

# Mobile Digital Pictures – the Future of the Postcard? Findings from an Experimental Field Study

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## INTRODUCTION



hi guys  
the opening of the season!!!

180 km/h and -20°C

JK

In recent years we have first learnt to use the email, then we have become accustomed to communicating with the SMS text messages – and now many of us cannot even think about everyday life without these. However, the visions and scenarios presented by the information technology companies suggest even more radical innovation in the near future: it is claimed that soon everybody will use the kind of mobile communicators – the “third generation” or 3G mobile phones – which enable us to send not only text but also

still photos and video images in real time. With all these new means available, where does this leave the traditional postcard and its characteristic combination of images and written text? Will it become completely obsolete as a means of communication?

In this article we present some themes and results of a field study conducted in 1999 and 2000 with new technology that anticipates a central feature of the third generation mobile phones: the possibility to send digital pictures by email (for a more thorough report on the project, see Koskinen, Kurvinen & Lehtonen 2002).

In fact, despite the technological novelty of mobile digital image messages, they build upon previous cultural forms and models of communication (cf. Bijker 1995, Pantzar 1996). Our thesis here is that digital communication that unites texts with pictures has as its most important point of reference the cultural form of the postcard. Defining the latter, Östman and Laakso (1999: 13) say that its existence depends upon being sent to another person, it contains text and one or more images, and texts and images form a unitary whole in conjunction. Apart from their material form, the mobile digital messages are in many respects very much like postcards. In the end, it does not even seem likely that the new forms of communication would simply supplant the old ones and make them obsolete; rather, they almost certainly will enhance the cultural specificity of the traditional postcard.

In the following, we will begin by presenting the data and by briefly explaining the ways in which a digital camera affects photographing and the use of pictures. Then, we introduce 'sociability' as the frame for communication with mobile digital pictures. After that, we move on to discuss the reciprocity, both formal and contentual, in the exchange of messages. We then discuss how the interpretation of messages relies on the interplay between pictorial and textual elements. This leads us to examine briefly the role of openness and allusions in communication. Finally, we conclude by discussing some points of convergence and divergence between the postcard and the mobile digital picture message.

## **DATA**

The data for the present study was gathered with a method that could be loosely called 'field experiment': the Nokia Communicator (9110) and the Casio digital camera, which communicate with infrared with each other, were given to four different user groups. It is possible to transmit an image from the digital camera to the Communicator, and with the latter send it further as an email using an internet connection. Thus, the snapshots taken here and now can be sent all over the world practically without any delay.

In relation to this study, the word 'experiment' does not refer to the controlled surroundings of a laboratory. Rather, it alludes to the research setting where the users were given the appliances and the access to the internet free of charge and they were encouraged to use them in their everyday life. In this respect, the experiment took place

in the ‘field’. There were altogether 20 participants in four user groups, five persons in each. The groups were: a ‘pilot’ group, a group of male students, a group of female students and a ‘control’ group. The participants in all groups knew each other from before.<sup>1</sup>

The aim was to gain new qualitative insight on the users’ practices. With this in mind it was considered impossible to try to gather extensive data; the emphasis was deliberately on intensivity. In principle, all the images the participants mailed with their Communicators were used as material for the study; messages sent within the groups were simultaneously transmitted to Esko Kurvinen who acted as the contact person. After the field study period, the duration of which varied in the four groups from approximately two to six months, there were personal interviews conducted separately with each participant. Thus, the main material of the article consists of, first, the texts and images in the messages that were sent within the groups, and secondly, of the interview material gathered after the process. The analysis centres on email messages sent by the male and female student groups – altogether 371 messages containing texts and images – and the interviews conducted with them. One message had between one to sixteen images attached; although the male students’ group sent twice as many messages as the female students (258 vs. 113), the latter’s messages contained altogether more images than the ones sent by the former. In this paper we are only going to present some exemplary cases (for more details, see Koskinen, Kurvinen & Lehtonen 2002).<sup>2</sup>

## **TAKING PICTURES WITH THE DIGITAL CAMERA**

What we are interested in is the combination of texts and images. However, the digital camera itself and especially the model that was in use in our study transform in such a marked way the activity of taking pictures that this needs to be addressed briefly. The first novelty is connected to the feature of the camera that makes it possible to see the pictures on the screen of the camera right away after taking them. This means that while carrying the camera one always also carries with oneself a bunch of pictures that one can show to friends. Minna from the female students’ group says that every time the friends with cameras met they immediately “had a look at what the others have in the camera”.

