

# Listening music on the public transport – About uses of mobile phone by young people

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## Abstract

The study object of this paper focuses on the use of mobile phones as a music player in public space. This practice is commonly observed in youth of popular sectors, who listen *cumbia* and *reggaeton* with speakers without headphones. This technological appropriation is generally opposed by their peers, adult culture, including by users of public transport of passengers who are not asked about being disturbed by the noise. There are laws prohibiting the use of music players without headphones in public transport. In this context, we propose to analyze the phenomenon from a qualitative perspective based on interviews with young and observations. Of these it appears that there is another issue beyond just the annoyance caused by noise: the criticism towards the music genre that these young people use to listen related with a strong presence of class discrimination. **Keywords:** Mobile Phones. Young. Uses and technological appropriation. Public transport. Music.

## Introduction

Digital Communication technologies participate in the daily routine of young through uses, appropriations and social practices that these people share with peers in and outside their groups. Raymond Williams (2011) argues that “technological determinism” implies a perspective considering that technologies produce practices and manners of social organization solely with

their existence. Additionally, he describes a perspective based on the idea of a “symptomatic technology” meaning that society, with its clear needs, brings technologies into existence in order to cover specific purposes. According to Williams’ definition, we consider that individuals create dynamics of sense with technologies through uses and social appropriations. In this context, it is appropriate to culturally analyze the social dynamics produced with Communication technologies.

In the case of mobile telephones, social subjects contribute to generate new uses in public space, at school, and at home. Waiting times, trips and periods of no activity are fulfilled with uses of mobile devices. During those periods, people perform activities such as sending instant messages, chatting, taking photographs or music listening as well as responding to e-mails or finishing delayed tasks. In this context, the public transport of passengers becomes the scene of a new practice of sense with mobile telephones. There, young people listen to music with their telephones with the speaker activated and without headphones. This situation is common for passengers in the urban space and it is also opposed and condemned by them. Criticisms come from other users of public transport expressing these opinions through virtual social networks and Internet forums. The investigation is dedicated to the noise caused by young people and specifically to the musical rhythms they listen to: *cumbia* and *reggaeton*. Due to criticisms, some bus and subway lines request passengers to use music players with headphones while some local governments introduced regulations prohibiting music listening without headphones.

Roger Silverstone, Eric Hirsch and David Morley (2003) suggest a conceptual diagram that is also posed as an analytical approach of the uses of technologies. They conceptualize the appropriation, the objectification, the incorporation and the conversion as characteristic moments of the uses of technologies. In this sense, appropriation occurs when we buy technology; objectification is when we grant it a place among our usual social practices; incorporation is when it becomes an institutionalized and necessary part of our daily routine, and conversion takes place when we

share social scenes with other individuals through technology. This schematization is useful to think about the cultural dimension of Communication technologies and the different Communication processes produced through the possible uses.

The present work intends to focus on a specific use of mobile telephones performed by an age group of young people. In this sense, a widely spread conceptualization as digital natives intends to reinforce the idea that this age group incorporates technologies into their daily routine more easily than the others since they are not afraid of them. Young people position each new technological development into the market as a wish, and they must be the main analysts of it. Therefore, many new practices of sense come from young people. According to Michel De Certeau (1996), these sagacious tactics (arts of doing that, facing the strategies of social structures, the weak propose as uses and appropriations of culture) are elements of interest of a communicational analysis.

The first couple of questions from our qualitative interviews focus on these matters: “What does the word *technology* mean to you?” and “Which device do you have and use frequently?” Each and every one of the young people we interviewed uses mobile telephones. If they do not own a computer, they use the one they share with their families, they borrow a computer from a friend or go to a cybercafé, and they do the same with videogames. As far as the mobile phone, as it is a personal object, it is considered a device that created applicability beyond ages, genders, and social classes.

