

Floating Fabulousness: Representation, Performativity and Identity in Musical Ringtones

Isabella van Elferen
University of Utrecht
Kromme Nieuwegracht 29
3512 HD Utrecht, The Netherlands
+31 (0)30 2536306
Isabella.vanElferen@let.uu.nl

Imar de Vries
University of Utrecht
Kromme Nieuwegracht 29
3512 HD Utrecht, The Netherlands
+31 (0)30 2539606
Imar.deVries@let.uu.nl

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we consider musical ringtones of mobile phones to act as virtual, communicative and cultural performances. They appear unpredictably, they communicate signs which are interpreted by a variegated and dynamic audience, and establish stages upon which cultural meanings are portrayed. We will argue that the musical ringtone functions as a musical *madeleine* in Marcel Proust's sense, an involuntary mnemonic trigger of a complex web of individual and collective memories. Having this quality, the ringtone lends itself perfectly for the performative manifestation and display of (sub)cultural identities in the public sphere.

Keywords

Performativity, ringtones, mobile phones, communication, representation, identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the space of only three decades, mobile telephones have grown from bricklike and inconspicuous attempts to bring communication out in the open, to immensely sophisticated small computer devices that have become as commonplace a personal accessory as, say, wallets and keys. Undoubtedly, this process of "mobilization", as George Myerson [26] calls it, has had and continues to have a considerable impact on how we, as social beings, experience the network of connections we share with other people. More than at any other time, digitally mediated communication can instantly connect singular but floating points in a communication network, making the mobile phone a unique designator of one's place amongst others. Moreover, as the cellphone does not only offer ultimate connectivity, but can also be personalized through photos, films and ringtones, it can be considered as a (potentially) omnipresent, high profile locus of identity-tokens. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin [4], unpacking one's phonebook, agenda, picture library or text messages will disclose reflections of one's constructed self, consisting of

memories of lived experience: my phone is not only where I am, but also *who* I am.

It is no wonder then that the mobile phone is so often studied as a representation of one's economic, social and cultural capital. It is a fashion statement, a means to exchange gifts in the form of text jokes or photographs, a catalyzer of doing business, a direct line to friends and family, a way to establish and confirm group norms and values. The public presentation of these various forms of capital has always been an important aspect of social behavior, and this has become even more apparent with the advent of the mobile phone, with its pervading use in public: the practice of temporarily laying the mobile phone on a table in a café or restaurant, for instance, has already been recognized by social anthropologists as showing off personal taste as well as claiming territory [27].

In this tension between the public sphere and private use, the mobile phone is bound to capture attention, and arguably no more so than through its ringtone. Its sudden presence in almost every conceivable environment causes it to act as an inescapable announcer of the start of a mobile phone conversation. Although it can be very annoying, we should not be tempted to discard the ringtone as an unimportant object of study. Returning to Benjamin, ringtones (and especially musical ringtones) can function as signifiers of various types of cultural libraries which the owner of a mobile phone carries with her. Moreover, more than clothes or perfume — which also project cultural values — the musical ringtone connects its audience to the vast and powerful world of music, and therefore provides ample room for shared and globally distributed experiences and values.

While the proliferation of mobile phones in the global mediascape has sparked a sizeable amount of research into various uses and impacts of that small apparatus everyone carries around, not so much scholarly attention has been paid to the announcer of its presence, the ringtone. In this paper we will describe how this often overlooked element of the mobile phone plays an important part in its use as a symbol of economic, social and cultural capital. We will do this by studying the ringtone as a virtual cultural and communicative performance. It is virtual, in the Deleuzian sense [8], because it is always silently present and potentially activated; it is a communicative performance because it works as a sign projected by the callee and interpreted by an audience; it is a cultural performance because it employs the performative moment of this communicative act in order to stage cultural meanings for its potential audience. By approaching the ringtone from these different but overlapping angles, a composite picture is drawn of its potential workings, functions and meanings.

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2. RINGTONES IN THE PERFORMATIVE SPACE OF COMMUNICATION

A useful framework for analyzing human social behavior has long been provided by sociologist Erving Goffman, whose work has influenced many recent scholars of mobile communication in their methodological approach [19][24][27]. In his seminal *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman proposed to capture the way people present themselves and their activities to others in terms of a theatrical performance, played on a stage [20]. Although his metaphor has been criticized for being too general and for instigating questionable methodologies,¹ Goffman's dramaturgical approach offers valuable ways of describing how people construct and present their identity within everyday life, an activity that has become especially manifest in the mobile age. Here, we will shortly explore Goffman's theory in order to understand the ringtone as a disruptive and cultural performance.

