photographs, where people use their mobile phones to send photographs back and forth to one another, commenting pictorially on the photographs they receive (Koskinen, Kurvinen and Lehtonen 2002). It is a conversation *with* photographs rather than a conversation *about* photographs. Pictorial conversation is a new phenomenon in personal photography, because previously people did not extensively use photographs as a means of responding to other photographs. In the art world and advertising, photographs are often visual commentary, but rarely direct interpersonal responses to other individual photographs (Villi 2010: 70).

Visual interpersonal communication using camera phones can be compared with the sending of postcards, or 'postcarding'. Also, postcarding can be seen as a communicative act or process in which the communication of images is at the core. The relationship between postcarding and photo messaging has been discussed in previous studies. According to Hjorth (2005), the postcard was a precursor to the communicative role of a photo message. Lehtonen, Koskinen and Kurvinen (2002), too, maintain that visual mobile communication has the cultural form of the postcard as an important point of reference.

What sets postcarding and photo messaging apart are the time-related aspects of mobile communication. The possibility of real-time photographic communication inherent in camera phones enables a 'synchronous gaze' – the act of seeing together – a practical possibility that in the past was available only to individuals sharing the same space at the same time (Villi and Stocchetti 2011: 108). By sending a photograph of the view the communicator is seeing at a particular moment, the sender and the receiver of the photograph can experience the same view in an almost concurrent manner. A photo message offers both an interpersonal, shared experience and a mutual

view of the same world through the photograph. This form of synchronous connection is common to mobile communication in general.

RITUAL MOBILE COMMUNICATION

The ritual view of communication provides a valuable tool for assessing visual interpersonal communication as a communicative practice. According to the ritual view, communication serves in maintaining a contact with one another without necessarily communicating any explicit content or exchanging meaningful information, and thus ritual communication is close to the phatic mode of communication first described by Roman Jacobson and Bronislaw Malinowski (Villi 2010: 19). Ritual communication is also similar to relational maintenance in interpersonal relationships, the processes that sustain a relationship (Dainton 2008). In addition, the ritual view has firm links with relational communication, which consists of those expressions that define the nature of the relationship rather than transmit information (Burgoon and Hale 1984: 193). In all of these forms, communication is about maintaining connections and relations with other people; it is relationship-related communication instead of task-related communication.

In order to further explicate ritual communication, Rothenbuhler (1998: 4–5) makes a distinction between using ritual as a noun and as an adjective. On the one side are rituals, rites and ceremonies as distinct events, whereas the other side pertains to the ritual aspects of otherwise ordinary and ongoing activities. This allows for the study of 'communication rituals' as well as 'communication as a ritual', the everyday interpersonal communication through which relationships are conducted. My own focus is on *communication as ritual.* I do not study media events (large-scale, public broadcast events) or media rituals – formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries (Couldry 2003: 4, 29, 60).

Carey's model does not consider ritual from an anthropological standpoint, where ritual is understood as habitual or formalized action (see Couldry 2003: 3), or in the Durkheimian sense as an often repeated cyclical rite (Ling 2008a). Nor does it focus on ritual as obsessive or repetitive behaviour, or on the ceremonial rules of interpersonal communication (see Goffman 1967), such as greetings and salutations. Thus, in the ritual view of communication, it is not possible to differentiate between the types of rituals people are performing. Rather, the ritual view accentuates the ritual aspects of communicative practices, those aspects that maintain social cohesion and communality.

In addition to Carey's model, I outline ritual communication by using the thoughts of mobile communication scholar Rich Ling (2008a) on how mobile communication reshapes social cohesion. Although Ling does not relate his study to camera phones, he importantly extends the study of ritual to interpersonal communication, to micro-interactions and to 'normal mundane interaction'. Thus, ritual communication does not only relate to communication within a group, but also to communication between individuals. Another interesting aspect of Ling's study is the focus on mediated interaction. Actually, Ling (2008a: 56) criticizes previous analysis of ritual and social cohesion, saying that it has largely been based on the idea of physical co-presence.