The advantages of the mobile telephone are evident: the possibility of immediate and constant connection, the possibility of control from parents to their children and between couples, the tranquility of knowing where and how a loved one is. Regarding this aspect, Rosalía Winocur (2010) suggests, as a kind of metaphor, that nowadays “the cell phone is a tranquilizer” as the cigarette was in the nineties.

The practicality, for a wide amount of people, also has to do with the possibility of buying different types of mobile telephones. The most sophisticated ones are called *smartphones*, but old models are also available. The latter have almost the same advantages

as the new ones, and the costs of repairing are lower. Also, it is possible to take advantage of the prepaid service (buying card with a code that provides credit to the telephone or using “virtual charge”), and parents can pay for this service for the telephones of their children, which allows them to control their expenses. In this context, young people use the money they save to have credit on the telephone.

At this point of technological development, the mobile telephone, in the strict sense of the word, is a euphemism. This device can be used as a calendar, a camera –with zoom and flash-, a video camera, a text editor, a video and music player, an Internet browser, an instant message sender, and it can also be used to talk by telephone. Therefore, it would be accurate to call it a portable multifunction device.

According to a report by the Public Policy Observatory, under the Public Management Secretary of the Chief of Ministers, Presidency of the Nation, in Argentina there are 117 mobile telephones for every 100 residents<sup>1</sup> (Burgoni and others, 2010). Thus, we can conclude that this technology goes through not only perspectives of ages but also of classes, given the availability of old models, the velocity of innovation and the prepaid control of credit.

This work focuses on the use of mobile telephones by the young people we observed and interviewed. Of all the different uses we have outlined, we will focus on a new and controversial use, which we will call “the children of the *bondi*”, meaning young people listening to music without headphones on public transport.

There is an evident dispute around these people about the hegemony of the senses of practices, and this is a social and even legal debate that implies censorship and bills of law prohibiting this practice described as annoying.

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<sup>1</sup> These are not the most recent data existing, but since they are official, we prefer to take these criteria. Other sources inform that the use of mobile telephones has increased.

## Methodology

The present work is based on different techniques: reading and analysis of specific bibliography, qualitative interviews with young people and observation on public transport of passengers. Rosana Guber (2011) states that “the interview is a face-to-face situation where there are different kinds of reflexivity but also where a new reflexivity is created.” Therefore, it is accurate for us to focus on the opinions of young people in order to know what technology means to them and characterize their practices.

Going out to the street to observe uses of technology is not an easy task, mainly because we do not know how to look, what to observe or how to take notes of what we observe since we cannot agree with the observed. For a Communication study, processes through which there is a construction of sense are relevant, and those uses and appropriations are also inevitably a result of a historical context that should not be overlooked. Likewise, looking around is also a part of observing the object. Therefore, space, the place where we observe, is not only a scene but also a battlefield when it comes to predominant and emerging practices. For that reason, it is necessary to be fully aware of that at the moment of observation.

To have access to data that account for the communicational practices of the “children of the *bondi*”, as we call them, it is necessary to get on buses, travel and observe everything, from how they act to their postures, from the clothes they wear to their idiomatic expressions, from the locations of the bodies to the attitudes of the others.

In a series of trips we carried out in February, March and April 2012, we wanted to investigate this communicational practice young people perform with devices on public transport. During those trips, we could observe (not in all of them, of course) young people listening to music through their portable devices with speakers. No passenger asked them to turn down or turn off their devices in any of the cases. However, there were looks

and expressions of annoyance because of their presence. We took register as written “comments” and also, in some cases, on video.

The study about these uses of technology by young people is also complemented with news articles about the subject published on electronic media. We also performed a critical reading of Internet forums about the subject, such as *Taringa*, and we also noticed the use of Facebook groups to ask people to participate in order to “forbid music listening on public transport without headphones”. Also, the images in pictures and drawings multiplying on the Internet regarding this situation are relevant for the study, since they are generally made to combat these uses from a hegemonic perspective.

