We define ourselves as human beings within a certain time and space context. These dimensions are now being transformed as our experience is mediated by mobile technologies. But how is this transformation occurring in women’s lives? Are women allowed a more comprehensive management of their time? This research, focusing on time, is theoretically grounded in the more recent feminist debates, identifying cultural representation and discourse as important carriers of the gender system. This work has opted for a qualitative dominant mixed method, designed to answer the question: what is the meaning of the mobile phone for women at different stages in their life trajectories? The paper argues that the role women play in society is determinant in their use of the mobile phone.

KEYWORDS women; technology; mobile phone; time

Introduction

This paper aims to provide a better understanding of the relationship between women and technology through an inquiry into the significance of mobile phones in the lives of Portuguese women. The study focuses on the mobile phone as a site where the nuances of women’s experiences with technology become visible and on adult women as a meaningful group. The research is located at the crossroads of feminist studies, cultural studies and new media, thus offering new lenses through which to look at the phenomenon of the gendering of mobile phones—those of feminist cultural studies of mobile communications. Past debates about gender and mobile phones have frequently focused on differences between men and women (Leopoldina Fortunati 2009); however, these debates have resulted in ambiguous, muted, or contradictory findings. Therefore, instead of suggesting another response to the issue of gender difference, this paper reorients the focus towards the discussion of the stability and homogeneity of the category of woman.

As gendered subjects, our research is situated within specific discourses, times and places, class relations, and knowledge structures. This study is located in Portugal, which makes for an interesting socio-technical system for analyzing the gendering of the mobile phone.
phone and offers a contribution to the “need to broaden and intensify the cross-cultural work on mobiles (…) further, extended, systematic and comprehensive studies of the insertion and shaping of mobiles in national cultural contexts” (Gerard Goggin 2008). With regard to technology, Portugal has a very high penetration rate of mobile phones, one of the highest in Europe. With regard to gender, Portugal is also considered a peculiar case within the scope of European Union countries, since, on the one hand, the State has not been able to provide a satisfactory level of supporting social services such as schools and maternity protection, but, on the other hand, it is the country where most women work full time (Ana Cardoso Torres, Francisco Vieira da Silva, Teresa Libano Monteiro & Miguel Cabrita 2004). In 2007, 61.9 percent of women aged fifteen to sixty-four were employed, which is above the European average of 58.3 percent.

Research Design

The research presented in this paper focusing on women’s time and the mobile phone has been drawn from a wider research project on women and mobile phones, which was conducted in Portugal and assumed a dominant qualitative approach. Qualitative data was drawn from thirty-seven in-depth interviews to Portuguese women. These women were aggregated into seven groups corresponding to a life course approach (JeyLan T. Mortimer & Michael J. Shanahan 2004).

To define the seven groups or seven life-stages, a modified version of the market research study of Portuguese consumers (Marktest 2006) was used. This research aggregated women into seven life stages: single dependent; young independent; nesting; mothers; single mothers; mature independent and empty nests. Women in the single dependent life stage are above eighteen years old but still depend on their families financially and actually live with them. In the next life stage, young women have gained their financial independence, and, although they may still live with their family, they are able to control purchase decisions. The nesting life stage is determined by the beginning of a co-habitation relationship which may be, or not, formally constituted as marriage. The next life stage is that of motherhood; contrary to the Marktest study, we have aggregated women with children at different ages, although acknowledging some differences in the use of the mobile phone according to the children’s age and whether they are old enough to have a mobile phone of their own. We then have single mothers, either because they have become widows, because they have divorced or separated their partners. We were particularly interested in analyzing the effects of the absence of the masculine part of the couple in the relationship of women to technology. Women in the mature independent life-stage are those around the age of thirty-five, who have no children and have either never been involved in a co-habitation relationship or have divorced or separated their partners. Finally, empty nesters are women whose children have left home and who have retired or whose job has reached a stagnant level. This last stage has also become more complex to define and thus presents much variability: “while old age once considered a homogeneous last stage of life (…) it is now a highly diverse universe, made up of old retirees, average retirees, able elders, and elders with various degrees and forms of disability” (Manuel Castells 1996).

As for the selection of women for the seven groups, a convenience sample was constructed. Women interviewed were also identified by “snow-ball” from a pool of urban heterosexual women.
Gendered Time

We are Embodied Time (Castells 1996)

If time is embodied, it is also gendered, and in a time-constrained society, women are perceived to be amongst the poorest. To the popular question what do women want, the most common answer would be “more time” (Michael J. Silverstein & Kate Sayre 2009).