Ling (2008a: 6) quite explicitly states that the characteristic forms of mobile communication can be considered mediated ritual interaction. Ling (2007: 199)

notes how, 'often it is not the specific words of the text message or content of the call that are important, but rather the process of communicating'. Ritual communication also surfaces – although not always as overtly as an overarching concept – in other commentary on mobile communication. For instance, Licoppe (2004: 147, 152) argues that when the frequency and continuity of the flow of calls in mobile communication is important, the act of calling counts at least as much, if not more, as what is said. This type of continuous, connected communication is closely related to the ritual view of communication as defined by Carey (Villi 2010: 107).

The mediated interaction keeps the link between the partners active. Mobile phone users create a space of shared awareness of one another by sending messages that are primarily designed to keep in touch rather than to communicate specific bits of information (Okabe and Ito 2006: 84). The 'sweet nothings' allow users to affirm that they are connected with one another (Ito 2005).

Another direct link between the ritual view of communication and mobile communication is established via the concept of 'connectedness'. Connectedness has been widely discussed in literature on mobile communication (for outlooks on mobile connectedness see, e.g. Katz and Aakhus 2002: 8; Licoppe 2004; Haunstrup Christensen 2008). Specifically, connectedness has to do with maintaining relationships by connecting merely for the sake of staying connected. By using the mobile phone, communicators can reaffirm the relationship on an on-going and perpetual basis.

Next, I will turn to studying how ritual communication is manifested especially in *visual* interpersonal communication by analysing how the subjects in the qualitative study describe their practices of sharing camera phone photographs. In general, Carey's model has rarely been applied when studying photography. The few exceptions are Strano's study (2006) on ritual communication within the context of family photography and the references to the ritual view in a study on Facebook photo galleries (Mendelson and Papacharissi 2010).

METHOD

Using in-depth interviews, I focused on a group of Finnish camera phone users. The sampling procedure was purposive and consisted of searching for exemplary informants – people who have actually shared photographs from their mobile phones. I interviewed eight subjects individually, and the interviews lasted on average 1.5 hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The language used in the interviews was mainly English, because I wanted to obtain material that did not need to be translated. The interviewees had a good command of English and only one interviewee wished to do the interview in Finnish.

I used a semi-structured model for the interviews and presented a set of questions to all of the interviewees. The questions consisted of the following themes: time and distance, interpersonal communication, ritual and transmission, camera phone photography and camera phone communication. The dialogue during the interviews was staged according to a thematic, topic-centred structure, which also provided the context for unexpected themes to develop (Mason 2002: 62–63). The interviewees could continue their thoughts along new lines, and they were asked to elaborate on certain themes that seemed interesting and to express reflective and critical views. I was mainly

interested in the perceptions and interpretations of the interviewees. In the article, I use pseudonyms when referring to the interviewees.

The accumulation of the empirical data and its analysis were systematic and grounded on a firm theoretical foundation. By applying thematic analysis (Eskola and Suoranta 2008: 174–80), I classified the interview material based on a study of previous literature on mobile communication and camera phones, including Koskinen, Kurvinen and Lehtonen (2002), Kindberg et. al (2005), Rivière (2005), Scifo (2005), Goggin (2006), Koskinen (2007) and Ling (2008a). I foreground the themes in the following section by highlighting them in italics. I was also open to themes that emerged from the analysis or originated with the informants, but the analysis was predominantly theory-based.

When analysing the data for this article, I specifically used the framework of ritual communication to form a theoretical lens as a way of drawing attention to particular aspects of the empirical material studied (see Alasuutari 1996). Due to the small scale and purposive sampling of the study, the qualitative data is not intended to provide an empirical generalization about a wider population of camera phone users. However, I do consider that my observations and explanations can have a broader theoretical impact.

