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# **Problematic mobile phone consumption among young consumers: policy and research implications**

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**Abstract:** *Youth represents a largest segment for both telecom operators and mobile phones manufacturers in Pakistan. However, there is relatively a little research regarding the inappropriate and problematic mobile phone consumption among youth. This paper with the help of extant literature argues that young consumers are generally involved in problematic mobile phone consumption than any other age group. This warrants a thorough research on different aspects of problematic mobile phone consumption patterns among young consumers for better consumer policy making and for their wellbeing. Present article proposes some potential research areas with regards to young mobile phone consumers and provides a few suggestions to protect young consumers from the negative consequences of mobile phone consumption.*

**Key words:** Mobile Phones, Young Consumers, Problematic Consumption

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## **1. Introduction**

World has experienced a rapid advancement in technological products including mobile phones and people of all age groups have rapidly adopted the mobile phone technology in contemporary societies (Kaasinen, 2003). Beyond the conventional role of calling and texting, mobile phones are commonly used for phone payment, playing games, mobile email, internet, audio, video, taking picture, listening music player, radio and television connectivity, data transfer and storage among others (Hansen, 2003). Though, technological products such as mobile phones have benefited societies in a number of ways but challenges posed by these technological gadgets cannot be ignored either.

The youth segment is one of the largest segments for both mobile phone manufacturers and telecom service providers in Pakistan. This is commonly observed that young consumers buy mostly expensive new model mobile sets or replace quite frequently their old ones with the new models. Furthermore, majority of youth are also the heavy users of the mobile phones features and telecom packages. Therefore, majority of the products of both mobile phone and telecom are targeted to the heavy users – the young consumer group. Mobile phone has become a vital part of our lives. However, in the contemporary societies mobile phone related issues specifically among youth are increasing. Yet, there is relatively little research evidence concerning the extent to which more problematic aspects of mobile phone use match youth's everyday experiences (Mort & Drennan 2004). Though, youth do use the mobile phone in positive ways as well such as sharing information and greeting to each others on different occasions among others (Kamran, 2010). However, apparently inappropriate consumption of mobile phone among youth generally surpasses the appropriate consumption. Some of these inappropriate consumption patterns, highlighted by previous researchers are excessive use of voice calls (James & Drennan, 2005), excessive voice communications, late night use, mobile phone use in the class rooms (Kamran, 2010; Srivastava, 2005) and use of mobile phones in other banned places such as hospitals, petrol stations, and while driving, (Palen et al, 2008) affect young people and society adversely. Further, the purpose of communications may also be negative such as, exchange of dirty SMS, insulting messages for a specific group, for teasing others and spreading the rumors etc (Kamran, 2010). Excessive mobile phone users may harass others and intrude in the privacy of others in the society (Australian Psychological Society, 2004). Some of the youth has been victimized of cyber bullying, as they were bullied by texting (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Work of Ling (2005) revealed connection between teenager criminality and high mobile telephone consumption.

Excessive cellular young consumers may also face difficulties in paying their mobile phone bills. Young mobile phone consumers experience great level of phone bills debt, which leads to the financial worries for some young adults (Griffiths and Renwick, 2003; James & Drennan, 2005). According to Carr (2005) symbolic interaction and conspicuous consumption has a major effect on the consumption patterns of youth (Carr 2005). Some social researchers have observed that youth show off their mobile handsets to the public, mainly when it is a new mobile phone model, perhaps to improve their status between peers (Carroll et al. 2002). This may also negatively affect the youth and the society. Young mobile phone users may also affect the school learning environment, and may create discipline and control issues for the teachers etc (Srivastava, 2005).

This is evident from the previous researches (e.g. Srivastava, 2005; James and Drennan, 2005; Palen et al, 2008 and Kamran, 2010) that youth is also involved in the inappropriate mobile phone consumption in a variety of ways. Thus, it becomes collective responsibility of different stakeholders to understand the issues for protecting youth from negative consequences of mobile phone consumption. Therefore, firstly, this

theoretical paper aspires to discuss extant literature pertinent to different aspects of problematic mobile phone consumption amongst youth. Though, most of the researches mentioned regarding problematic mobile phone consumption in the paper were conducted in developed world context. Nevertheless, similar types of mobile phone consumption patterns and issues are obvious amongst Pakistani youth too. After discussing and analyzing literature, this paper proposes some research guidelines with regards to problematic consumption of mobile phone among youth. Lastly, research provides some suggestions and recommendations to telecom operators, regulator and policy makers to protect youth from the negative consequences of mobile phone consumption within Pakistani context.

## **2. Consumption of Mobile Phone among Youth**

Mobile phone has changed the coordination patterns in several areas of our social life, including peer groups, family, and at work (Ling & Yttri, 2002). Contemporary societies have benefited from the mobile technology a lot and previous studies highlighted the benefits of the technology. According to Srivastava (2005) mobile phone technology helps youth to widen their social networks (Srivastava, 2005). Similarly, according to Power and Horstmanshof, (2004), youth form and support their relationships through mobile phone technology (Power & Horstmanshof, 2004). Other benefits include sense of security among the mobile phone users, using mobile phone for leisure and fun activities and strengthening their group identity. Cellular telephones and text messaging have been extensively adopted by youth and the mobile phone technology has been incorporated into their everyday lives (Carroll et al, 2002).

