

## Introduction

Being happy and sad at the same time, feeling lonely while sitting together with friends, not knowing who I am and who I want to be – the time of adolescence is characterized by curiosity and vitality towards new experiences and simultaneously by doubts and uncertainty concerning the perception of self in relationships. Young persons have to deal with physical and cognitive changes but especially with social issues.<sup>1</sup> One of the most important social challenges lies in obtaining and differentiating new relationships with peers of both sexes and transforming the relation to parents into a more grown-up connection. Looking at the contexts of these challenges: adolescents grow up in a social world permeated by media and mediated communication. “Mediatization” as a meta-theory and long-term process describes the integration of “new” together with “old media” into the everyday life of people, and its consequences for individual and social life, culture and society: “People think and live their everyday lives ever more connected to these media and the possibilities that are opened up. The concept of mediatization of course includes that this has consequences for people, their everyday lives, their identity and their social relations, as well as for culture, democracy, the economy and society in general, since all areas of human life are involved, leisure and work, learning and entertainment, social relations and forms of communication, etc.”<sup>2</sup> The mobile phone as an indispensable, personal and multifunctional medium holds an important position within these mediated communication processes and provides adolescents with different or even new possibilities to answer developmental and relational questions.

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<sup>1</sup> R. J. Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education*, New York: McKay, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> F. Krotz, “Mobile Communication, the Internet and the Net of Social Relations: A Theoretical Framework”, in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2005, pp. 447–457, this passage on p. 450.

Against this background the present paper aims at conceptualizing adolescent relationships as dynamic social networks of negotiated meanings that are intertwined in processes of mediated communication and especially mobile communication. Findings from developmental theory will be merged with phenomenological network concepts and studies about the media use of adolescents in peer relations. On this foundation the paper focuses on three different kinds of relationships as part of an adolescent network: close friendships, romantic relationships and peer-group relations. All three are described according to their communicative nature and function, as well as their role in negotiation processes with mobile phones. The paper closes by addressing theoretical implications for the investigation of adolescent relationships, as well as practical issues with regard to the legal protection of minors and media education.

### **Adolescent Relationships as Social Networks of Negotiated Meanings**

“Bridging uncertainty” – as the title of this paper implies, the negotiation of peer relations is considered an important challenge in adolescence, closely connected with the aim of feeling accepted, integrated and self-assured. In order to grasp the nature of peer relations, many theoretical approaches view this notion from the perspective of the group, concentrating on a fixed number of members, and describing their structure and functions.<sup>3</sup> Others primarily focus on the single individual in dyadic relationships like friendship or sibling-relations and highlight specific personality traits and their implications for the relationship.<sup>4</sup> Emphasizing the embeddedness of adolescents in a wider and differentiated network of relationships, John C. Coleman mentions relationships with family members and adults, interest groups, and online relations, in addition to friends, peer-groups, acquaintances and romantic relationships,<sup>5</sup> and thus argues for an integration of these different perspectives. His argumentation employs a relational perspective, reflecting the tradition of phenomenological network theory. Following Fine and Kleinman, social networks are conceived

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. B. Schäfers (ed.), *Einführung in die Gruppensoziologie*, Wiesbaden: Quelle & Meyer, 1999; L. Krappmann and L. Oswald, “Beziehungsgeflechte und Gruppen von gleichaltrigen Kindern in der Schule”, in F. Neidhardt (ed.), *Gruppensoziologie: Perspektiven und Materialien*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1983, pp. 420–450.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. A. E. Auhagen and M. v. Salisch (eds.), *Zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen*, Göttingen: Hogrefe, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> J. C. Coleman and L. B. Hendry, *The Nature of Adolescence*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 140.

as a dynamic set of relationships including dyadic ties. The social structure of such a network is constituted through meaningful self–other interactions and communicative negotiation processes: “Since meanings provide the basis for individual and collective action, people’s meanings will have consequences for action, the production of social structures, and changes within those structures. ... Understanding actors’ meanings is fundamental to any analysis of social structure.”<sup>6</sup> Taking his approach from a developmental point of view, Selman conceptualizes social relations in terms of the perspective of the self and others.<sup>7</sup> He describes different levels of reciprocal perspective taking and emphasizes its importance for the maturation of social negotiation strategies. In his model the actions of most adolescents are characterized by reflective and complex communication strategies that can be categorized into successive levels. These strategies are primarily directed towards relationships and questions of who likes whom and how do people treat each other: “It is probably not a coincidence that the (level 3) capacity for mutual collaboration emerges and begins to consolidate at about the time that most adolescents are turning their attention to often extremely intense and public disequilibrium engendered by powerful boy-girl and peer-group needs and pressures, pressures arising from within the self and throughout the culture.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Media as Communicative Tools to Negotiate Relationships**