In the subsequent section, I present major findings based on the interviews. As examples, I also present three photographs. Based on the interviewees' descriptions, I explain how each photograph was used in communication. I also briefly describe the contents of the photographs. During the interviews, six of the eight subjects agreed to show me their camera phone photographs either from the screen of their mobile phone or from the screen of a laptop (in the case of photographs that had been transferred from the phone to the computer). I obtained permission from them to include their camera phone photographs in the study, during the interview and also through a written consent via e-mail later on. I received altogether fourteen photographs from five interviewees (Kasper, Lotta, Joakim, Anja and Ulla). However, Mikael transferred as many as 154 camera phone photographs to my computer.

'WE SHARE THE EXPERIENCES VISUALLY'

The qualitative study demonstrates that camera phone photographs represent a valuable means for *maintaining interpersonal connections over distances*. Also, most of the photographs are communicated within a rather *intimate circle*. For instance, Bengt commented that, 'They are more personal, those [the photographs] that you send as MMS [...] like this car that I saw and took a picture and sent to my son, it was just for him and no one else.' The personality of the photograph was accentuated because his son had just bought the same model of car as depicted in the photograph. If Bengt had placed the same photograph of the car on a general photo-sharing site on the web, it would have just been a 'photo of a car', but now that certain model had meaning within the interpersonal communication relationship between father and son. It seems that often the connection between the communicators needs to be deep enough and intimate enough for the receiver to really care about the personal and possibly mundane image and to *appreciate the interpersonal contact* established by the photograph (Villi 2010: 63).

Kjell used to send photo messages to '*keep up with friends*', to maintain a connection, for example by sending a picture of an interesting bird to a friend

who he knows is interested in birds, as 'it connects to that what the receiver is interested in'. He concluded that,

> I have a few good friends; we are sending to each other what we see and what we do. We try to keep contact by sending pictures of when we are at some special occasion, trip or if anything has happened, we try to share the experiences visually.

Many of the practices of visual interpersonal communication that the interviewees described were related to the *synchronous gaze*. The distinct value of visual mobile communication seems to consist mostly of the possibility for two people to be seeing the same thing, and thus to *maintain social proximity where physical distance applies* (Villi and Stocchetti 2011: 106). For example, Joakim remarked that, '[With a photograph] you can show unusual or strange things happening at the moment they happen, and you can send a picture of that to a friend or somebody, hey, something like this happened right now.' Bengt was thinking along the same lines when commenting that,

> I think that those [photographs] I would send on the phone have to do with what's going on, the feeling which is there, there is a connection that I'm here now watching this […] I can take a picture and show that hey, now this is going on.

In the study interviews, the participants clearly expressed that they predominantly use photo messages to maintain contact in a ritual manner. The majority of the subjects' photo messages were primarily oriented towards *sharing the moment with another* and reasserting a mutual bond in the process. Kjell provided an encapsulating view on photo messaging: for him, a strong motive for taking a photograph and sending it as a photo message was '*to touch people with what you are doing now*', to communicate that 'I still think about you', or 'I'm alive'. In general, according to him, 'The communication and type of photos which are used in mobile communication are different [from standard photography].'

Figure 1: 'The mood is blue when you are in the army [...] the same blue chairs every Sunday night [...] I wanted to share that feeling with my girlfriend.' Image reproduced with the permission of Mikael.

The above quote from Mikael, and the photograph (Figure 1) showing empty seats in a train that Mikael sent to his girlfriend when returning to the army base after a furlough, represent well the ritual communication mode of photo messaging. He used the photograph to *establish a connection*, a sense of sharing and loving fellowship, and to *share those feelings with his girlfriend*. The photograph communicates a longing for her presence. The seats are empty, void of any human presence; the blue seats both symbolize and epitomize the blue mood of the journey away from her.