### The children of the *bondi*

A young man gets on a bus (usually, young people call this kind of transport *bondi*, so we can adopt that word<sup>2</sup>), pays his ticket, sits on the last seat, takes a telephone out of his pocket and plays music. The music is *cumbia* or *reggaeton*. There is almost nothing new in this situation. Communication and entertainment technologies invade public space in different ways. Many other people on the bus are also using technologies, some of them are noticeable like telephones and MP3 players. In other cases we see headphones on their ears with wires out of pockets and backpacks. Here is the difference from the young man we are talking about: unlike the others, he is not using headphones, he is sharing his music with the rest of the passengers. This image is slowly

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<sup>2</sup> This word is an adaptation of the Brazilian Portuguese word “*bonde*” into Spanish, which means “streetcar” and it is pronounced /ˈboˈdʒi/. In turn, this word comes from the English word “bond”. At the beginning, “*bondi*” was used to designate streetcars in Lunfardo. This word has been incorporated into the slang of Buenos Aires and it has been used on a poem entitled “*Línea 9*” (“*Line 9*”) by Carlos de la Púa: “*Era un bondi de línea quemada / y guarda batidor, cara de rope*”. (“It was a scorched line *bondi*, and informer keeper, dog-faced.”) Music was added to transform this poem into a tango. It was recorded and sung by Edmundo Rivero. Streetcars have disappeared, but new generations have incorporated said term to buses (many buses did the same rounds and had the same line numbers as the disappeared streetcar lines.)

beginning to become common but also rejected and fought against, at least on discussion groups. Passengers say nothing about the young man or to him. We think the music does not bother while we look at everybody around to notice expressions of disapproval. These are not the people who later complain about this practice. They are not the ones supporting punishment requests for these young people and their uses of technology on social networks.

We could begin by wondering who public space belongs to. We could also try to define what we mean when we talk about public space, which would definitely exceed the limits of this work. We could begin by saying that public space has a material and a symbolic dimension connected at every moment. We can make an inventory to describe public space and say there are squares, streets, monuments, stations and other physical places. The media can also appear as first impressions, as well as the stores where we can buy or the places of services where people can go, stay, make use of their facilities, and generate frequent practices.

Trains, long or short distance buses, and subways are scenes where we display our manners towards other people. We are polite, we exchange looks, and we say “excuse me” and “thank you.” Many social rules are rooted in these spaces: giving up the seat to pregnant women, old people, disabled people, and any other people we may consider that needs the space more than us. In this situation, men are considered “gentlemen” if they give up the seat to women, even if they are tired, and even if those women do not need it.

New rituals involving uses of technology are being generated in these ritualized spaces. Technologies, as we stated in other works, have an important place in our daily routine. We even wear them as if they were clothing (MUROLO, 2011). MP3 players, tablets, personal computers, but most of all, mobile telephones are the favorite devices for people wandering in current societies. They appear as one more mark of the urban lifestyle. Uses are diverse, but one of the biggest attractions of these technologies is the possibility to play music.

The interviewees download music from the Internet to their telephones from where they listen to it in spare times or waiting

times. Even though most of the young people use the music player, not all of them use it without headphones. This use had its origin in a social sector, and it is a stigma, so the others do not do it in order to avoid being associated or belong to this group.

What kind of communicational or cultural analysis can we do about why it is in style for young people to listen to music loudly on buses and trains? What annoys people about this communicational practice with technologies basically performed by young people?

The analysis must focus on the senses that come into play in this practice. These senses are evidently competing for the appropriation of public space. At first sight, we could make a short inventory of the “troubles” it causes. The high volume can be annoying for most people, and then the kind of music, the genre: *cumbia* or *reggaeton*. Of course they can listen to other kinds of music with speakers on public transport, but those are the most common ones. Therefore, we can affirm that this is also a communicational practice of a specific social sector.