In every social encounter, Goffman argues, we realize that the impression we make on others depends on what signals we give them. Therefore, in order to keep this impression as close to our 'real' selves as we want it to be, it is necessary to present the signals in ways that we think will lead to 'correct' interpretations. Such a presentation of self Goffman calls a performance, one that continuously adapts itself to either changes in the social setting the performance is played in, or to signals received from others as a result of the performance. At the same time, unconscious — mostly non verbal — signals are projected onto and received by others, thereby creating a complex web of signs which the performer tries to gauge and control. This web is the *front*, "the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" [20]. The impression that is made on others is thus comprised of and based on sending active and passive signals, which form a *facade* that is performed by one or more individuals — Goffman labels them *teams* — in front of an audience (of one or more individuals), in a certain social setting, using several performance techniques.

Mobile communication presents us with a special performative situation. In unmediated forms of human interaction we can usually point out a singular performative space, as these kinds of interaction are mostly situated within a single geographical location or fixed locale. In a typical act of communication between people using mobile phones, however, we can distinguish *two* types of performance, played out on multiple facades, which we would like to term *inner* and *outer performance*.² The inner performance is a result of a caller actively setting up a connection with another person,³ and is

¹ Cf. Paul Drew [11].

² It is important to note that we see inner and outer differently from Sadie Plant, who uses similar terms to describe two forms of mobile phone use "[a]mong small groups of friends or associates": innies take to themselves and try to shield mobile conversations from group interaction, whereas outies tend to integrate their mobile phone usage into ongoing proceedings [27].

³ Except, of course, in cases where the caller accidentally calls a person without knowing it, for instance when redial or

played out as a one-to-one conversation using the connection as a stage. Here, both callers play their part as a one-person team, with the other acting as an audience. At the same time, however, an outer performance by both callers emerges within their respective geographical locations, in front of a chance audience that is physically present in their surroundings.

By thus acting in two performances, the signals a mobile phone user gives during a conversation are dispersed over multiple channels. Both performances obviously use speech as a way to control which signals are given and received, but the outer performance also uses, as we have seen in unmediated communication, mostly *unconsciously* projected non-verbal signs. What makes this outer performance in mobile communication especially interesting, though, is that, at the callee's side, it starts with a non-verbal but often very much *consciously chosen* sign, namely the ringtone. This sign is part of what Plant [27] calls *stage-phonning*, a "unique opportunity to put something of [the callee] on display", and can present a multitude of information regarding the owner of the mobile phone: a confirmation of her connectedness, her agility with digital artifacts, her knowledge of popular culture, or, especially in case of musical ringtones, her connection with certain songs. On all these functional levels, the ringtone's sudden disclosure initiates a culturally contextualized signal.

It is this property of facilitating culturally loaded outer performances that can be identified as one of the core characteristics of the mobile phone, and that can be held responsible for the rise of annoyance over cellphone conversations in public. Much has been said about the disruptive nature of mobile phones, as they have the ability to invade almost every social setting and break common social patterns. The most disruptive characteristic of the mobile phone, however, is undoubtedly the ringtone, as it precedes any actual mobile conversation and pervades social settings uncalled for.

Usually, specific social settings are connected to specific facades, that is, they construct semi-fixed culturally determined performances carried out by easily identifiable teams. In order to expose appropriate behavior, each actor in a team will try to conform to social and cultural conventions belonging to the setting. When an actor does not know these norms or laws, or when team loyalty fails, the performance can be disrupted, or be disruptive for the audience. Interestingly, the ringtone's socially disruptive nature is actually actively employed to help construct an outer performance. Moreover, the ringtone *needs* to be disruptive in order to have any impact on the initial structure of the outer performance. What may seem as normless behavior [19] can actually be understood as a carefully orchestrated (sic) moment of self-presentation. With its continuous, though hidden presence in the public sphere, the ringtone — when activated — thus engenders a cultural performance taking place between the callee and her surroundings.

3. RINGTONES ARE REAL

Having established that the ringtone is both a communicative and a cultural performance, the questions are which possible meanings

preference keys are pressed when tucking away the mobile phone in a tight space.

these performances embody, and which messages they transmit to their audience. In order to answer these questions, we must first determine the medium-specific characteristics of the ringtone — is it music broadcast by way of a wireless medium, a wireless message in the shape of music or a wireless commercial?