The ritual communication apparent in photo messaging is similar to how people often use postcards to acknowledge that 'I am alive' and 'thinking of you' (Östman and Laakso 1999: 17–18). According to Östman and Laakso (1999), there is a strong phatic aspect involved in the sending of a postcard; it can, in an implicit manner, say that everything is OK. The importance of using a photo message to communicate that '*everything is OK*' surfaced in the interviews, for example, in such a situation where the sender was travelling and had just arrived at the hotel and wanted to communicate this to family back home. A photo message can, in fact, accomplish this visual exclamation in a more explicit manner than a postcard, because it can show the smiling traveller herself and not just an impersonal photograph of the hotel, the city, the beach, or some other subject often included on the front side of a postcard.

An example of mobile postcarding came up in the interview with Ulla, who described a situation where she had photographed a Darth Vader made out of sand (Figure 2). She explained that she had taken the photograph with the sole intention of sending it to her nephew, to the person in her circle of acquaintances who was most into Star Wars. Furthermore, the moment itself was a strong motivating aspect for sending the image of Darth Vader. The special thing about Darth Vader was that it was made out of sand and that Ulla saw it along the beach in the Finnish town of Lappeenranta, where she was visiting. She was in Lappeenranta only then, so it was about *sharing a momentary situation* in which she was confronted by the Sand Darth Vader. There was no need to explain why she was sending the photograph just then and no need for her nephew to ask, 'why now?'; the motive was to send 'Greetings from Lappeenranta'.

Figure 2: Sand Darth Vader. Image reproduced with the permission of Ulla.

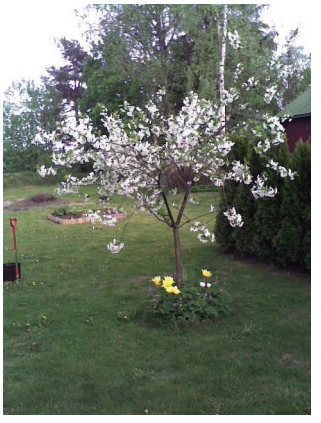

Figure 3: Cherry tree in bloom. Image reproduced with the permission of Anja.

As a third example of visual interpersonal communication, or visual chitchat, I present a picture of a cherry tree (Figure 3) captured and communicated by Anja. When an old neighbour sent her pictures of their old house, with the yard full of the renovation companies' trucks, Anja responded by sending a photograph of a cherry tree in the garden of her new house, which the friend had seen the previous winter, thereby visually communicating that 'now the cherry tree looks like this'. The photograph communicated her good mood and enjoyment when admiring the cherry tree in bloom. A motive for sending the message was also 'to care of the other when you are somewhere else'. Thus, she used the photograph to convey in a ritual manner her *thoughts to the absent friend.*

I argue that these ritual practices of photo messaging stem largely from the practices of mobile communication. Photographs function in maintaining a connection in the same sense as Licoppe and Heurtin (2002: 106) describe the use of short, frequent mobile phone calls as a way of strengthening the formation and maintenance of deep bonds, in which those involved are not motivated by the content but by the reassurance the calls bring. The use of the mobile phone is often similar to face-to-face communication, where it is common not to aim at conveying specific information, but rather at expressing affection (Geser 2004: 7–8). Visual chitchat can simply be a phatic device by which partners reassure one another of their well-being.

The connecting function, keeping in touch visually, can affect personal photography. People do not commonly choose to photograph the everyday or commonplace (Chalfen 1987: 94–98; Wells 2003: 199). However, a ritual connection makes a mundane situation or object worth photographing, that is, it makes it photo-worthy. Visual chitchat or small-talk can be a valuable communicative activity, even if it consists of repetitive and superfluous photographic messages – 'visual little nothings' (Villi 2010: 121). Redundancy, the repetition of sameness, does not impede ritual communication. Van Dijck (2007: 114) observes that when photographs shared from a camera phone are used to merely show effect, they are more about connecting and getting in touch than communicating memory objects.