The second difference in relation to traditional photography stems from not anymore having a sense of scarcity. With the digital camera it is not necessary to develop the

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<sup>1</sup> The pilot group consisted of four men and one woman aged 26 to 38; they were workmates at the Department of Product and Strategic Design at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki. The second group involved male students at the School of Economics and the University of Technology, aged 25 to 27. The third group consisted of female students of the same age as the second group; they all study social sciences at the University of Helsinki. The fourth group was composed of workmates in the new media business, these participants were between 23 and 25 years of age.

<sup>2</sup> The aim was also to gather information on the everyday consumer uses that are not yet prevalent but might become so in the future. Thus, we were not primarily interested in the ways professionals might use such appliances; the assumption was that as user groups, lay people and professionals are quite distinct, and our interests lie mostly within the scope of the former.

pictures. This means that in themselves they do not cost much anything. The low price is enhanced by the third novelty brought about by the camera, namely the feature that makes it possible to delete pictures. In practice this means that one can take many shots in a situation and keep only the best of them. Because of this, the value of photographs becomes inflated: they do not seem to require to be stored, they become more and more disposable.

The fourth change is specific to the Casio model used in the experiment: its objective can be turned 270 degrees. Combined with the fact that the aiming is done with the screen – not through an eyehole – this means that there is no need to raise the camera in front of one’s face while photographing. Thus, in a social situation it is possible to take pictures without the others present really noticing that this is happening. Therefore, there is much less posing in the photos. In addition, because of the possibility to turn the objective and aim with the screen one can easily take pictures of oneself – either alone or in company. This way, photographing can also become more socially inclusive, and the questions of objectification inherent in the activity are transformed. In the interview, Jari from the male students group thought that his message from Italy was exemplary of the new possibility of including the photographer in the picture.



*skiing in Italy*

Greetings from Italy, it was a great gig.

For starters, here are some local young ladies.  
the one in the right top corner clearly  
had the best attitude!

more reports once I recover from the jetlag

Jari

Of course, the capability to send photographs by email is in itself an important novelty which affects greatly the attitude to pictures that now are more easily shared. Tapani states:

When a person takes photos, normal photos, they only bring pleasure to that person alone. Maybe they are shown to people, but that will be only a passing glimpse. But this is completely different when you can mail them to others and they can return to them at home also later on. (*Tapani*)

To communicate with personally taken photographs is quite different from utilising ready made images found on the internet – and of course, this is also one of the main differences between the traditional postcard and the mobile email picture message. As the objects in the messages, there are often the same people who receive the pictures, the group of friends – not pre-chosen views of a touristic sites, for instance.

## **SOCIABILITY**

In the media the digital picture messages have been marketed as being part of the mobile phone culture. What comes forth in the studies on the latter is that the main point with the employment of mobile phones is a sense of ‘control’, the capability to arrange spatial and temporal relations – although their use has some autotelic aspects as well (Kopomaa 2000, Mäenpää 2001). However, with the mobile digital images the sense of control is only secondary. The purpose of the utilisation is in the way it can form a basis for sociability.

In the material the connection to other people and the capability to entertain them are ends in themselves; the ‘utility’ of the message is of secondary importance. Thus, to understand the interaction it seems feasible to rely on the classic formulations of ‘sociability’ by Georg Simmel (1950 [1917]). For Simmel, sociability is interaction that has no external purpose: it is its own goal. Being autotelic, it is very close to games, play and art. According to Simmel, the essence of sociability is in the *entertainment*: the joy an individual gets is fundamentally based on other people also enjoying the interaction. As such, sociability is first and foremost about leisurely conversation, telling jokes and anecdotes.