Within these negotiation processes, media play an important role for constituting relationships, for expressing one’s identity and exchanging experiences inside a social network. Comprehensive studies prove the importance of media for adolescents concerning these issues: “The more personal freedom and unsupervised leisure time children and youth have, the more they spend time outside home and with their friends and the more they use media together with their friends.”<sup>9</sup> In order to demonstrate their belonging to other peers or aiming at a certain kind of status or connectedness, adolescents use media together or talk about it, share media content or communicate by media. They are interested in music, computer

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<sup>6</sup> G. A. Fine and S. Kleinman, “Network and Meaning: An Interactionist Approach to Structure”, *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1983), p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> R. L. Selman and L. H. Schultz, *Making a Friend in Youth: Developmental Theory and Pair Therapy*, Chicago: Chicago Press, 1990, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> A. Suoninen, “The Role of Media in Peer-Group Relations”, in S. Livingstone and M. Bovill (eds.), *Children and Their Changing Media Environment: A European Comparative Study*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001, p. 203.

games, movies and TV shows, but also in portable media devices like mp3-players, game consoles and especially in mobile phones that incorporate all these contents and functions: “The mobile phone differs from other media in that it is an individual-related and predominantly personally used medium that at the same time as a minicomputer incorporates manifold kinds of spoken, written and visual communication.”<sup>10</sup> Studies about adolescent’s mobile phone use focus on favoured functions like the text message service or the telephone and the camera function and describe its importance for peer relations in general.<sup>11</sup> To open a further perspective, the present analysis starts out with the individual who negotiates different relations before his or her developmental background by using the mobile phone and other media within the structure of everyday life. The focus will lie on close friendships, romantic relationships and peer-group relations as part of an adolescent network. To ensure a well-grounded description, different resources are taken into account. The main source are empirical findings from an ongoing qualitative longitudinal investigation with three spontaneously evolved groups of adolescents aged 13 to 17 and their social network. Figure 1 shows a diagram representing one of these groups and their net of different relationships.

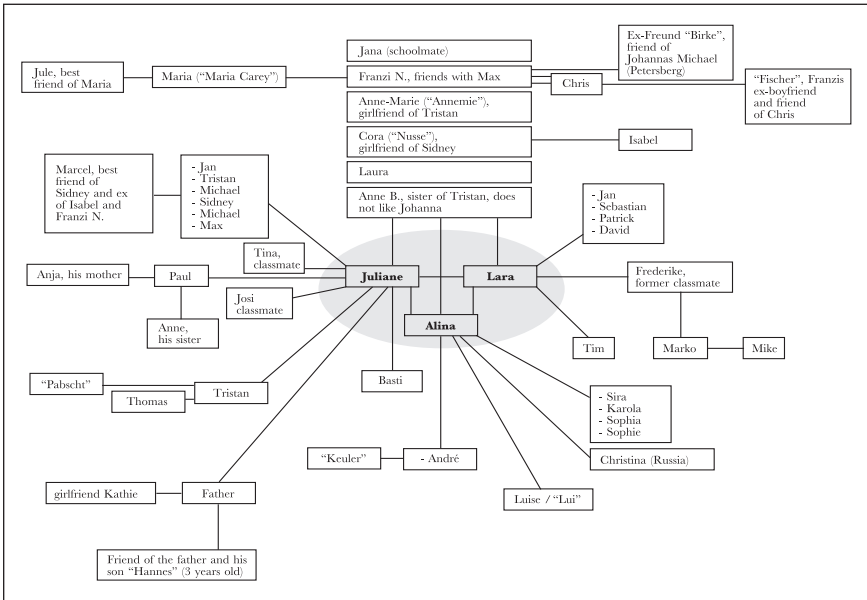


Figure 1

Exemplary cases from all groups are chosen and analyzed to closely examine the specific communicative nature of each relation and any negotiation processes via the mobile phone. These findings are complemented by developmental and ethnographic studies about relationships and communication in adolescence.