Also, other personal photographs than those sent as photo messages can be used in a ritual manner. Photographs in a family album – memory objects – can act as a manifestation of the family community: an ephemeral and shifting collage, which is produced by and within the activities of

the present (Slater 1995: 139). The family album is an emblem of the family community, or, rather, it acts as reassurance of the existence of the community over time. However, in contrast, photo messages sent between family members do not provide an assurance of the continuity of the community; rather, they communicate its existence in the moment. Photo messages can create a 'mobile album' for a 'live' community instead of a community consisting of living and dead family members (Villi 2010: 159).

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The camera phone is a device that enables new forms of mobile interaction by adding a visual element to the communication process. Significantly, with regard to the context of this special issue, the function of photography has become more pronouncedly interpersonal through the easy sharing of photographs from camera phones – devices that can both capture and communicate photographs. In the article, I have studied how the practices of mobile phone communication influence visual interpersonal communication. Of the different modes of visual mobile communication, I have concentrated in particular on photo messaging. As a theoretical framework, I have applied the ritual view of communication formulated by James W. Carey (1989).

Based on previous literature and my qualitative study, I have argued that the ritual view of communication provides an explanatory and accurate framework for describing the communicative practices of visual interpersonal communication. Ritual communication is evident in how mobile phone communication is used to maintain social cohesion among a group or among individuals. Ritual communication is manifested in how the camera phone enables a perpetual, visual connection to others, i.e. visual connectedness. The 'I'm thinking of you' messages are not sent in order to explicitly transmit images as such, but rather to show the recipient that s/he is in the sender's thoughts (Villi 2010: 115). Maffesoli (1995 [1993]: 93) contends that, in general, it is reasonable to have image-based communication whose only aim is to 'touch' some other person.

However, it is important to note that not all photo messages are the same. Ritual communication – although predominant – cannot be generalized to describe all the ways in which people use photo messages. For example, based on her study, Scifo (2005: 371–73) distinguishes between three ways in which photo messages are used as a new linguistic resource that do not conform to the ritual view of communication: performative messages (employed as a resource to generate an act); informative messages (visual communication dominated by an informative function); and problem-solving messages (instrumental, pragmatic photographs taken in order to reduce time and costs or to solve emergencies). In the future, it would be advantageous to continue studying the use of camera phones in visual interpersonal communication by gathering larger samples and by utilizing ethnographic methods that would enable observational work in particular settings. As Oksman (2006:105) points out, when researchers examine the use of mobile phones in contemporary society, they are already living amidst the studied phenomenon.

A further outcome of the convergence of photography and mobile communication is that photographs can be increasingly directed towards communicating the present. Photographs can become easily disposable, single-use images, which are only important during communication in a particular situation, like words during a phone call. They function as

communicative objects through which distant people engage with one another, helping them to form a connection in the present, as opposed to a connection between the past and present (Villi 2010: 156). Such photographs gain value as 'momentos', while, at the same time, they lose value as mementos (Van Dijck 2007: 115). It would be interesting to examine if there is a 'photographic grammar' developing, one that people can express themselves with and use to communicate in the age of networked photographic communication.

The established forms of visual mobile communication, such as photo messaging, have an interesting relationship with emerging forms of mobile communication, such as video calling. The camera on a mobile phone serves the purposes of the synchronous gaze well, enabling the video caller to show and share visually what is around him/her, what s/he is seeing just then. Similarly to photo messages, we can assume that video calls from mobile phones will be most popular between family members and other intimates, in particular during a state of extended absence, allowing them to communicate their presence and establish a connection.

Furthermore, the results of the present study can be applied to other novel forms of mediated communication. Social networking and micro-blogging include a rather strong aspect of ritual communication, because one prominent function of status updates is that they allow users to maintain a connection with one another and create a sense of togetherness. Therefore, the ritual view of communication helps researchers to better understand several modes of communication, not just photography, in the era of mobile communication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the interviewees and Matteo Stocchetti, who helped in realizing the empirical study. My appreciation also goes to the guest editor of the special issue and the two anonymous reviewers.