*Cumbia* is played as music “to dance” in parties of all social classes, but it is specifically consumed as music “to listen to” by lower classes, for which *cumbia* dancing clubs are their usual destinations on weekends and, by extension, they listen to it at their homes and on their portable devices. At dancing nightclubs, other kinds of liturgies are displayed around the music, such as the bands playing live, the drinks consumed, the dancing movements, the clothing, and the idiomatic expressions, among other specific communicational characteristics. Thus, there are ways of denominating oneself and recognizing people on the opposite classes (the division between high and low classes). Possible uses of technology are concomitants of said division.

For the first “accusation”, the answer is that *cumbia* is played loudly. The experience with music is also related to how we appreciate it, how we relate to genres, its impertinences and possibilities of consumption. *Cumbia* is played loudly. Small houses, shared bedrooms, spaces, in conclusion, also shape a way of relating to music. This is contrary to the “bedroom culture”,



in which young people live their world in a bedroom where there is a TV, and a computer, as well as the usual elements of a bedroom, such as a bed, a wardrobe, and the decorations they like. Generally, lower classes do not have these conveniences. Those young people cannot affirm that something in their bedrooms is genuinely theirs, since they share everything with their siblings or with their parents, if there is a room designated only for sleeping. In those spaces, the experience with music is different.

*Cumbia*, as we have explained in previous works, is more than a musical genre for lower classes. Behind and under the genre, other practices take place related to feeling identified with the lyrics and the ideas expressed by the genre.

### Discussions on forums, virtual social networks, and digital media

On virtual social networks like *Taringa*, there is an open space for debate about this communicational practice performed by young people<sup>3</sup>. Someone opened a discussion topic for people to comment on by telling an anecdote: They were studying on the bus when a young man got on and played music, interrupting the reading. On said discussion, they proposed to read the Traffic Law number 24,449, which establishes what can and cannot be done on public transport in Buenos Aires<sup>4</sup>.

The person posting the message was reading, a practice that goes unnoticed for being usual, when another person invaded performing another practice. In the political economy of social practices, given the comments on this discussion, reading is accepted, and listening to music is similar to robbing. The idea is that public space belong to people who produce (students, workers) while the others are usurpers and must be punished and silenced. Moreover, the person posting said that “in Caballito (I think) a young man got on the bus looking similar to the one

<sup>3</sup> Available at: [www.taringa.net/post/apuntes-y-monografias/13503892/Solucion\\_-altavoz-en-el-colectivo\\_.html](http://www.taringa.net/post/apuntes-y-monografias/13503892/Solucion_-altavoz-en-el-colectivo_.html). Consulted on: March 29, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Available at: <http://www.inti.gov.ar/chas/pdf/ley24449.pdf>. Consulted on: May 23, 2012.

on the picture”, also giving a generalizing characterization of the young people performing this social practice. The aspect is the same as the one stigmatized by the media as “the *cumbia* fan”. Under said message, we can read discriminating comments in which young people are accused of being annoying and being delinquents. In those comments, they are categorized as “being burnt by the *paco* and the *fernandito*”<sup>5</sup>, “negroes”, and “half-caste”, their practice is compared to robbing (by users @notimeforsuffer y @XzeppoCoreX), people talk about how to address them and force them to change their attitude and even propose to “shoot them in the back of the neck.” The other option is to tolerate, according to @alejandrodi, whose comment, in this line of discussion, went unnoticed.

For its part, the *Rock & Pop* radio forum published an article entitled “*Ponete auriculares o te bajás del bondi*” (“Use your headphones or get off the *bondi*”), in which they talk about a measure promoted by bus drivers from Córdoba who propose to forbid music listening without headphones on the bus. On said article, the radio argues editorially about the bad taste of people listening to *cumbia* and the good taste of rock music.