Because it has no external purpose, the quality and nature of sociability depends on the personalities of the participants. But for the very same reason no ‘objective’ circumstances will limit the way personal traits come forth in the interaction. Consequently, a sense of *tact* is fundamental for sociability: one should not emphasise what is objectively remarkable in one’s own or other people’s personalities, for instance status or wealth. Similarly, one should not be too intimate either, broach subjects that concern the deepest personal sides of people’s lives, the private joys and sorrows – because, in the end, these cannot be *shared* in the interaction, and talking about them is also contrary to tact. Thus, Simmel defines upper (objective circumstances) and lower

(deepest personal sphere) ‘thresholds’ for successful sociability. It is between these that sociable interaction can be equal (Simmel 1950 [1917]). It is easy to locate most of our material as being in between these ‘thresholds’ of sociability. This is emphasised because most of the messages were sent at once to many recipients. When a message is not part of intimate communication where one can talk sensitively about personal feelings, and when it is not about matter-of-fact information to a large audience, its sociable nature is emphasised. In this respect the digital picture messages of our study are much like the good-humoured postcards that people send to their workplaces (Tainio 1999). As Jari says:

These are sent because of the picture. It’s not that you’ve had the need to say something urgently and you’ve taken the picture because of that and then sent the message. Most of these I think are like this, you have taken the picture and written some explanation for it and then sent it. (*Jari*)

All in all, the messages were part of a communication aiming at light, positive and not very serious interaction that sustains an ephemeral community. With the messages the participants could maintain and reproduce their relationships to each other. They shared parts of their worlds and displayed them for others to discuss and comment on. Of course, basing the research on the experience of user groups who were friends already before the experiment began is bound to underline the sociable character of the activity; therefore this is not an important result in itself. Rather, our main aim here is to see *how* this sociability is achieved in the interaction by means of pictures.

## THE GESTURE OF CREATING CONNECTION

To send a picture message is in itself a gesture of showing that you care about the other person. As such it is meaningful – to some extent, regardless of the content of the message – for both the sender and the recipient; the communication does not function only in one direction. Rather, it is a question of exchange or *formal reciprocity* – in a similar manner as with correspondence by letters. To receive a message forms a binding relationship in a sense that some kind of a reply is expected. This way it actually *calls for* a reaction, at least an expression of gratitude, if not an outright return gift (Mauss 1950 [1923]).

To appreciate the independent signification of the gesture of sending a message, it is useful to make an analytical distinction between the *form* and the *content* of the activity. When the activity is examined as a connection, the emphasis is not on *what* is being sent but on the fact *that* something is sent, whatever the content. Here, the main questions are: Who are among the recipients? What kind of a relationship is formed with the specific means of communication? Who does one answer to and how?

In the field study there were not many images sent to people who were not actually involved in the experiment. Part of the reason was that, obviously, not all potential

recipients had the technology to receive email messages with images. Still, some pictures were sent to friends and relatives and also to acquaintances who live abroad. The general rule was that an effort was made to share the pictures with people who were shown in them. At times this was done right away after having taken the photos, at other times they were sent afterwards.

However, after the first few days' enthusiastic play with new technology, for the gesture of sending to become an end in itself and to have an independent cultural status, it would require a long collective history of use. Of course, this is the case with the traditional Christmas postcards. Sending them is part of a seasonal ritual where the aim is to maintain social relationships and where the contents of the messages are very standardised – and as long as the limits of good taste are not transcended, the contents have very little value in themselves. Although in the case of digital image messages the gesture of creating the connection can be analytically distinguished from the specific contents sent, in practice the decision of what to send and to whom was more often than not linked to what the pictures actually represented.

Especially when the people in the study started to get accustomed to the possibility of sending pictures but still were not receiving large numbers of them, they more and more started to think that the object of the picture should be something 'special': it should entertain others. This could create a barrier for sending images, even among friends one knows quite well. People can restrain themselves from sending something they themselves find amusing, if they cannot be sure enough of others' reactions – in spite of wanting to see even more pictures sent by others. Mervi, a member of the female students group says:

*Mervi:* It was fun to receive them. But you think about your own pictures that they're not interesting. [...]

*Esko:* What do you think about then, why can't you send a picture, not only to the members of the group but also to other people?

*Mervi:* Well I don't know. Somehow you're worried about them being good enough, you wonder whether there is anything interesting in them. You don't want to send the kind of stuff people have in their normal photo albums. You want to send something interesting. But then you're always having doubts about not succeeding when you try to construct it as interesting.

More generally, although there had not been any negative feedback in the groups, in the interviews people expressed concern for the capability to entertain others. In all of the material there is only one message where a person is playfully scolded for having 'picture diarrhoea' when he had sent more than twenty images in an hour. Even this 'critique' was humorous in its tone so that it would not endanger the sociable interaction – in fact, it could have been read as a joyful and approving recognition of the sender's activeness.