REFERENCES

Alasuutari, Pertti (1996), 'Theorizing in Qualitative Research: A Cultural Studies Perspective', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4: 2, pp. 371–84.

Batchen, Geoffrey (1999), *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Becker, Karin (2004), 'Where is Visual Culture in Contemporary Theories of Media and Communication?', *Nordicom Review*, 25: 1–2, pp. 149–57.

Burgoon, Judee K. and Hale, Jerold L. (1984), 'The fundamental topoi of relational communication', *Communications Monographs*, 51: 3, pp. 193–214.

Burgoon, Judee K. and Hoobler, Gregory D. (2002), 'Nonverbal Signals', in Mark Knapp and John Daly (eds), *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*, 3rd edn, Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 240–99.

Carey, James W. (1989), *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, Boston: Unwin Hyman.

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

Couldry, Nick (2003), *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, London: Routledge.

Dainton, Marianne (2008), 'Relational Maintenance', in Wolfgang Donsbach (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Online*, http://www.communicationencyclopedia.com. Accessed 12 March 2012.

Döring, Nicola; Dietmar, Christine; Hein, Alexandra; and Hellwig, Katharina (2006), 'Contents, Forms and Functions of Interpersonal Pictorial Messages in Online and Mobile Communication', in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Understanding: The Empistemology of Ubiquitous Communication*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, pp. 197–208.

Eskola, Jari and Suoranta, Juha (2008), *Johdatus laadulliseen tutkimukseen/ Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 8th edn, Tampere: Vastapaino.

Gergen, Kenneth J. (2002), 'The Challenge of Absent Presence', in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 227–43.

Geser, Hans (2004), 'Towards a Sociological Theory of the Mobile Phone', in *Sociology in Switzerland: Sociology of the Mobile Phone*. Online Publications, Zürich, March 2004 (Release 3.0) http://socio.ch/mobile/t_geser1.htm. Accessed 4 March 2006.

Geser, Hans (2005), 'Is the cell phone undermining social order? Understanding mobile technology from a sociological perspective', in Peter Glotz, Stefan Bertschi and Chris Locke (eds), *Thumb Culture: The Meaning of Mobile Phones for Society*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, pp. 23–36.

Goffman, Erving (1967), *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-face Behavior*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Goggin, Gerard (2006), *Cell Phone Culture: Mobile Technology in Everyday Life*, London: Routledge.

Gournay, Chantal de (2002), 'Pretense of Intimacy in France', in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 193–205.

Habuchi, Ichiyo (2005), 'Accelerating Reflexivity', in Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe and Misa Matsuda (eds), *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 165–82.

Haunstrup Christensen, Toke (2008), '"Connected presence" in distributed family life', *New Media and Society*, 11: 3, pp. 433–51.

Hjorth, Larissa (2005), 'Locating Mobility: Practices of co-presence and the persistence of the postal metaphor in SMS/MMS mobile phone customization in Melbourne', *Fibreculture*, 6. http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue6. Accessed 12 October 2008.

Ito, Mizuko (2005), 'Introduction: Personal, Portable, Pedestrian', in Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe and Misa Matsuda (eds), *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 1–18.

Ito, Mizuko and Okabe, Daisuke (2005), 'Intimate Connections: Contextualizing Japanese Youth and Mobile Messaging', in Richard Harper, Leysia Palen and Alex Taylor (eds), *The Inside Text: Social, Cultural and Design Perspectives on SMS*, Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 127–46.

Ito, Mizuko; Okabe, Daisuke; and Matsuda, Misa (eds) (2005), *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Kadmon Sella, Zohar (2007), 'The Journey of Ritual Communication', *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 7: 1, pp. 103–24.

Katz, James E. and Aakhus, Mark (2002), 'Introduction: Framing the Issues', in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–14.