According to Diane Negra, there has been a “feminization of the temporal crisis” (2009) which is a hallmark of postmodern culture and postfeminism. Female philosophers like Julia Kristeva, Alice Jardine and Harry Blake (1981) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 1995, 1999, 2004) propose a female notion of time bounded by women’s corporal experiences and by the unexpected. According to Kristeva, Jardine and Blake, the concrete experiences of women’s bodies are not compatible with the masculine linear and industrial conception of time, but still women are forced into timetables. Elizabeth Grosz speaks of the female desire for something new. But beyond the corporal and the biological, women and men are also socialized into different time cultures, where women’s time is defined as relational, that is, directed to the care of others (Helga Nowotny 1989/2005) thus, “women often feel alienated from their ‘own’ time” (Grosz 1987; Marli Huijer 2010). Barbara Adams (1995) speaks of the need of women for “open-ended-time,” because most of the activities performed by women such as caring, loving, educating and household management are unpredictable. Nowotny (1989/2005) also describes how women have less possibilities to structure their time and how their life courses are less unified and coherent than men’s. Negra notes the punitive discourse around women’s time pressures, with “temporal problems that may frequently be resolved through minimization of their ambition and reversion to a more essential femininity” (2009).

In Portugal, a country that registers one of the highest employment rates for women, women’s time constraints are substantially high. According to the national survey on the uses of time (Ine 2000), the combined duration of professional work, household and family care amounts to 6.96 daily hours on average for the employed male population and 8.67 hours for employed women, with the great discrepancy being that household chores only account for 20 minutes for the male population and 3 hours for female population. Leisure time is also reduced for women, with the average being 2.30 hours for the male population and 1.42 hours for the female population. Also according to the survey on the uses of time in Portugal, the feeling of being rushed and time pressured is higher for women and starts at a younger age, with 41 percent of young women, aged fifteen to twenty-four years old, claiming they feel rushed, versus 29 percent of young men. The statistics are about the same for other European countries (Christel Aliaga 2006; European Communities 2005, 2008).

Time is certainly one of the main concerns for the women interviewed. Across all life-stages, but especially for women who are mothers or sole care-givers, time poverty and paucity of leisure or personal time is one of the main obstacles in everyday life, and more time is the most common need:

I feel that life is a bit monotonous. I don’t have time for myself, leisure time: to do a massage, lie down on the sofa, go have a coffee when I feel like it. (Carla D., thirty-four-year-old, unemployed marketing manager, married, mother of a toddler)

The felt need to have more time is also rooted in the fact that women have to perform multiple tasks in different spheres of their lives. Multitasking seems to be a trademark for
women. Manuel Castells has designated multitasking as the “blurring of time and space” (2008) and shown how the mobile phone has become the tool of choice for multitasking by enabling the hybridization of spaces and blurring of sequences in time. D. Southerton (2006) and D. Southerton and M. Tomlinson (2005) designate this pattern of allocation of tasks as “temporal density” which together with “temporal dis-organization” and volume constitutes the basis for the sense of always running out of time.

Multitasking is also commonly associated with women who are believed to be better at it than men. Data supports the fact that women perform more tasks at the same time. In a recent study about media multitasking, 31.4 percent of women talked on the phone or on the mobile while they were watching TV, compared to 30.1 percent of men (Vera Araújo 2009). The women interviewed generally acknowledged that they did a lot of multitasking, not always by choice, and often this is a cause of stress:

I feel very stressed out. I have to do a lot of things in little time and I have to make them all and because of that I am always running. For me multitasking is a necessity I would do it differently if I could. (Sofia, forty-seven-year-old, human resources manager, divorced, mother of two teenage boys, sole caregiver)

Moving Time

The role technology plays in this process of time poverty and the perception that time is saved or lost has been very controversial. From a co-construction perspective, it is easy to understand that this impact could never be straightforward because “technologies change the nature and meaning of tasks and work activities, as well as creating new material and cultural practices” (Judy Wajcman 2008). Acknowledging the agency of users, in our case women, allows us to understand innovative uses of technologies, such as the mobile phone, to take control of time.

Most of the women interviewed have indeed referenced the mobile phone as a tool for saving time, namely by minimizing the “temporal dis-organization” (Southerton 2006; Southerton & Tomlinson 2005) through micro coordination and control. With the mobile phone, especially with web-enabled phones, we are in “perpetual contact” (James Katz & Mark Aakhus 2002), in a state of “constant availability” (Mary Chayko 2008). This constitutes a paradox for the women interviewed, insofar as, on the one hand, it helps to release the anxiety, especially for mothers and sole caregivers who have children or relatives that depend on them, and to feel more connected to their social networks and thus emotionally rewarded, while, on the other hand, it leverages their multitasking and burdens their daily life with tasks related to their labor of care and unpaid work, namely household management:

The mobile phone allows me to manage my personal and family life in a more effective way but I feel free when I am able to turn off my mobile phone, especially if I go out without one. (Sara, thirty-five-year-old, social worker, married, mother of two children)

I use the mobile phone a lot and I feel that if I leave home without it I will miss it. There’s a lot of stuff I get around on my way to work. We are doing multiple things at the same time and that is an advantage. On the other hand if I could spend two weeks without it, it would be great, I would have a less stressful life and I could take advantage of things that I can’t now. (Inês, twenty-five-year-old, marketing manager, single, young independent)
The “always on” nature of mobile phones has also led to an extensive discussion on the role they play in the hybridization of time, especially on the balancing of family life and work.