Sending unentertaining pictures is not the only concern among the participants. They also worry about the opposite: not having sent enough images, not having fulfilled the sociable expectation of replying, of giving back in the exchange. In both cases it is a

question of a moral imperative that is not externalised as a clear code or rule but that nevertheless seems to be important and that is discussed in the personal interviews.

The lesson seems to be that the easier it is technically to send images and the more pictures a group sends, the less remarkable an individual picture is expected to be. This can be compared to the changes in the value of speech when the amount of opportunities for it varies – for instance, when there are only limited possibilities for interaction between two persons who are very important to each other: extreme cases could be the moments before lovers go separate ways or the visits to a prison. Then, every word is important. In contrast, when it is possible to chitchat in a leisurely manner, this can be valuable and meaningful as an activity, and still consist of commonplaces that in themselves do not have much importance and are not remembered afterwards. If in a group many people send a lot of pictures, the threshold for sending anything gets lower for each participant.

## **RECIPROCITY IN THE MESSAGE CONTENTS**

The idea of reciprocity is not limited to the formal exchange and to the gesture of sending messages. In addition, there is *contentual reciprocity*. This has to do with people's desire to communicate using the kinds of messages that are understandable to others, and what is more important, messages which these others can answer to as well. The study on the practices of sending postcards, conducted by Laakso, Laakso and Östman (1999), shows that people tend to have clear ideas about what type of pictures are appropriate for their 'postcard partners'. And when suitable cards are not found, the less brilliant choices have to be apologized for and explained. (Laakso, Laakso & Östman 1999: 133).

Similarly, when sending digital images by email people try to respond to the recipients' expectations. Of course, these expectations are rarely dictated by any clear rules, rather they structure the shared taste. What type of things, images and words will others appreciate? What will they find funny – or tasteless? Answers to these questions will also distinguish different persons and recipient groups from each other. Some people receive pictures that relate to shared leisure activities like playing football. Others will see shots taken on a tourist trip. Still others will get images that in a new light depict the work place that is common to both sender and receiver.

It is here that the assumption of contentual reciprocity is at work: if I send this type of a picture, I can expect to get a similar one back. The members of the male student group would not try to amuse their grandmothers with the same lewd images they themselves find entertaining. And even if the pictures were the same, the texts framing them would differ.

What is interesting is that these reciprocal expectations slowly evolve and can become transformed while the communication goes on. If a member of a group makes an 'innovation' and sends a message with an attention-grabbing new theme, others follow.

Thus, sociability is constant only as a form: it allows for continuous changes in the contents of what is thought of as interesting.

At first, all the groups started by sending pictures of themes that are familiar from all amateur photography (see Ulkuniemi 1998): depicting friends and relatives, views on a tourist trip, recording extraordinary situations like parties – and thus using the photos as ‘prostheses’ for memory (Lury 1998). However, more worthy of note were the ways in which the groups subtly developed themes for themselves: for instance, the female students sent photographs of their childhood landscapes; the male students introduced their leisure activities to each other, and more importantly for themselves, all through the ‘field experiment’ they sent a lot of pictures showing girls they were captivated by and who they were trying to make a hit with. The pilot group, in turn, seemed to make themes out of anything – even photographing brand names and TV shows.

What is it, then, that makes an individual picture exciting enough to be sent? It is of crucial importance to realise that there is no way of answering this question by listing different features of a picture. What becomes interesting for the participants is a matter of local and contextual processes of interaction: it is a question of a collective history that shapes what is seen as important (Koskinen, Kurvinen & Lehtonen 2002; Miller & Slater 2000). In addition, in our material the texts attached to the pictures have a pivotal role in making the pictures interesting.

## **THE INTERPRETATION OF TEXT AND IMAGES IN CONJUNCTION**

Like the postcard, the mobile photo email message forms an original hybrid where the whole can only be understood as the intermingling of the pictorial and textual elements that differ qualitatively from each other (Laakso, Laakso & Östman 1999: 137-138). Of course, the impact of the verbal element is not strange to the traditional use of photographs either. People often name represented persons and maybe describe the occasion, the time and the place in their photo albums; thus it becomes a bit like a diary. Further, a central number in the social event of showing slides are the accounts given and the appreciative and evaluative discussions by the party who is watching. However, contrary to the traditional uses of amateur photographs, in the digital picture messages textual elements are seen as belonging to the *core* of the communication.