Katz, James E. (ed.) (2008), *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Kindberg, Tim; Spasojevic, Mirjana; Fleck, Rowanne; and Sellen, Abigail (2005), 'The Ubiquitous Camera: An In-depth Study of Camera Phone Use', *IEEE Pervasive Computing*, 4: 2, pp. 42–50.

Knapp, Mark L.; Daly, John A.; Fudge Albada, Kelly; and Miller, Gerald R. (2002), 'Background and Current Trends in the Study of Interpersonal Communication', in Mark Knapp and John Daly (eds), *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*, 3rd edn, Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 3–20.

Koskinen, Ilpo (2005), 'Pervasive Image Capture and Sharing: Methodological Remarks', paper delivered at the *Pervasive Image Capture and Sharing Workshop, Ubicomp '05, The Seventh International Conference on Ubiquitous Computing*, Tokyo, Japan, 1–14 September.

Koskinen, Ilpo (2007), *Mobile Multimedia in Action*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Koskinen, Ilpo; Kurvinen, Esko; and Lehtonen, Turo-Kimmo (2002), *Mobile Image*, Helsinki: Edita.

Lange, Patricia G. (2008), 'Publicly Private and Privately Public: Social Networking on YouTube', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13: 1, pp. 361–80.

Lasén, Amparo and Gómez-Cruz, Edgar (2009), 'Digital Photography and Picture Sharing: Redefining the Public/Private Divide', *Knowledge, Technology and Policy*, 22: 3, pp. 205–15.

Lee, Dong-Hoo (2009), 'Mobile Snapshots and Private/Public Boundaries', *Knowledge, Technology and Policy*, 22: 3, pp. 161–71.

Lehtonen, Turo-Kimmo; Koskinen, Ilpo; and Kurvinen, Esko (2003), 'Mobile Digital Pictures – the Future of the Postcard? Findings from an Experimental Field Study', in Ville Laakso and Jan-Ola Östman (eds), *Postcards and Cultural Rituals,* Hämeenlinna: Korttien talo, pp. 69–96.

Licoppe, Christian (2004), '"Connected" presence: The emergence of a new repertoire for managing social relationships in a changing communication technoscape', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22: 1, pp. 135–56.

Licoppe, Christian and Heurtin, Jean-Philippe (2002), 'France: Preserving Image', in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 94–109.

Ling, Rich (2007), 'Mobile Communication and the Generation of Social Cohesion', paper delivered at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, *Towards a Philosophy of Telecommunications Convergence* [conference], Budapest, Hungary, 27–29 September.

Ling, Rich (2008a), *New Tech, New Ties: How Mobile Communication is Reshaping Social Cohesion*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Ling, Rich (2008b), 'Trust, cohesion and social networks: The case of quasi-illicit photos in a teen peer group', paper delivered at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, *Mobile Communication and the Ethics of Social Networking* [conference], Budapest, Hungary, 25–27 September.

Maffesoli, Michel (1995 [1993]), *La Contemplation du Monde/Maailman Mieli: Yhteisöllisen Tyylin Muodoista/Contemplation Of The World: Figures of Community Style* (trans. Mika Määttänen), Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

Mason, Jennifer (2002), *Qualitative researching*, 2nd edn, London: Sage.

Matikainen, Janne (2009), *Sosiaalisen ja Perinteisen Median Rajalla/In the Borderline of the Traditional and Social Media*, Helsinki: University of Helsinki, http://www.valt.helsinki.fi/blogs/crc/sosiaalisen_ja_perinteisen_median_rajalla_raportti.pdf. Accessed 10 August 2011.

Matsuda, Misa (2005), 'Discourses of *Keitai* in Japan', in Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe and Misa Matsuda (eds), *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life, Cambridge*, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 19–40.

Mendelson, Andrew L. and Papacharissi, Zizi (2010), 'Look at us: Collective Narcissism in College Student Facebook Photo Galleries', in Z. Papacharissi (ed.), *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, New York: Routledge, pp. 251–73.