The provocation finishes with “Your opinion is important to us”, and then follows a series of opinions as discriminatory as the comments on the previous virtual social network. What is annoying: the high volume or the genre? Is the high volume annoying whether it is heavy metal or melodic? If the music played on those mobile phones was by David Guetta, would it be equally censored by society? We can also think the genre is also annoying, since that is the subject of the comments. Given that *cumbia* is categorized for a specific public, and that this public perform different practices from the high class, annoyance turns into a hegemonic dispute for public space. Technologies are the means

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<sup>5</sup> *Paco* (also called “basic paste of cocaine”, “*bazuco*”, “basic paste”, “BPC” or “*Oxi*”, diminutive of “*oxidized*”) is a low cost drug similar to crack made of cocaine residue and processed with sulfuric acid and kerosene (usually they also use chloroform, ether, and potassium carbonate, among other ingredients). “*Fernandito*”, refers to Fernet, an alcoholic drink common for young people from popular sectors.

of realization of a new round of a dispute with the otherness we previously mentioned about amusement places like nightclubs, the clothes they wear and how they name themselves and others. Uses of public space are also included.

The high volume is annoying, the genre is annoying for being associated to a certain social class, and these young people are annoying, as we can read in sentences like “Wachiturros<sup>6</sup> should also be forbidden”, which can be read in one of the messages. To prohibit Wachiturros means to prohibit a part of youth only for being young. This comment summarizes the intolerance towards others for their social communicational practices. We understand that, due to the anonymity of virtual social networks, opinions can be extreme, but we do not think they are false or that the person behind that nickname does not think what they say. Therefore, we will take it as an indication of the social thermostat about the subject.

When we asked our interviewees why they think young people listen to music without headphones, even when social speeches censor them and ask for punishment for this practice, we obtained different answers. People who listen to music on the bus analyze why they do it with headphones and say they understand that doing so without headphones can disturb other people. The hardest criticism about people performing this practice is on another level of opinion. These opinions evidently express the level of complexity on which a social use that is new and appropriate for a specific sector can be based on. In this case, young people who listen to cumbia. Criticisms are based on their social connection and the music they listen to. People censor them, they ask for the prohibition of this practice, and –as a euphemism, we think– there is a repetition in their speeches of sentences we have already read on virtual social networks about an extreme physical punishment.

Through the speeches, we can see that the practice of using the music device without headphones is well known. People associate it to *cumbia* and *reggaeton* and reject it at the same time. When the annoyance is due to the musical genre, there is

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<sup>6</sup> Wachiturros is a young cumbia musical group.

an underlying annoyance about the communicational class who listen to *cumbia*, the identity and, by extension, the presence of the person itself. It is said to be nice or irritating, but the discriminatory character of the speech asking to turn off that music goes unnoticed.

Some testimonies insist on the idea that this is about individuals invading a shared space wanting to disturb people by listening to *cumbia*, and we understand that, if we were talking about other sounds or “noises” like people talking by telephone, honks, cars braking or music played by the bus driver, they would be a condition of living in society.

Going out to the street and being with other people means to meet their bodies, their looks, their noises. The public spaces we share are distinctive, by definition, for being a scene for coexistences. This implies respect and even tolerance when there is something about the others disturbing us in that space. Some interviewees seem to understand the public space is chaotic and full of co-presences, most of which cannot be chosen, like people on public transport, in an elevator, on a queue at the bank. However, other testimonies talk about problematic and harmful presences, with attitudes and practices aimed to disturb whoever is next to them. The children of the *bondi*, from this perspective, grip *cumbia* as a social punishment for people who do not like the genre. They are proud of being *cumbia* fans, and they turn the stigma into a symbol.

In this case, the identity of the *cumbia* fan is established through the music on the speakers, whether the young man wears sportswear, as in the aspect of the *rocho*, or a *Lacoste* sweater (or an imitation), as in the aspect of the *turro*. Music warns that the “other” is there threatening with their presence founded on the hatred caused by the media, and wearing insecurity and impotence.