Nearly all the messages sent as part of the ‘experiment’ had textual elements either in the heading or in the body of the message. Still, pictures and texts function together as two distinct elements. One and the same image can be sent many times to different people, but the texts that shape the ideas of the context and of the relevant narrative vary to match the relationship with different recipients. A good example is a case in the male students’ group. A member sent a message showing himself sitting in a bar with a blonde.



*better than good  
company*

howdy octopuses! yesterday I was at a bar with  
three pints and this radiant blonde!

beat that.

T. Jokinen – the strategist and intellectual

However, he also sent the same picture with completely different texts to the boyfriend of  
the girl.



*a woman at a bar*

well, finally Simo, here's the picture of your  
boozing girlfriend!!!!

Tomi

Thus, because of the texts, the picture was received in a completely different way by the  
boyfriend and the other friends, and in the two cases the depiction of the situation had  
markedly different undertones.

In the interviews everybody confirmed what the actual messages already showed: the pictures need to be framed with text. Tomi sums up: “Well it would be rather strange to receive an image without any explanation.” Similarly Minna says: “The picture is particularly important, but you have to explain where it has been taken and who it represents.”

In addition to the specifically written texts, important information and resources for interpretation can be carried by the fields of the message that automatically reveal the time of sending and the names of other recipients, for instance. Who the message comes from, and to whom all it is directed can be very useful information. For example, one tends to relate quite differently to the messages one receives via message groups and the ones that are sent to only one person. Also, a note is treated differently depending on whether the receiver group consists of a group of close friends or of a bunch of not personally well known colleagues.

## **ALLUSIONS IN TEXTS AND IMAGES**

Communication both with language and with images implies an openness, the possibility for many interpretations that can be even contradictory. Thus, the sender and the recipient try to reach a level of communication where both know what the other means and understands. In the case of postcards, as Östman and Laakso (1999: 20) say, it is the mutual influence of images and texts that needs to be taken care of. When united, their interpretational potential is unpredictable: it is possible to read more – or less – into the message than the other part of the communication originally planned to include in it.

In addition to the fundamental openness for many interpretations, inherent in text and picture elements, communication by postcards is further complicated by the fact that they are often written with an implicit style that consists of allusions and hints. According to Laakso, Laakso and Östman (1999: 128-129) this has its basis in the semi-public nature of the postcard and its mediation through the post. Implicit writing is necessary because the message is potentially read by many outsiders and the most intimate meanings must be conveyed indirectly. Thus, postcard texts often consist of subtle hints and suggestions. They are ‘unopen’ and ‘semi-secret’, things are expressed by writing ‘between the lines’.

Just as with postcards, also in the case of the mobile picture email messages, the meanings that are written – and hidden – ‘between the lines’ are essential: what is only alluded to but what both the sender and receiver can read into the message.

Nevertheless, the material produced in our ‘experiment’ suggests that, in addition to the will to conceal, the implicitness in communication has another – and maybe even more fundamental – reason: hints and suggestions are instrumental in reciprocal entertainment. In the digital picture messages a central basis for enjoyment but also concern is the potential of meaning implied in the intertwined texts and images.

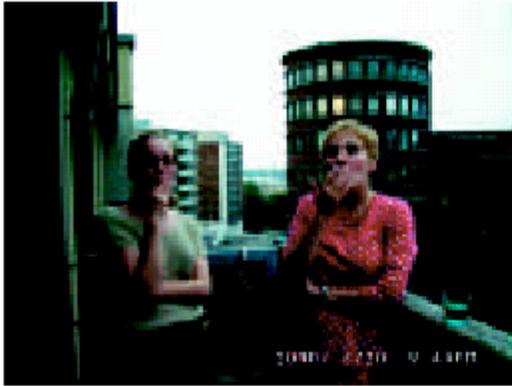
For instance, the two examples given on the previous pages make a number of alluding suggestions. In connection to the way the male students' group communicated with sending pictures of girls, the idea of 'company' is meant to imply that the sender will not only share a short moment with the woman just sitting together with him. And of course, it can be further suspected that also the members of the experiment group were aware of the young woman's relationship with someone else than the sender – which could give a new nuance to the joke. And in the second version, by transforming and exaggerating what really took place, the message itself can give a whole new – entertaining – interpretation to the boyfriend who was also present at the table.