Okabe Daisuke and Ito, Mizuko (2006), 'Everyday Contexts of Camera Phone Use: Steps Toward Techno-Social Ethnographic Frameworks', in Joachim R. Höflich and Maren Hartmann (eds), *Mobile Communications in Everyday Life: Ethnographic Views, Observations and Reflections*, Berlin: Frank and Timme, pp. 79–102.

Oksman, Virpi (2005), 'MMS and Its "Early Adopters" in Finland', in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, pp. 349–62.

Oksman, Virpi (2006), 'Mobile Visuality and Everyday Life in Finland: An Ethnographic Approach to Social Uses of Mobile Image', in Joachim R. Höflich and Maren Hartmann (eds), *Mobile Communications in Everyday Life: Ethnographic Views, Observations and Relections*, Berlin: Frank and Timme, pp. 103–22.

Rivière, Carole (2005), 'Mobile Camera Phones: A New Form of "Being Together" in Daily Interpersonal Communication', in Rich Ling and Per E. Pedersen (eds), *Mobile Communications: Re-negotiation of the Social Sphere*, London: Springer Verlag, pp. 167–86.

Rothenbuhler, Eric W. (1998), *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Scifo, Barbara (2005), 'The Domestication of Camera-Phone and MMS Communication: The Early Experiences of Young Italians', in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, pp. 363–74.

Slater, Don (1995), 'Domestic Photography and Digital Culture', in Martin Lister (ed.), *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, London: Routledge, pp. 129–46.

Strano, Michele M. (2006), 'Ritualized Transmission of Social Norms Through Wedding Photography', *Communication Theory*, 16: 1, pp. 31–46.

Van Dijck, José (2007), *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Villi, Mikko (2007), 'Mobile Visual Communication: Photo Messages and Camera Phone Photography', *Nordicom Review*, 28: 1, pp. 49–62.

Villi, Mikko (2010), *Visual mobile communication: Camera phone photo messages as ritual communication and mediated presence*, Ph.D. thesis, Helsinki: Aalto University School of Art and Design.

Villi, Mikko and Stocchetti, Matteo (2011), 'Visual mobile communication, mediated presence and the politics of space', *Visual Studies*, 26: 2, pp. 102–12.

Villi, Mikko (2013) 'Publishing and Messaging Camera Phone Photographs: Patterns of Visual Mobile Communication on the Internet', in Kathleen Cumiskey and Larissa Hjorth (eds), *Mobile Media Practices, Presence and*

Politics: The Challenge of Being Seamlessly Mobile, New York: Routledge, forthcoming.
Wells, Liz (2003), 'Image and Identity, Introduction', in Liz Wells (ed.), *The Photography Reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 376–79.
Östman, Jan-Ola and Laakso, Ville (1999), 'Postikortille diskurssia löytämässä', in Ville Laakso and Jan-Ola Östman (eds), *Postikortti Diskurssina/The Postcard as a Discourse*, Hämeenlinna, Finland: Korttien talo, pp. 11–22.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Villi, M. (2012), 'Visual chitchat: The use of camera phones in visual interpersonal communication', *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture* 3: 1, pp. 39–54, doi: 10.1386/iscc.3.1.39_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Mikko Villi works as a postdoctoral researcher at Aalto University School of Business in Helsinki, Finland. Villi's background is in communication studies. He has gathered knowledge and expertise especially on themes related to new communication technology and forms of communication, in particular on mobile, visual and social media. His research interests focus on the borderland between the new and old media, in particular the effects of new communication technology on established practices of communication. Lately, he has focused his attention on social media, the media industry and the media ecosystem, where different media, devices and actors converge.

Contact: Aalto University School of Business, Department of Communication, PO Box 21210, FI-00076 Aalto, Helsinki, Finland.
E-mail: mikko.villi@aalto.fi