### **Close Friendships, the School Structure and Mobile Communication as a Short-Term Connection**

Close friendships during adolescence are characterized by strong and enduring ties with clear boundaries to others and at the same time deep and emotional connections with a special quality of trust. “During adolescence best friendship are also increasingly valued as a source of mutual intimacy. Many adolescents report that their best friendships are characterized by acceptance, understanding, self-disclosure, and mutual advice.”<sup>12</sup> Communicative actions like talking about school topics, sharing secrets or overcoming difficulties together mirror the manifold and often very intimate character of this relationship. Close friendships in adolescence are embedded in the structure of the school and can be characterized by continuous and intensive face-to-face contact in and around school time.

The mobile phone becomes even more important at times when school structures are missing like after school or during school vacation. Communication via the mobile phone then serves to bridge missing face-to-face contacts. To perpetuate the connection and ensure that the other person is still “present”, adolescents send text messages or view pictures and video clips to deal with lonely situations. For example, four thirteen-year-old girls are best friends. They attend the same class and spend each afternoon together. As often as possible they sleepover at their friends place to escape their parents and talk about other relationships and particularly boys. When they are separated from each other the girls write text

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<sup>10</sup> F. Krotz and I. Schulz, “Vom mobilen Telefon zum kommunikativen Begleiter in neu interpretierten Realitäten: Die Bedeutung des Mobiltelefons in Alltag, Kultur und Gesellschaft”, *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, vol. 37, no. 135 (2007), p. 59, my translation.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. e.g. Manuel Castells et al., *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007, pp. 127–169; V. Oksman and J. Turtiainen, “Mobile Communication as a Social Stage”, *New Media & Society*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2004), pp. 319–339; N. Döring et al., “Contents, Forms and Functions of Interpersonal Pictorial Messages in Online and Mobile Communication” in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Understanding: The Epistemology of Ubiquitous Communication*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2006, pp. 197–207.

<sup>12</sup> W. A. Corsaro and D. Eder, “Children’s Peer Cultures”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 16 (1990), p. 207.

messages commenting on their current actions, asking for company or tape their friends during and after school to watch the clips in the evening or during holidays.

Series of text messages, sent on a hot summer day:

Just now I went out and it is so hot. Oh my god! Go to the bus right now.  
– Uups, missed the bus, have to wait 5 minutes. – Ok I'm in the bus, will be there in a minute. (Tabea)

Text message sent in the evening:

I have an appointment at the dentist tomorrow and don't want to be alone that long. Do you have time after school to go with me? K. (Katja)

If the school structure is missing for a longer period of time or even completely (e.g. when one friend has to change school or moves to another city), the communication with the mobile phone will not be sufficient to sustain this special quality of close friendships, since such relations need intensive face-to-face contact to maintain the continuity and intimacy. Communicative contacts are otherwise reduced to a few text messages a year for birthdays or holiday greetings. Compared to the importance of the school context, the mobile phone offers an additional but not sufficient means of staying connected.

### **Romantic Relationships, Uncertainty and Mobile Communication between Other Media**

Romantic relationships in adolescence usually evolve within peer relations, where adolescents experience their first sexual encounters, differentiate their gender identity and develop an idea of future adult partnerships.<sup>13</sup> It can be described as a kind of “clumsy experiment”: “In these beginning relationships, the focus is not on the nature of the relationship or the fulfillment of various needs, but on who the partner is, the partner's attractiveness, how they should interact in a romantic context and what their peers think of the relationship.”<sup>14</sup> Consequently romantic relations do not usually last longer than a few days or weeks. Negotiation strategies aim

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<sup>13</sup> W. Furman and V. A. Simon, “Advice from Youth: Some Lessons from the Study of Adolescent Relationships”, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, vol. 15, no. 6 (1998), pp. 723–739.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 734.

at creating a safe space away from parental influence and providing occasions to get closer to one another. Playful patterns of communication are used to set up a pair, or to tease somebody, but also to hold hands, smooch or meet up. While these interactions are characterized by happiness, adolescents at the same time deal with doubts, uncertainties and fears concerning their romantic relations. These feelings and questions are then discussed in close friendships and peer relations.<sup>15</sup>