## CREATING AN INNER CIRCLE

To implicitly allude to things that 'only we' share and know about is an effective way to *create* the sense of forming an *inner circle*. This is the additional spice of the 'inside joke'. Moreover, implicitness is central in messages that can be understood as some sort of gifts: the more exclusively a message or a gift is addressed to a specific person, the more exclusively it can be interpreted only by him or her, and the more allusions it will have to the relationship between the sender and the receiver. To give an exceptional gift means donating, in addition to the material present, symbolical allusions to shared meanings, experiences and taste. Most importantly, the best gift tends to be the one that *requires* a flash of insight and that will give an experience of being surprised, because of its unanticipated accuracy. It is for this reason that universally applicable presents – like chocolate, jewelry, champagne and flowers, and at the extreme, money – are problematic: they are not unexpected and they could be given to *anyone*. It is also for this reason that lovers expect to be gladdened by 'something really special' – and often become disappointed.

In the material provided by our 'experiment' the individualisation of the messages was done with various types of allusions; again, the pair of messages on the previous pages showing the young woman in a bar are a good example. At once, the allusions entertain the recipients and are functional in the construction of an inner circle. It is unavoidable that part of the fun in the messages is not conveyed to the outsiders – and this is not by accident.

A specific way of creating a sense of 'inner circle' or unity is linked to the way a group represents itself for itself: the pictures that show individuals who receive them. Typically, people who share a leisure activity, for instance, a group of floor ball players, would get a picture of themselves. The collective self-representation could be a bit fictionalised as well. Female students take photographs of themselves on a balcony drinking beer and smoking cigarettes and imitating 'suburban mothers'. Thus, the representation of the group to itself can also be playful. In this case the distorted self-representation only underlines the awareness of *not* being the kind of people that are represented; this is also the playful message that is conveyed to the boyfriend of a member of the group.



*Nasty realism...*

Kepuli,

Here's some seriously nasty realism for you, pictures from the summer evening yesterday at our balcony with Minna and Mervi. We took pictures of the future of suburban mothers – or what we hope we won't become. We look terrible!

I thought I'd give some shock treatment against your loving feelings. [...]

Beso,

Susu

One of the main ways the male students' group created a sense of being an 'inner circle' was to send pictures of girls. It was a question of showing both familiar faces and new 'conquests'. Even old female friends came to be seen in a slightly new light because of the new gadgets and because of the experiment context where all the participants had a local history of seeing pictures of women as depicting potential conquests.

When in the interviews there was a discussion concerning the way in which different recipients for different messages were selected, Esa says that the central criterion was 'of course, the degree of obscenity, naturally'. At the same time, he is very aware that the in-group communication is not really presentable:

Some of the stuff that has circulated among us is, in a sense, unsuitable for being printed. [...] I think those things that are a bit wild are fun as long as they are kept inside a certain group. [...] Of course, it's quite limiting as well, it forces you to leave the girls out when there are some pictures of naked women, well girls don't necessarily like it that these kind of pictures are sent to them. (*Esa*)

Esa is very conscious of the fact that pictures that might entertain some people are not seen as funny by others – and that as a sender he is evaluated very differently on the basis of the same messages. Thus, he carefully chooses what to send to the inner circle and what to others.<sup>3</sup>

## **CONCLUSION: COMPARING THE POSTCARD AND THE MOBILE DIGITAL PICTURE MESSAGE**

To ponder on the future of the postcard in digital times, a guiding analogy could be found in the relationship between the traditional letter and the email. That is, although communication in real time has clearly diminished the will to write traditional letters, the latter have simultaneously gained in status: what is received in a paper form feels somehow more 'important' and even more reliable; there is an increase in the ritualistic value of letter writing in connection to invitations or formal matters. At the same time, the long waning culture of communication in writing has been altered and reborn in a new form in emails and SMS messages. Thus, the relationship between the new forms and the old ones is not simply exclusive. The classical sociological finding that activity is accumulated, is true also for communication: the same people who use a lot of mobile phone and internet also tend to send postcards more than others (Östman & Laakso 1999: 21).

Therefore, to speculate a bit, it seems reasonable to expect that the amount of postcards sent will decrease when the 'third generation' mobile phones become common among consumers. However, this does not necessarily mean that there would not be postcards

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<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough discussion on the gendered aspects of the 'experiment', see Koskinen, Kurvinen & Lehtonen 2002: 85-90.

sent anymore; rather, their cultural specificity might become even more accentuated: to receive a postcard means that someone has really taken his or her time to think about me. Furthermore, the material support of a *card* will probably have an intensified status.