**Juggling Spheres**

With mobile phones being introduced as professional tools, they have been often regarded as facilitators for intrusion into family time; however, “the same technologies can mean very different things to different groups of people (…) rather than simply reading them as adding to time pressure and accelerating the pace of life, mobile modalities may be creating novel time practices and transforming the quality of communication” (Wajcman 2008). Just like the landline phone that was diverted from a business tool to an easy way to contact relatives and friends, so has the mobile phone been domesticated as a tool for social networking. In fact, although most of the women interviewed acknowledge the mobile phone as an important tool for their jobs, they rely on it mostly to manage their personal lives. Women at the young independent life stage are confronted with the fact that it is “not easy being a princess,” as explained by a young marketing manager when she mentioned how hard it is sometimes to look after your appearance, invest in hard work to progress in a career and still find time for friends and family.

When asked what sphere would be mostly disturbed if they were deprived of their mobile phones, women across life-stages—but once again, especially mothers and sole caregivers, the life-stages where time bind is most critical—were almost unanimous in indentifying their personal lives as the sphere they would have more trouble managing:

> If I had to be without my mobile phone it would be better work wise but in my personal life it would be worse. I find myself very dependent on it for coordinating little things, the daily life tasks. I have a landline phone but it is not practical. I don’t even know the number anymore. (Margarida, thirty-three-year-old, engineer, married, mother of two infants)

Also, none of them seems to feel that their family time has been affected by the presence of the mobile phone. This conclusion is consistent with the study of cell phone and time scarcity in Australia (Michael Bittman, Jude Brown & Judy Wajcman 2009a, b; Wajcman, Bittman & Brown 2008, 2009): “It may be that, with ‘seamless connectivity’, the separation of home and work that we take for granted in modern societies is in the process of reformulation” (Wajcman 2008).

This welcoming of “boundary permeability” is expressed by Vanda, a training technician who has recently experienced increasing mobility in her job-related activities with many meetings outside the office. Formerly, she relied on landline phone for most of her contacts, but now she has welcomed the mobile phone as a tool for micro-coordination and recognizes that it allows for a greater degree of freedom:

> While on vacations, it is good not to have the mobile phone with us but on a daily basis it is very complicated. It is my contact with my friends and my family. Without a doubt the personal sphere would be the one most harmed if I did not have a mobile phone. (Vanda, thirty-six-year-old, training technician, nesting)

Some studies have reported that only women felt that family-related calls spilled over into their working schedules (Noelle Chesley 2005). This reinforces the traditional gendering of time, where family management seems to burden only women. This feeling of not being able to disconnect from family worries was reported by the women interviewed and it was
even made clear during the interviews, which, in many cases, were conducted during working hours but constantly interrupted by calls from family members.

Conclusion: Mobilities and Immobilities in the Gendering of the Mobile Phone

Becoming entitled to mobility is a superb achievement for women. Rosi Braidotti (1994, p. 256)

The mobile phone perfectly embodies “life in the fast lane” (Judy Wajcman, Michael Bittman, Lynne Johnstone, Jude Brown & Paul Jones 2008) and life certainly runs fast for the women in the present study. Women's time is constrained by gendered domestic division of labor, with women still being perceived as having the sole or main responsibility for household work and family care giving and management. This trait burdens especially mothers in dual earning households but is also extended into later life stages, such as empty nesters with grandchildren to take care of. The labor of love consumes so much time that women are left with no time to play and sense they do not own their time, and this adds to the unpredictability. Women recall never knowing when they might be summoned to solve a family problem, big or small, and the sense of anxiety this brings into their lives. So it is not unexpected to discover that women crave more time, especially more time for themselves, as expressed by Ana, a mother of two small children who needs to wake up earlier than the rest of the family to get the housework done.

In this context of “temporal crisis,” many have addressed the mobile phone as a tool of acceleration that might increase pressure on an already stressful environment. Nevertheless, what our interviews have shown once again is that the nature of a technology or an artifact can only be understood in the co-construction of users and context. Women have shown overt agency in the use of the mobile phone. Experiences may vary across life stages in accordance with different time needs, but they all share the fact that the mobile phone has been incorporated into their lives as a tool for management of their interactions with family and friends and for micro-coordination of their everyday lives.