Following Adorno and Horkheimer's line of argument, Gabriele Klein and Malte Friedrich argue that the convergence of digital media technology, telecommunication and entertainment in global cultural industries has resulted in a complete merger of technology and content [23]. As an example of this development, Klein and Friedrich describe the music video, which is marketing device, image/branding medium and artistic expression at the same time. This argument holds true even more for the ringtone. What started out as simple gadgetry has grown into one of the most promising branches of current music industry.⁴ The enormous commercial as well as artistic success of the ringtone as a musical medium is not only the result of the capitalist laws feared by Adorno and Horkheimer. The new medium of mobile phoning has rather enabled the cultural industry of music to expand its artistic and communicative horizon. Whereas recording technologies liberated music from the stage, mobile technology overcomes even the physical limitations of broadcast media.⁵ This technological development has had two important consequences for music culture. Firstly, the ringtone emulates the music video as a commercial strategy because of the limitlessness of mobile technology: whereas MTV was dependent on the static medium of TV for its proliferation, the marketing space of the ringtone has virtually no limits. Music broadcasting has thereby gained both spatial width and audience. Secondly, the ringtone has made music part of mobile communication. It transmits cultural messages of variegated content to both intended and unintended listeners, enabling direct interaction between musical content, the cellphone user and her changeable social environment. The content of mobile communication, in short, consists of words, text, images, as well as music.

The ringtone is thus an epitome of the convergence of technology, entertainment, telecommunication and marketing strategies in current cultural industries. The highly technological and commercial form of this medium does not inhibit its artistic expression. Apart from offering an exciting platform for innovative composers of digital music,⁶ the ringtone has a similar musical authenticity to other mediated music, and therefore still can be considered 'music'. Even Adorno held the opinion that the LP could render a musical perfection unequalled by most live performances; mass reproduction and mediatization, therefore, do not necessarily diminish music's authenticity or meaning. Adorno's statement led Simon Frith to conclude that "'liveness', whether defined in social or in physiological terms, is not essential to musical meaning" [15].

⁴ In 2005, the US music industry had a revenue of \$12 billion; \$600 million came from selling ringtones [21].

⁵ A similar point is made by Paul du Gay et al. in their assessment of the cultural meaning of the Sony Walkman [17]. The ringtone's cultural implications are larger even than that of the walkman or other mobile music devices because of its active presence in public and private communication.

⁶ See for instance <http://ringtonesociety.com/>.

In terms of communication, furthermore, recorded music conveys strong messages. Whether this message is related to 'liveness' (for instance in case of a DVD registration of an 'unplugged' music session), to purely musical aspects (for instance in case of a digitally edited video to a sampled pop song) or extramusical aspects (for instance in the case of a film soundtrack), the recording underlines and strengthens musical expression rather than diminishing its Benjaminian aura. Philip Auslander even argues that live and mediatized music have become inseparably intertwined both in their production and their reception [2]. 'Rock authenticity' is called forth by a combination of live performance of a song, its auditive or visual reproduction and by its technologically enhanced reiteration, for instance in the shape of a ringtone. Just as seeing Clapton on DVD calls forth not only the memory but indeed the re-experience of seeing him live — even if one has not actually witnessed a live performance —, hearing a ringtone calls forth the experience of hearing the song that it plays. The qualitative inferiority of mono- and polyphonic ringtones has only little influence on the remembrance, re-experience and re-enactment of former hearings of the same song: as Proust's famous *petit madeleine* [28] demonstrates, the power of memory hardly fades through time or mediation:⁷ the synesthetic workings of memory induce the calling forth of a multi-sensual complex of remembrances at the encounter of even the smallest, mono-sensual mnemonic trigger. Tia DeNora has demonstrated how this mnemonic power of music, furthermore, can make it function as a Foucauldian 'technology of the self,' linking musically induced memories to notions of self and identity [10].

The empirical user research conducted by Heikki Uimonen [33] seems to confirm these theoretical contemplations. Ringtone marketing revolves around aspects of the music, not of the phone, indicating the primary importance of music over mediation. Ringtone users, too, are concerned with the connotations and memories of the song that is played, not with the device that mediates it. Uimonen's interviewees are very eager to point out that they have *not* picked, for instance, Britney Spears-ringing tones, for fear of being associated to the connotations of Spears' music. It is the subjective and collective meanings attached to a song, not of its ringtone mediation, that constitute the possible meanings of a ringtone. The ringtone is therefore not more and not less than the *mémoire involontaire* of a song, just like any other music recording.⁸ It embodies the same meanings and transmits the same messages as the song that it is molded upon.

