

Chapter Seven

From *Gengsi* to *Gaul*: Mobile Media and Playful Identities in Jakarta

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How do mobile media technologies shape identities? Identity – what it is to be and have a self, and to belong to social and cultural groups – is always mediated. People understand themselves, others and their world in terms of the media they know and use. According to philosopher Paul Ricoeur, narrative is the privileged medium for self-understanding and social/cultural identifications.¹ The quick and widespread adoption of mobile media technologies prompts us to revisit this claim. In this window I look at the context of Jakarta, Indonesia, to show how urban mobile media practices shape identities in playful ways.

The mobile phone – or *handphone* – has rapidly gained popularity in Indonesia. The number mobile phone subscribers, predominantly prepaid, increased from 3.67 million in 2000 to 159.25 million in 2009 (on a population of 229.96 million).² Reasons include the lagging state of fixed telephony at home, its affordability (even for poor people), and the omnipresent branding that induces an acute sense of “must have”. Most importantly, mobile phones offer Indonesians rich new opportunities for identity construction and expression. Mobile media hook into existing identity practices that are specific to life in the capital city. Jakarta is both a city-world and a world-city. As “Indonesia in small”, Jakarta reflects the nation’s ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. However, Jakarta’s urban culture and identity transcends this mosaic. Unlike most other Indonesian cities, shared symbols, interactions in public and modes of self-presentation are not based on the rules of one traditional regional culture. Young people in particular base their identities on shared (though contested) ideas about what it means to live “modern life” in the capital city. Two defining practices are *gengsi* (the display of prestige) and *bergaul* (the art of modern socializing). Mobile media technologies have quickly become part of this dynamic

urban culture, and help to define what it means to be a “modern Indonesian”.

Gengsi, which means “prestige” or “status display”, originally connoted family standing and class. With Soeharto’s New Order (1966-1998) economic boom, the notion has shifted from an interior “innate” property to an image achieved by outward appearances. Appearing prestigious involves the possession and display of material goods that symbolically convey progress and cosmopolitanism. The notion regularly recurs in descriptions of Indonesian consumer society in general.³ And it recurs in analyses of Indonesian technological culture, in particular.⁴ Indonesians rarely use *gengsi* to describe themselves but frequently ascribe *gengsi* to other people or to indicate the general Indonesian obsession with conveying impressions through status symbols. The moral attitude towards *gengsi* is ambiguous. It is synonymous with consumptive materialistic hedonism and treated with mockery, contempt or concern. It is also the measure of a “modern lifestyle”, and seen as a source of pride and self-worth.⁵

Mobile media technologies have become an indispensable part of *gengsi*. Prestige can be conveyed by the mobile phone as a material artefact. The device rubs off its prestigious qualities on the individual bearer. Technology journalist Budi Putra says:

Indonesians like to possess prestigious devices. Technical specifications are not important. The phone is used to express oneself, to make one feel higher. I’d say for 80% of people the mobile phone is about *gengsi* and at most 20% really knows and uses the technology.⁶ Two editors of *Telset*, one of the many printed glossies about the mobile phone, explain:

[T]he mobile phone has become a kind of benchmark of the individual. The mobile phone is an object you carry with you all the time and can put on display at any moment. It is seen as part of someone’s social status. Someone who doesn’t have a mobile phone is thought of as backward.⁷

After choosing brand and model the generic stock item must be customized. The phone is dressed up, often in gendered ways. Girls and young women like danglers and sleeves. Guys often wear their phone in (fake) leather pockets. A common personalization involves picking a so-called *nomor cantik* (beautiful number). Regular SIM cards sell for 10,000 rupiah (less than €1). A beautiful number is usually at least 125,000 rupiah. Exceptionally beautiful numbers sell for 3 million rupiah or more (€250 in 2007). A website devoted to selling *nomor cantik* explains:

Cellphone number is your prestige [because] your number already introduce yourself first, who you are, before you introduce yourself fully. What people think with the owner phone number of 99999999? The owner must be not a common people, he must be an important people.⁸

Beautiful numbers may be chosen because they are easy to remember. They can also carry a specific personal meaning (like one's date of birth), and/or a cultural significance.⁹ Adi, a young marketing sales manager at the largest telecom operator in Indonesia, Telkomsel, reveals another way mobile phone numbers express *gengsi*. In Indonesia's low-trust economy, post-paid customers are thoroughly checked by telecoms to make sure they are credit-worthy. Telkomsel post-paid numbers start with the combination 0811. Having such a number reveals one can afford a post-paid number, and that one is with what is considered the best and most expensive operator.¹⁰