Initial time constrains begin in the young independent stage, when young women start to work and feel the pressure of having their days filled with work related tasks. The pressure at this stage arises mostly from the need to sustain the connection to their network of friends and to meet the expectations of being a young woman. For these women, the mobile phone is a tool for the management of social life, to keep up with friend’s lives, and a connection to the outside world. When women progress to the nesting life stage, the division of domestic labor presses on women’s time. Even for young couples, there is still a traditional gendered pattern in housework division. Women become then the managers of social and family life for the couple. At this stage, the mobile phone becomes a useful micro-coordination tool. This trend will be emphasized when women become mothers. For mothers, the mobile phone is also an electronic leash on their children and, with decreased opportunities for personal contact, their own umbilical cord to the world outside their job or home. This role of the mobile phone can extend to the empty nest stage, especially when women have to look after their grandchildren. Time pressure is even more acute in sole caregivers. As for mature independent, the pattern of usage seems closer to the young independent, with the exception of increased responsibility towards elderly members of the family, like aging parents or sick relatives.
The mobile phone, instead of adding more pressure or intruding into personal and family time, rather seems to enable women to better control their lives and reduce the anxiety of the unpredictable by enabling them to always be at reach, providing them with flexibility. Women have historically been described as immobile, passive and dependant on others to move for them. Women seem to deny a reading of immobility, but in fact much in their lives is still static, of which the division of labor is one example. Women have conquered mobility in many different ways: they are space and time invaders, they are able to express their individuality and creativity, but they are still constrained by their own inability to acknowledge the backlash of their achievements.

This paper brought women to the forefront of the discussion of the uses of time and affordances of the mobile phone and, building on the concept of cultural studies of mobile communications, introduced the idea of feminist cultural studies as a conceptual lens through which to look at mobile communications. Contrary to the theory that gender differences tend to disappear as penetration rates increase, we found that in Portugal, a country with one of the highest penetration rates in Europe, the mobile phone has different roles and affordances throughout women’s life course.

From a broader perspective, this study has implications for service design by urging the industry to move from a functional perspective to a broad socio-cultural perspective, and to develop products that truly resonate with women’s lifestyles. Some companies claim to have a strategy to approach women but cute and pink do not solve women’s problems or address their needs such as that of time saving or enabling them to manage their conflicting priorities such as balancing work and family life. Companies have to tap into their female consumers and that means doing market research that goes beyond differences between men and women, otherwise the end result will be to treat women as an homogeneous group which could not be further from the truth.

To do a research is a path fraught with hard choices and the painful realization that to include is to exclude. The methodological option was to learn about women from women, to give them voice, to get insights from their discourse, thus we used a dominant qualitative research design. In the absence of an accurate portrait of the relationship of women with technology it would be interesting to provide an extensive analysis through a quantitative survey based on a life-stage approach. It would also be worthy to compare men and women’s life-stages and life courses and understand the differences in touch-points with the mobile phone and the differences in affordances at each life stage. Another avenue for research is the interconnection between technologies, and the negotiations that take place in networks that are increasingly complex. It would be interesting to study the mobile phone as part of a specific socio-technical system, specially its articulation with the Internet. One of the conclusions that could be drawn, from the interviews, is that the mobile phone seemed to be more important for the women that did not know how the use the computer or did not have one at hand. The same phenomenon seems to occur with the availability of other resources for communication: when women have a very stable routine, constant access to Internet and perform their job in a single constant location their dependency on the mobile phone also decreases. Further more with the increasing integration of mobile and Internet it will be necessary to look at the mobile phone use from the scope of post-convergence theories. With increasing penetration rates the mobile phone is becoming a ubiquitous technology and, in Western countries, one of the most promising segments is the aging population. Women live longer and thus specifically
studying older women and their relation with technologies at large and mobile phones in particular could provide useful insights.

Both Portugal and the mobile phone have fallen victims in the past to the hegemony of larger countries or larger screens such as the computers or the television that have rendered them invisible to academic research. This paper hopes to have laid the ground for future cross-cultural work using the lenses of feminist cultural studies to study mobile communications around the world. Contrary to a theory of *apparatgeist* it is contended that future analysis should always be grounded and situated, without obliterating differences and complexity and without obscuring the smaller objects vis-à-vis the larger ones.

**NOTES**

1. According to ANACOM (http://www.anacom.pt), at the end of the second trimester of 2010 the penetration rate was 148.7 percent, which is above the European Union average of 122.9 percent.
2. The retirement age in Portugal is sixty-five years old for both men and women.
3. The study was conducted based on a sample of 10,093 interviews to the Portuguese population.

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