If we consider ringtones as cultural performances on the one hand and as musical communications on the other, it follows that what is being performed is the cultural meanings of the music being played. In other words: ringtones enable users to appropriate and display the meanings attached to their ringtone in the outer circle of mobile communication. The Gothic girl whose phone plays a Bauhaus song publicly confirms her belonging to the Gothic community. It is important to note that the performative dimension of the ringing tone is always at work, whether or not

⁷ Cf. also Deleuze and Guattari on the (de- and reterritorializing) mnemonic powers of music and its functioning as *mémoire involontaire* [9].

⁸ This is an important extension of Caroline Bassett's idea of the mobile phone as a mnemonic operator [3].

intended: the disruptive sound of the ringtone *must* be heard by what Hillel Schwartz has termed “the indefensible ear” [30], and it *will* stimulate the listener’s cultural memory. However, non-analytical and fuzzy inattentive listening is, it still is listening, and it will still generate memories, thoughts, meanings — Muzak thrives on this principle.

Unlike the static musical media of television and radio, the ringtone, like the iPod and the car radio, is mobile and therefore interacts differently with its environment. The constant recontextualization of a song through the mobility of the cellphone user may cause variations on its original connotations, messages or meanings.⁹ If the above-mentioned Gothic girl would have the latest Eminem ringtone, the cultural meanings attached to that artist would acquire a different reading. Moreover, it would matter greatly whether Eminem’s ‘Gothic’ performance would sound in the neutral environment of a bus or train, or in the circle of the girl’s Gothic friends. Whereas attentive bus passengers around the girl might at most be somewhat puzzled by the apparent subcultural conflict being enacted, fellow Goths might be genuinely appalled by it, to the extent even of doubting the girl’s ‘Gothic authenticity’ and her loyalty to the subculture.¹⁰ Even in the globalized cultural industry, local appropriations of musical products still exist and can cause unpredictable differences [23].

As the ringtone adds the dimension of mobility to the cultural performance of music, the appropriation and attached meaning of one and the same piece of music may vary according to its location [7]. Like the walkman and the iPod, the ringtone is an explicitly spatial medium, intricately linking together time, space and communication [32]. Unlike those media, moreover, the ringtone — and therefore its performative effect — is public. The ringtone, in short, proves to be a powerful communicative medium: the combination of the mobility and public character of the cell phone with musical messages and their strong cultural connotations has created a medium generating very effective cultural performances.

4. RINGTONES AND THE PERFORMANCE OF (SUB)CULTURAL IDENTITY

In his paper “Self and Community in the New Floating Worlds”, psychology professor Kenneth J. Gergen argues that where many of the 20th century’s major technologies have “functioned corrosively with respect to the traditional, face-to-face community”, the mobile phone “offers the possibility for continuous and instantaneous reconnection of participants within face-to-face groups” [18]. This restoration of community does not take a traditional form, however, but one Gergen terms as a “floating world”. Here, he refers to a description from 19th century Japan of free and informal social interchange that takes place in small and loosely connected communities, hidden from

⁹ Cf. Fischer-Lichte’s analysis of the emergent meanings of auditive performances [14].

¹⁰ If, very hypothetically, she might be member of some postmodern eclectic art scene, her combination of two musical lifestyles might be considered perfectly original and acceptable.

government or other authority control. The new floating world of mobile phone users, Gergen argues, replicates the uninhibitedness and unbounded nature of communication within those communities. Yet, while the 19th century floating worlds were “literally ‘grounded’ [...] the floating world of the mobile phone user is approaching the point of geographic irrelevance”.

The floating worlds of mobile technology have thus changed the conditions for the understanding of self and community from boundedness and centeredness to relational connectedness through mobile phones. Following cybernetwork theories, Joshua Meyrowitz adds that this new sense of identity can be identified as ‘glocalized’, the term stressing both global connectivity and local attachment [25]. These characteristics of mobile phone communities extend also to their cultural identities. Cultural identity of individuals and groups is no longer definable solely via physical location, but reaches over the borders of time, space and mediation.

Musical subcultures, in line with these developments, have glocalised both in scope and in reach. Various subcultural theorists have stressed that locally confined subcultural scenes now operate translocally through mediation and commercialization.¹¹ The feeling of belonging that is so crucial for the self definition of subcultures has thus come to apply to glocal networks as well as to locally bound communities [23].¹² The ringtone seems to function as an active marker of the new floating (sub)cultural communities and their outward appearance, attaching the cultural memory of a certain song to both caller and callee. The disruptive social quality of this medium, moreover, makes sure that the audience, voluntarily or involuntarily, witnesses this cultural performance. Because of its necessarily public character, the ringtone establishes the auditory boundaries of floating subcultures to their participants as well as to outsiders.