Physical context matters in handphone-related signifiers of prestige. One day Adi showed me around the Telkomsel office and the customer area in Wisma Slipi, a tall building in west Jakarta. He explained that Telkomsel's "high value customers" came there to receive personal assistance. The customer area was designed to make the customers feel valued and important. Telkomsel recently moved to a new building and redesigned its interior in a style called "futuristic". Indeed, the space has a sterile, "cool" quality that is diametrically opposed to Jakarta's chaotic, hot and dirty streets. Even queuing up can become part of the display of prestige, Adi continued. It is quiet in the new building because people had to stop by Wisma Slipi and could not be seen by others. When Telkomsel's customer service was still located in the nearby Mall Taman Anggrek (one of the biggest and most luxurious shopping malls in Jakarta), the customer desks were always busy. People had to wait in long queues, and could be seen by other people passing by. Many did not have real questions for the service desk, Adi confided, but just wanted to appear to belong to Telkomsel's customer base. As Adi and I had a coffee in a small café downstairs near the exit of the building, he talked about office culture in Jakarta with a generous dose of irony and self-reflection. Adi pointed at the people walking in and out of the building, many with a communicator-type handphone clinging to their ears. He said there are many aspiring "young executives" who act as if they are very important people and wish to appear like successful businessmen. According to Adi, the majority of those passing by are only pretending. He uses the phrase "*hanya main-main*" (only playing) to describe them. This phrase frequently recurs when people talk about how the mobile phone is used.

Personalizing the phone quite literally changes its character from being an undetermined "wild" object to a "domesticated" companion tailored to people's individual preferences. This is called "appropriation" in the domestication

approach.¹¹ In what is called “conversion”, personalized phones become symbolically charged objects that “speak” for their owners. These artefacts tell other people who their owners are, and convey the message that they take care of their “image”. Tamed devices are also tangible everyday reminders to their owners that they are in charge of their own lives. Many Indonesians look at themselves through the eyes of others and are acutely aware that they live in an underdeveloped nation. Reflexivity, or “the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself”, is often forwarded as a distinguishing feature of modern identity.¹² Following 32 years of Soeharto rule, the reform period has failed to deliver on its promises. People commonly describe the state of the country as chaos. It is said that Indonesia is “still running behind” and is “not advanced”. Many feel that the country as a whole hardly is a source of self-pride. Showing that one is capable of at least exerting control over one’s own life by taming technological artefacts offers the individual a much-coveted sense of pride and prestige. Mobile phone *genssi* then is not just a sign or symbol of individual progress. It actualizes it. It *is* the progress. Through *genssi* people distinguish themselves from those who are “backward” and seek to distance themselves from the generally deplorable state of the country. This, however, is only one side of the coin. Technologically defined prestige is not solely a centrifugal force but can also be a way to identify with collectives. Quite explicit about the potential of technologies to present a modern face of the nation is Elnar (female, 23 years old). Elnar likes to chat online and get in touch with people on international chat channels. Foreigners often ask her whether Indonesia has many slums. She feels that they are under the impression that Indonesia is a poor and backward country. Elnar then tries to explain: “[I]t is modern here too. We also have factories, our own airplane, and the internet.”¹³

Handphone *gaul*

The mobile phone is partly a symbolic artefact used for aggrandizing personal prestige. It is also a profoundly social communications medium. Knowing how to use the mobile phone to socialize is part of *bergaul*, which can be loosely translated as the savoir faire of modern socializing.¹⁴ *Bergaul* consists of creative play with language (*gaul*). *Bahasa gaul* is the trendy language spoken by young people in Jakarta and spread out all over Indonesia. It borrows words from languages spoken in the capital, notably *prokem* (Jakartan lower-class vernacular), Chinese, and English. It has no fixed vocabulary. Mastery of *bahasa gaul* entails continuously inventing new words and humorously reusing existing expressions. *Bergaul* is a dynamic collection of “meta-rules” informing not only what to say, but also how to say it and to whom, how to move around town, what to buy, etc. One must know how to present oneself and have a view about matters. It means

knowing what is current, what is “now”. Moreover, it is showing that one knows through one’s speech and demeanour. It is reflexive social play in continuous flux, a kind of infinite play with its own rules. If *gengsi* departs from individuality and exclusion, *bergaul* departs from social interactions and inclusiveness. Mild competition in one’s self-presentation and the expression of originality should never overshadow connecting with other people and playing together. Someone who is too competitive and uses *bergaul* to increase personal *gengsi* is seen as arrogant. Newcomers to Jakarta, like young students from all over Indonesia, must quickly familiarize themselves with *bergaul* in order to link with peers and not to be considered “backward” or “from the village”. *Bergaul* is an essential social skill required of anyone who seeks to move with ease and confidence in any situation and to relate to others.