The *cumbia* fans of the *bondi* are not welcome. *Facebook* is full of public petitions to “forbid *cumbia* listening without headphones on public transport”<sup>7</sup>, subway ticket cards thank passengers for

<sup>7</sup> Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Que-se-prohíba-escuchar-musica-sin-auriculares-en-el-transporte-publico/117483858349605>. Consulted on: May 23, 2012.

listening to music with headphones because “it benefits everyone”. A traffic law was established including in its item 9.2.2 section G that music listening without headphones is forbidden on public transport. In addition to these social speeches, here are some articles as examples of social speeches on the media: “*En los micros se prohíbe escuchar música*” (“Music listening is forbidden on buses”), published on March 17, 2012 on *Tiempo Pyme*<sup>8</sup>; “*Prohíben escuchar música sin auriculares en ómnibus de Córdoba*” (“Music listening without headphones is forbidden on buses in Córdoba”), published on March 22, 2012 on *Subrayado Sos Vos*<sup>9</sup>; “*Proponen prohibir el uso de reproductores de música personales sin auriculares*” (“Use of personal music players without headphones could be forbidden”), published on March 23, 2012 on *Territorio Digital*<sup>10</sup>.

The practice is irritating, and it is argued, from the same capitalist moral, that it endorses other practices. When the bus driver plays music, passengers do not think about this kind of public petitions or the debate. For the capitalist moral, people who work and produce are on one side, and the children of the *bondi* are on the other, stigmatized as “negroes”, and “half-caste”, who, instead of working, dominate public space in their own way. The winner is obvious. This speech is based on the idea that the student and the tired worker are the only owners of public space while the other practices related to free time are minor and even invasive.

## Conclusion: the battlefield

The mobile telephone opens several battlefronts for the hegemony of the senses. This device provides possibilities appreciated by young people. In fact, it is the most mentioned device, and each and every one of our interviewees admitted they use it. Likewise, it is a space of everyday relationships: with

<sup>8</sup> Available at: [http://www.tiempopyme.com/despachos.asp?cod\\_des=113619&ID\\_Seccion=92](http://www.tiempopyme.com/despachos.asp?cod_des=113619&ID_Seccion=92). Consulted on: May 23, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Available at: <http://www.subrayadososvos.com.uy/blogs/metalking>. Consulted on: May 23, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <http://www.territorioidigital.com/nota3.aspx?c=5441315289659485>. Consulted on: May 23, 2012.

friends, with boyfriends or girlfriends, and most of all (at least on their speeches), with parents.

Regarding the uses of portable music devices in public space, hegemonic disputes are constantly repeated on the specific area of their dispute. The battlefield is essential to understanding the challenge. The data we included are from the city of Buenos Aires (the pictures from the Internet), from Córdoba (the articles from newspapers), but the observations and video footage we expose are from the South Greater Buenos Aires, where we systematized the data.

The Greater Buenos Aires is a territory where communicational classes of high and low class are blended, and there are different offers of consumption for public habitat and recreation. Young people go to public and private schools, clubs and pasturelands, gyms, shopping malls, *McDonalds*, cinemas, and nightclubs where they dance to pop and even *cumbia* music. They occupy amusement places like nightclubs, corners of streets, shopping malls, and cybercafés as they can, and generate practices usually by unconscious habit and without premeditating.

Using the mobile phone is common for those who do not use broadband Internet every day, and do not live on *MSN*, *Skype*, *Facebook*, and *YouTube* and those who do not have the *Play* or the *Wii* at their homes to play with their friends every day.

Text messages and photography have become massive uses and, given the possibilities, also did the *Walkman* and the MP3 player, which coexist on the same device created to talk by telephone. Young people who have not generated said elite practices invade public space with their music as a result of their impossibilities to fully belong to a virtual world presented as massive, necessary and binding by the media and the hegemonic juvenile culture. Those are the young people who find technologies at school, given through state projects of social and technological inclusion, those are the children who play against the clock in cybercafés, and the children on the *bondi* with their mobile telephones with speakers. However, they generate their own technological and communicational practice, but at the same time,

it is censored by its own etiology for being communicational – and thus, for creating sense – and fundamentally, for being theirs.

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