Milena Droumeva asserts that the ringtone subjects audiences to the mobile phone owner’s personal soundscape design, leading to a polluted public soundscape and to a “lack of real community” [12]. This negative evaluation of the ringtone’s communicative potentialities is based on Schafer’s notion of the schizophrenic separation of a sound and its original context and meanings [29]. According to this theory, the recontextualisation of sound equals loss of meaning. However, although a constant recontextualisation is one of the main features of mobile music, the variable times, places and social contexts of the performed music will engender subtle variations in its embodied cultural meanings rather than completely alter or even eliminate them. As has been argued above, we consider the ringtone as the *mémoire involontaire* of a song; like the *madeleine* dipped in jasmine tea, this physically limited object inevitably stirs strong memories to which new

¹¹ See for instance Paul Hodkinson’s observations of these aspects of Gothic subcultures in the UK [22].

¹² One of the results of these developments is the critical reworking of CCCS subculture theory. This is not the place to discuss the distinctions between subcultures, neotribes, bünde and scenes (for an overview of the research field see Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris [5]). For brevity’s sake we will employ the term subculture here for less or more coordinated, music-based youth cultures, without attaching stringent or generalising characteristics to them.

contexts make additions rather than radical alterations. Since floating subcultures by no means lack a sense of real community, it seems likely that a strong cultural marker such as the ringtone confirms rather than endangers subcultural belonging.

One reason why the mnemonic working of the ringtone is so strong can be found in the great performative power of music. Simon Frith has argued that the performative working of music can be explained for a large part by the strong connection between the subjective and the collective in musical experiences [16]. Because music induces both individual and shared emotions and memories, the listener can identify both with the musical performers in question and with their audience. Hearing a ringtone and experiencing the cultural memory it embodies can thus induce identification processes in inner — as the callee attaches musically derived meanings to the caller — as well as outer communication — as the callee's surrounding attaches similarly constructed meanings to her. These listener groups can recognise and identify with subcultural conventions in any aspect of the cultural performance of a ringtone; the example of the Goth girl's ringtone described above illustrates the various possible types of recognition and identification, all stirred by the connection between personal and collective cultural memories in musical experience.

As has been argued both from a cultural and a musicological viewpoint, performance and performativity are important factors in the construction of social identities [6][15]. Cultural identity can be considered a cultural performance acquiring meaning in interaction with an audience [13][14]. Musical ringtones are attributed meaning in an interactive way as well: the social environment of the callee recognises the subcultural conventions embedded in the ringtone and establishes the callee's attachment to them. Simultaneously, this audience will — however subconsciously — reflect upon their own connection to this subcultural field as well. The ringtone can therefore be considered as a cultural performance of subcultural identity operating both within floating communities and, because of its disruptively auditive quality, in their immediate surrounding.

5. FLOATING FABULOUSNESS

As we have argued in the previous section, the ringtone, understood as a cultural and communicative performance, co-shapes the floating worlds of musical subcultures. Because of its mobility, the mobile phone enables its users to carry with them a multitude of identity-tokens and to present these in public, making them 'float' out in the open. Just as with the walkman and the iPod these identity-tokens can take the powerful shape of music, but unlike the sound coming through a headphone or earpieces the ringtone is heard by an audience. This makes the ringtone an extremely prominent means to establish, confirm or even question an alliance with specific musical subcultures.

Carrying and almost flaunting a specific ringtone and its cultural connotations can, because of the performative nature of such an act, thus be seen as a way to (re)negotiate how this alliance with musical subcultures can be perceived. Through this process, a callee can temporarily become a virtual member of all musical subcultures that, through the possible domain of interpretations, can be connected to her ringtone. The examples and empirical data shown in the second and third paragraph have already illustrated this; we would briefly like to discuss another example

in which the ringtone and its disruptive, flaunting character works to confirm group allegiance, namely the gangsta rap scene.

In gangsta subculture, street credibility is the key word. Any hip-hop devotee who cannot convincingly demonstrate having lived a hard life in the ghetto will be dismissed by their peers and fail in music industry (Armstrong). Identity is indeed constructed performatively in gangsta culture: it is the surroundings of a hip-hop devotee that confirms and indeed determines the credibility of her/his performance as a gangsta or a pimp [31]. Surely certain aspects of ghetto fabulousness have been commoditized — but obtaining a big car, shiny jewelry, fur coats and the latest phone does not make one a gangsta. Ghetto fabulousness can only be acquired performatively, in interactive relation to one's surroundings.