Communication via mobile phones becomes especially important during the initiation or the break-up of a partnership. Numerous examples from the longitudinal study reveal the specific position of mobile communication between other forms of mediated communication and face-to-face communication. For instance a fourteen-year-old girl got to know a boy in an internet chat room. After some talks, they exchanged their mobile phone numbers. It was then expected from the boy to initiate the more intimate communication by sending text messages. This communication channel provides boys with the means to show interest while remaining in a secure distance. Two sixteen-year-old interviewees comment:

It is easier to communicate through the mobile phone than face to face.  
(Christoph) Especially when the relationship is getting really serious.  
(Manuel)

After the first date, it is also acceptable to call the girl on her mobile phone. Numbers of home phones are rarely exchanged and if so, only in relationships that lasted for a longer time with the knowledge of the parents. When one of the partners intends to end the relationship, communication is getting more and more distant. Especially boys but also girls use text messages to resolve the bond. Katja, fourteen years old, explains the reason why:

We had some conflicts and he said – break it off – and I did. Then he was crying and I gave him a second chance. A few days ago he was upsetting me again and because I knew that he will cry I sent him a text message because I didn't want to see his emotions. (Katja)

These messages are not replied to by the addressee. While the intimate communication by mobile phone discontinues after breaking up, chat communication might go on.

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<sup>15</sup> J. Barthelmes and E. Sander, *Medien in Familie und Peer-group: Vom Nutzen der Medien für 13- und 14-jährige: Medienerfahrungen von Jugendlichen*, vol. 1, München: DJI, 1997.

These examples also demonstrate the embeddedness of mobile communication within other forms of mediated interpersonal communication and face-to-face communication. With regard to negotiation processes, the use of the mobile phone opens and closes intimate spaces. By doing so, adolescents establish negotiation strategies that create a certain kind of “distant nearness” in their romantic relationships.

### **Peer-Group Relations and Mobile Communication as a Strategic Ritual of Participation**

Peer-groups are considered the frame of action, in which adolescents deal with developmental issues like forming a gender-specific identity or achieving a certain kind of appreciation. Within these relationships they are able to try out different roles and to break boundaries they had to accept during childhood.<sup>16</sup> Peer relations are mostly same-sex ties between adolescents at about the same age, contracted voluntarily and shaped through collective activities and continuous interactions like routines of demonstrating status, trying to stand out from others or renegotiating levels of membership.<sup>17</sup> “Everyday activities in preadolescent and adolescent culture enable peers to negotiate and explore a wide range of norms regarding personal appearance and the presentation of self, friendship processes, heterosexual relations, and personal aspirations and achievement.”<sup>18</sup>

Against this background, adolescents exchange pictures, animations and video content by using the Bluetooth function of their mobile phones.<sup>19</sup> The shared content refers to favourite music stars, TV shows or films, portrayals of everyday life situations, but also to sexuality or violence. Typical sharing situations are during and after school, while waiting together at the bus stop or spending time at parties or other weekend activities. The screenshots from photos, animations and video clips below were collected from girls and boys during group interviews and illustrate the variety of shared content.

Considering the process of communication itself, adolescents are able to obtain almost any picture, photo or video clip they want from another

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<sup>16</sup> R. Oerter and E. Dreher, “Jugendalter”, in R. Oerter and L. Montada (eds), *Entwicklungspsychologie: Ein Lehrbuch*, Weinheim: Psychologie Verlags Union, 1998, pp. 310–395.

<sup>17</sup> K. Neumann-Braun, A. Deppermann and A. Schmidt, “Identitätswettbewerbe und unernte Konflikte: Interaktionspraktiken in Peer-Groups”, in H. Merckens and J. Zinnecker (eds.), *Jahrbuch Jugendforschung*, vol. 2, Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2002, pp. 241–264, my translation.

<sup>18</sup> W. A. Corsaro and D. Eder, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

<sup>19</sup> Bluetooth is a wireless and free phone-to-phone transmission function.





*Two friends having fun with large sunglasses*



*Photo from a poster with a German football star*



*Animation showing Garfield in erotic poses*



*Screenshot from a very violent video clip*

mobile phone owner, whereby getting it means, subsequently, passing it on to the next member of the peer-group. From the content of such communication it seems that the person who is able to acquire the funniest, most embarrassing or even most violent pictures or video clips is considered the coolest, most admired member of the peer-group. With regard to rather problematic content like pornography or videos, where animals or human beings are being tortured or killed, it appears that, particularly, male adolescents use these contents for the reasons mentioned above.<sup>20</sup>

Hence, the exchange of mobile content can be described as a strategic ritual of interaction. It is not confined to the communication between two adolescents, but rather directed towards the integration of one person into a wider net of peer relations. In doing so, the process of sharing is itself more important than the content that is shared. Adolescents who do not own a mobile phone with Bluetooth feature are excluded from an important ritual that interlinks peer relations:

For me it feels like being completely out, not cool and lost in a certain sense. I can't join in all the sharing activities and have nothing to show or to send. (Lisa, 14)

Thus, participation in peer relations and the negotiation of roles and communicative actions also materialize in a dynamic and continuous exchange of mobile content.