There is a lot of *gaul* talk about the handphone. People share information on the best models and providers among each other and talk about their personal relation with the phone. Late-night television shows hosted by trendy young women invite viewers to call in and chat on the topic “have you ever broken your handphone?” A popular blogger’s “meme” at some point was writing down “ten things about my handphone” and passing these questions on to blogger friends. These were questions about phone brand and type, special number, what wallpaper, last SMS, where do you wear your phone, and so on. Besides being a researcher’s goldmine, this meme shows how the mobile phone is caught up in *bergaul*. One cannot just carry any phone. One should be able to explain why one has this brand, that specific wallpaper, this ringtone. The self-conscious relation to the device informs the relations with others and oneself.

In addition to being a topical item, the mobile phone as a communications medium is central to *bergaul*. Texting in particular offers rich possibilities for linguistic play in socializing and self-expression. This is a text message Dewi (female, 25 years old) sent to a male friend:

Gw g taw,,c iwan jg g taw.lo cb dtg lgs di graha mobicel jl.mampang prapatan gw taw lg dah,,rabu gw lbr.ikut dunkz¹⁵

In English:

I don’t know. Iwan also doesn’t know. Please come directly to Graha Mobicel, Mampang Prapatan Road. I do know something else though. I am free on Wednesday, so come along!

This message contains several *bergaul* elements. First, this message is an ad hoc invitation to socialize and join in, without applying too much pressure (“Please come directly to Graha Mobicel”).¹⁶ Second, the message is a prelude to a possi-

ble physical encounter. Dewi is not very precise about a specific hour and location and keeps all options open (“I am free on Wednesday, come along!”). A few more messages will likely be exchanged to fine-tune the actual time and place for a meeting, if it will take place at all. Third, the message jumps into an ongoing conversation that involves multiple people (“I don’t know. Iwan also doesn’t know”). Fourth, the message makes creative use of abbreviated SMS language, leaving out vowels and seeking shorter alternatives for common words, and sometimes using words from other languages like English. In English the *c* in “c iwan” is pronounced *si Iwan*. *Si* is a definite article used before names of people one is familiar with.

This example parallels mobile communication practices observed elsewhere. In the context of Norwegian teens, the use of the mobile phone to coordinate future physical meetings in sequences of increasingly precise communicative exchanges has been called “micro-coordination”.¹⁷ Mobile communication also involves an expressive dimension of self-presentation and a social dimension of group discussion and agreement, particularly among young people. This has been called “hyper-coordination”.¹⁸ The use of abbreviated and foreign language in texting has also been widely described in diverse contexts. So if the elements in this example have universal parallels, then what is typically Indonesian about it? The answer, predictably, is because its language, content and context are Indonesian. It is an Indonesian expression of individual and group identities. This needs further explication. The message may be written out as follows in *bahasa gaul*:

Gue nggak taw, si Iwan juga nggak taw. Lu coba datang langsung di Graha Mobicel, Jl. Mampang Prapatan. Gue taw lagi deh. Rabu gue libur. Ikut donk!

In official *bahasa Indonesia* the message might be rendered as:

Saya tidak tahu. Si Iwan juga tidak tahu. Kamu mencoba datang langsung ke Graha Mobicel, Jl. Mampang Prapatan. Saya tahu lagi. Hari Rabu saya libur. Ayo ikut!

Two steps of “encoding” occur in composing the message. From standard Indonesian into *bahasa gaul*, and from *bahasa gaul* to abbreviated SMS language. In texting almost always the national language is used, often interwoven with English words, rather than regional languages. One of the reasons is that Javanese in particular has an intricate way of establishing and expressing social standing. Not handy when you try to cram a message into 160 characters. Another reason is that *bahasa Indonesia* and international languages are considered more modern.¹⁹ Writing down spoken *bahasa gaul* itself is a creative play with language. People

must make up their own transcriptions, since there is no written standard. *Bahasa gaul* rarely features in “official” institutional publications, like newspapers, books, film and television subtitles. Written *bahasa gaul* thrives in informal media where there is a place for the voices of young people themselves: the Internet blog-posts, text messaging, email, and youth magazines that publish letters from readers. These media offer play spaces to experiment with alternative youth identities, with *bergaul* as its shared distinctive feature. Many young people now own a personal communication device that enables them to bypass parental or institutional surveillance. The use of *bahasa gaul* and abbreviated SMS language erects further boundaries. This development is particularly urgent in Indonesian society characterized by strong family ties and social hierarchies (not surprisingly, new liberties afforded by digital media cause reactions of deep moral concerns. However, that falls outside the scope of this window). The receiver on the other side also must be able to “decode” the message. This encoding/decoding is not merely a way to hide the content of the message from the prying eyes of parents or schoolteachers. It is a meta-communicative message by which both sides “perform” to one another their knowledge and versatility in playing with the rules of *bergaul*. An individual should be knowledgeable and have opinions worth sharing. Dewi apparently broke this rule when she started with “I don’t know.” But then she corrected herself, saying: “I do know something else though.” This negated her earlier statement, and can be interpreted as a reflexive comment on the rules of *bergaul* itself.