It seems that the mobile messaging with digital images adopts, and because of the new technology, also transforms, elements that have been typical of postcards. Still, there remain major differences: the postcard is part of the culture and the rhythm of correspondence by ‘snail mail’, whereas communication with mobile pictures belong to the mobile phone culture where speed and ‘real time’ interaction are important (cf. Mäenpää 2001; Kopomaa 2000). To write a postcard one has to delimit a time and space where one creates the message; although this is required with the new technology as well – especially with the combination of a Communicator and a camera – it can be done much more rapidly. The main influence this has in relation to the postcard is that long sequences of interaction with many messages and responses can take place within an hour’s time – whereas the relevant time span in the classical communication with letters and postcards has been counted in days and weeks.

Moreover, together with the increased rapidity of the communication, the augmentation of the amount of digital images in circulation tends to inflate the value of individual pictures. The quantity will bring about a qualitative change – this has been the central general lesson of the industrialisation of society. As the value of individual items has declined, the *categories* of items have gained in importance: a single milk bottle or pen is fully substitutable, but the categories of milk or pens have become more and more significant; as the money economy has spread, the value of a single coin or banknote has become marginal, but the general importance of money as a tool has become enormous (Lehtonen 1999: 266; Simmel 1990 [1900]). This trend applies to the visual culture as well. Were we to receive postcards daily from same people, the value of each single card would diminish. At the same time, the general value of postcards as communication tools would grow. This is precisely the way in which the mobile digital picture messages most likely will affect the visual culture: while the value of individual pictures decreases, the general significance of visual communication becomes much more important.

Although the mobile digital picture messages are clearly part of the emerging ‘mobile phone culture’, also these two have a different relation to temporality. Important here is the fact that communication by speech is emphatically real time. In contrast, much like the written word, also pictures are attached to the material support in a manner that emphasises a kind of ‘objectivity’: the messages have fixity that does not pass with a fleeting moment. This in itself encourages us to reshape and recontextualise them again. No wonder, then, that central in our material is the way in which pictures and texts are intertwined to form *narratives*, installing them to new connections and contexts – that link them to new temporalities, as well.

Based on the interviews, it might be easy to claim that the key to the question of what is suitable to be sent is the evaluation of the recipients’ inclination to think of a picture as interesting. However, the examination of the messages themselves reinforce the essential specification – also made in the interviews – that the meaning and significance of pictures

and texts is built in a way that they affect each other and that their value heavily relies on the local history of interaction of the group. To understand their way of functioning does not mean, however, that they just follow a deterministic path set by earlier messages. Rather, central to them is their partial *openness* for different interpretations. It is this which guarantees that the collective history can have a future – which is unpredictable and needs to be *created*: the inherent diversity of the messages provides open elements that the next messages can build upon to form a chain.

It is important to realise that the chains of communication are not necessarily hermetically sealed and limited to one particular means. It was clear in our ‘experiment’ that among the participants the lively interaction with digital picture messages intensified other forms of communication as well. There emerged new topics of discussion and reasons to interact: new objects with which to playfully tease others or to be sociable with them and create entertaining inside jokes. Seen this way, the mobile digital picture messages do not replace other forms of interaction. On the contrary: they create a new interface for contacts, an additional and qualitatively new way of maintaining and reproducing relationships. They produce specific forms of reciprocity, both formal and contentual. The messages sent are such that it is the specific recipients, and no one else, who understand them and who can answer in a similar style.

Once it becomes possible for the average consumer to send mobile digital picture messages, this will have an effect on, first, the general status of visuality in our culture, and second, on the way people react to pictures showing them personally. The general tendency will be that the value of individual pictures diminishes, but the overall value of visual representation increases. We will get used to the situation where we personally are objects for other people’s shots – often without recognising that any photographing is taking place. It is a question of a condition where, alongside surveillance cameras and the ‘counter gazes’ against them (see Koskela 1999, Loon 1996, Rossi 1995) the amount of visual information grows exponentially. It becomes ever more important to discuss the power of visuality and the ways in which the use, reuse and transformation of pictures are present in everyday lives – and how they can be utilised for both everyday entertainment and for counter gazes.

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