## **Conclusion**

Theoretical and empirical findings concerning developmental issues, social networks and media use with special regard to mobile communication were specified to conceptualize adolescent relationships as differ-

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<sup>20</sup> See in addition: P. Grimm and St. Rhein, *Slapping, Bullying, Snuffing! Zur Problematik von gewalthaltigen und pornografischen Videoclips auf Mobiltelefonen von Jugendlichen*, Berlin: Vistas, 2007.

entiated social networks established by negotiation strategies that are intertwined with mobile communication. To conclude, it first should be emphasized that the investigation of communication with mobile phones in adolescence has to be set against the background of different relations as part of a social network and with respect to developmental, social and media contexts. Figure 2 tries to visualize these assumptions by displaying a single adolescent with his/her developmental background and questions in relation to others such as close friends, romantic partners or other peers. To negotiate these relations the adolescent establishes communicative actions by using the mobile phone in line with other media and face-to-face-communication within the structure of everyday life. The mobile phone therefore holds a specific position within a wide range of communicative negotiation strategies depending on the shared meaning and the communicative nature of a relation, but also depending on the developmental challenges an individual is struggling with.

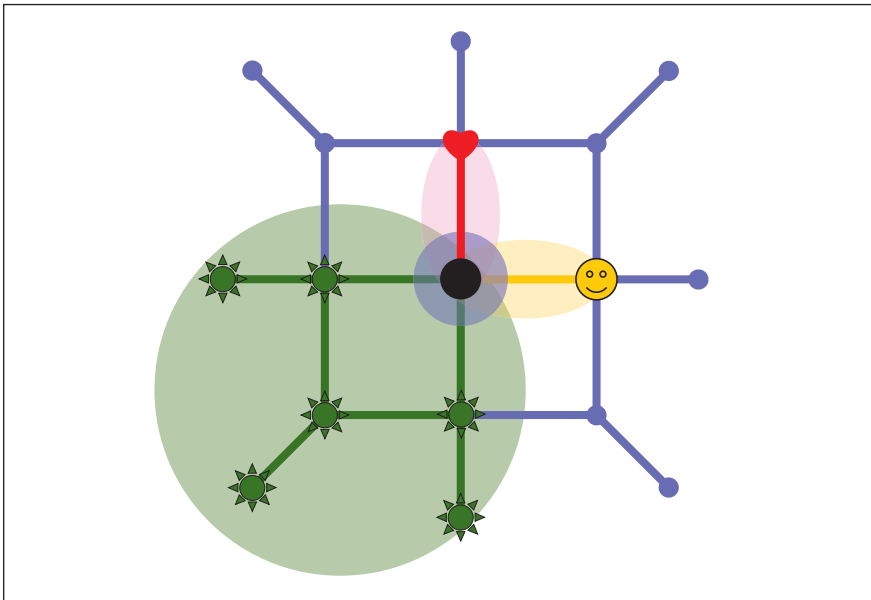


Figure 2

A second conclusion deals with practical and pedagogical implications and argues that the use of mobile phones in adolescence poses new questions about the legal protection of minors and the encouragement of

media literacy. One evident example is the exchange of problematic mobile content in peer relations described above. Because of the Bluetooth function every mobile phone owner – even children! – can be considered a potential addressee and user of pictures or video clips dealing with pornography, violence or problematic political content. It takes one click only to get what somebody wants and when he or she wants it. Since these processes of sharing take place in the individual communication between two adolescents, precautionary actions of professional providers of mobile content (e.g. age constraints) are ineffective just like current laws, regulations and guidelines which do not oversee private and intimate communication processes. For this reason, the encouragement of a critical and reflected use of new communication technologies becomes more and more important not only for children and adolescents, but for parents, teachers and other pedagogues as well as providers of technologies and services.