Hip-hop performer 50 Cent (Curtis Jackson) carries the visual tokens of street life with him. He allegedly got shot 9 times in a street fight, and explicitly markets his scars as a sign of his genuine gangsta identity: according to his official website www.50cent.com, 50 is

“[...] the real deal, the genuine article. He's a man of the streets, intimately familiar with its codes and its violence, but still, 50, an incredibly intelligent and deliberate man, holds himself with a regal air as if above the pettiness which surrounds him. [...] 50 is real, so he does real things.”

Since 50 Cent apparently has what it takes to belong to the gangsta subculture, it is interesting to analyze one of his songs and its ringtone along the theoretical framework laid out in this paper in order to study their performative effects.

The song “Candy Shop” appeared on 50's album *The Massacre* from 2005. The song was a big hit throughout the US and Europe, not in the least because of its video, which closely tied together the auditive and visual representation of a pimp fantasy. The text is a typical hip-hop boast celebrating the singer's bedside manners, referring also to his own former work¹³ and thereby reinforcing his status in the gangsta hip-hop world. The story situated in the fantasy world of a candy shop, in which both the shape and taste of those delicacies are clearly to be interpreted metaphorically.

The visuals of the video elaborate on the sensual fantasy laid out in the text. The fantasy world is set in a large mansion which is accessed by the singer in a big ‘pimp’ car. Inside the pastel-colored interior of the mansion we find ladies who dance, who bathe in chocolate and who emerge from seemingly lifeless paintings and statues—naturally all in service of the protagonist of the story. At the end of the video, the latter finds himself having fallen asleep in front of a drive-in restaurant, and only having dreamt all the sweetness.

The music to “Candy Shop” underlines both the fantasy- and the sensual aspects of the song text. The chromatic sample which dominates the musical outline of the song evokes overtones of the exotic, an effect supported by the instrumentation in low strings and the Dionysian flutes in the chorus. The melodic

¹³“Got the magic stick”, for instance, is a reference to “P.I.M.P.”, the song with (among others) Snoop Dogg that established 50 Cent's fame and career.

ornamentation appearing regularly in the flute sample is another reference to oriental exoticism. The heavily syncopated drum samples playing against the onbeat synthesizer chords and chromatic samples, finally, accentuate the sensuality of the song's theme. In the video, the beat only sets in when the door to the mansion has been opened and one of the girls begs 50 Cent to enter, indicating that the fantasy starts then and there. Upon the singer's waking up in his car, the music stops abruptly: the fantasy's over.

The ringtone to "Candy Shop" is a very brief, but effective musical condensation of the song. It summarizes its key characteristics, playing only the chromatic bassline, the onbeat synthesizer chords, and the flute sample. Whereas both instrumentation and melody of this short extract of the song already are powerful reminders of its musical and textual atmosphere, an added melodic grace note makes sure that the exotic mood is captured in these few seconds. The disruptiveness and performative capacity of this powerful musical *madeleine* will inevitably induce individual and collective memories related to music, video, artist or gangsta subculture in the audience. Since a ringtone is consciously chosen, they will contemplate the callee's and possibly their own relation to it. The floating subculture of which this ringtone marks the cultural memory is that of gangsta rap, and by unpacking his mobile music library its carrier stages a cultural performance of what we would like to call 'floating fabulousness'.

6. CONCLUSIONS

As virtual, communicative and cultural performances, musical ringtones have the inherent capacity to function as publicly disseminated *madeleines*, which suddenly announce themselves and disrupt everyday social situations. For this reason, ringtones can be seen as a means to actively display and communicate a loyalty to floating subcultures, as well as triggers for cultural performances within the spatial sphere of the ringtone's carrier. The flaunting character of these performances lends itself perfectly for the display of fabulousness: hearing a ringtone *will* induce mnemonic reflections.

Our findings concern musical ringtones primarily. Sound effects or recorded speech can equally invoke communicative and cultural performances, but we consider the vast array of individual and shared musical memories to be more powerful in invoking 'madeleine trails' and in manifesting (sub)cultural identities. This does not mean that we think that the functioning of ringtones as communicative and cultural performances is only established when complete songs are played; even the smallest musical unit such as, say, a bass line or a vocal timbre can open up a whole archive of other songs—and unpack their (sub)cultural libraries.

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