According to Ricoeur, storytelling mediates identity via three “mimetic” steps. People implicitly preunderstand their lives as composed of narrative elements (*mimesis1*); they actively construct plotted stories about their lives and those of others (*mimesis2*); and they reflexively understand themselves as narrative characters (*mimesis3*). Narrative identity theory, however, pays no attention to the conditions under which people tell certain stories. By contrast, a theory of “playful identities” takes this reflexivity towards the medium and the mediating process into account. To this end, the threefold mimetics are reworked into “play₁₋₂₋₃”. In *play1*, life’s interactions are implicitly understood as playful. In a dialectic between free play and rule-driven game, mobile media at once open up a room of potential to experiment with identity in the display of *gengsi* and the social play of *bergaul*, and constrain life with new burdens, like forcibly having to choose the right model and to always interact in creative ways. In *play2*, interactions are explicitly configured in playful ways. Sociologists such as Erving Goffman have pointed out that self-presentation in everyday social interactions involves illusory role-playing.²⁰ In *gengsi* people playfully express themselves by customizing their phones and engaging in make-believe. In *bergaul* people engage in witty to-and-fro play with language and context, and deliberate coding and decoding of text messages. In *play3*, people come to reflexively understand themselves and others as playing beings. In the example of people pretend-

ing to be businessmen by ostentatiously flaunting their phones, Adi understands the office as a stage, the phone as a prop and the people as actors in playful performances. *Gengsi* and *bergaul* thus foreground reflexive identity mediations via mobile media. People relate to the artefact, to their communication and to their own play. Mobile phone *gengsi* plays with the pretence involved in everyday role-playing. Mobile phone *bergaul* involves an infinite metaplay with its own rules. Identities emerge not merely in storytelling “after the fact”. From the theatrical performances of the self in *gengsi* to the social play in *bergaul*, mobile media technologies shape identities in what theatre theorist Schechner calls a performative “showing of a doing”.²¹

Notes

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 114n1.
2. International Telecom Union statistics at <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx>.
3. Lizzy van Leeuwen, *Airconditioned Lifestyles: De Nieuwe Rijken in Jakarta* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1997); Yatun L.M. Sastramidjaja, *Dromenjagers in Bandung: Twintigers in Het Moderne Indonesië* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2000).
4. Bart Barendregt, “Sex, Cannibals, and the Language of Cool: Indonesian Tales of the Phone and Modernity”, *The Information Society* 24.3 (2008): 164; Michiel de Lange, “Dunia Digit@L: Internet en Moderniteit in Indonesië 2000”, M.A. thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2001), 19, 36, 82.
5. Sastramidjaja, *Dromenjagers*, 51.
6. Interview with Budi Putra, 3 August 2007.
7. Interview with *Telset*’s managing director Walid Hidayat and editor Nurhamzah, 10 August 2007.
8. www.perdanacantique.com (now offline), accessed 17 April 2008.
9. Bart Barendregt, “Mobile Modernities in Contemporary Indonesia: Stories from the Other Side of the Digital Divide”, in *Indonesian Transitions*, ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt and Ireen Hoogenboom (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2006), 329; De Lange, “Dunia Digit@L”, 65-66; Li Li, “Superstition or Modernity?: On the Invented Tradition of Lucky Mobile Phone Numbers in China”, *M/C Journal* 1 (2007).
10. Interview with Adi (pseudonym), 24 August 2010.
11. See Roger Silverstone and Leslie Haddon, “Design and the Domestication of Information and Communication Technologies: Technical Change and Everyday Life”, in *Communication by Design: The Politics of Information and Communication Technologies*, ed. Robin Mansell and Roger Silverstone (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 19-23.
12. George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, vol. 1 of *The Works of George Herbert Mead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967 [1934]), 134.

13. De Lange, "Dunia Digit@L", 78.
14. Barendregt, "Sex, Cannibals", 164, 166; De Lange, "Dunia Digit@L", 30-31; Sastramidjaja, *Dromenjagers*, 67-74.
15. Interview with Dewi (pseudonym), 25 August 2007. I had asked her to show me "a typical text message".
16. Dewi literally uses the words "try to come" (*coba datang*), a polite way to phrase an imperative.
17. Rich Ling and Birgitte Yttri, "Hyper-Coordination via Mobile Phones in Norway", in *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, ed. James E. Katz and Mark A. Aakhus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 139, 142-146.
18. Ling and Yttri, "Hyper-Coordination", 140.
19. Barendregt, "Sex, Cannibals", 166.
20. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).
21. Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, rev. and expanded edition (London: Routledge, 2003), 114.