The choice of mobile brand is a significant part of teenagers' social identity (Wang, 2005). According to Madell & Muncer (2005), adolescence is traditionally a time in which socializing becomes important, (Madell and Muncer 2005, p.77). Mobile phone consumption is to a greater degree seen as a means of self-expression, individual identity-formation, and creativity among youth segment. (Gabriel & Lang, 1995). Students do also SMS communications for the positive purposes such as, sharing information and greeting to each others on different occasions (Kamran, 2010).

However, different researchers have identified the problematic use of mobile phone among youth. According to a research carried out by Kamran (2010) on the Calling and texting patterns of Pakistani college students' revealed similarities of SMS and calling patterns among both male and female students. The study also revealed that the majority of youth is extremely high user, and fond of texting. More than half of the study participants were found sending and receiving more than 100 SMS a day. However, majority of participants were found as the low user of voice calls. About 66% of the participants made 0-4 calls per day. His study unfolded that the young people do most of the mobile phones communications within their age group, communicate in both positive and negative ways. But, most of youth cellular communications could be classified as problematic with reference to the place, time, and purpose (Kamran, 2010). College and University students use mobiles during their classes (Kamran, 2010; Srivastava, 2005) and in other banned places like hospitals, planes, petrol stations, and

while driving, (Palen et al, 2008). Youth also do mobile phone communications in late night. This inappropriate and excessive use sometimes creates conflicts with their parents and affects their studies negatively too (Kamran, 2010). A study conducted by James and Drennan (2005) in Brisbane, Australia discovered that mobile phone usage rate in students were high ranging from 1.5 Hours to 5 Hours per day (James & Drennan, 2005). This is noticeable that the reason of most of SMS sent and received is negative among youth. Students send most of the text messages, which are dirty, insulting for a specific group of people, for teasing others and spreading the rumors etc (Kamran, 2010).

### **3. Conspicuous Consumption of Mobile Phone among youth**

Mobile phone is a central expression of the young people identity (Brown et al, 2002). Mobile phones may help youth to gain peer group acceptance (Cova, 1994) proposed that youth just not only acquire and consume the products to satisfy the core needs but also to fulfill the liked needs such as superiority and acceptance within the group (Cova, 1994). According to Carr (2005) symbolic interaction and conspicuous consumption has a major effect on the consumption patterns of youth (Carr, 2005).

Some social researchers have observed that youth show off their mobile handsets to public, mainly when it is a new mobile phone model, perhaps to improve their status between peers (Carroll et al, 2002). Byrne (1999) proposed that people are more likely to purchase the physical objects and show off their status and success to others through those material products. In this context, people send out messages by using their wealth and define themselves in this regard (Byrne, 1999). Similarly according to Marcoux et al. (1997) consumption of the product is not only a mean of exploiting the functional benefits of the products but also a way for gaining social status and one's own identity. It is viewed as a way for people to show off their status and wealth in front of others (Marcoux et al, 1997). A study conducted by Acikalin et al (2009) through the survey questionnaire revealed that Turkish University students are involved in one element of conspicuous consumption, which is status for getting the social advantages. Secondly, conspicuous consumption expenditures are reported in all the social classes of Turkish youth (Acikalin et al, 2009).

These researches were carried out in different countries context but the same behavior exists among Pakistani youth as well when it comes to conspicuously using their handset in different social settings. Buying and consumption of latest handsets and their conspicuous consumption has some negative consequences as well, which are not just restricted to Pakistani society. As some youth can buy expensive mobiles, others are deprived of this luxury especially youth belonging to lower social classes. So, some of those who cannot buy a newer handset may use illegitimate ways to get a latest handset for such as stealing a handset of other, snatching mobile handset and even buying stolen handsets on lower prices. In many contemporary societies mobile phone related crimes have been increased as 'daily mail' reported on October, 15, 2013 that according to UK home office report more than 700,000 handsets were stolen just in last year in the UK (Mail Online, 2013). The same conditions prevail in Pakistan as well and mobile phone

related street crimes are soaring mostly involving young people. However, as a lot of people do not report their incidents to police in Pakistan and due to lack of documentation of events an exact figure cannot be provided in Pakistani context.

#### **4. Financial Issues Faced by Young Mobile Phone Consumers**

Youth also believe that paying the mobile phone is difficult. Young mobile phone consumers experience great level of phone bills debt, which leads to the financial worries for some young adults (Griffiths & Renwick, 2003). A study conducted by Carrol et al (2002) on the perceptions and use of mobile phones of Australian youth, revealed that participants of the study experienced problems in paying their mobile telephone bills. Many school-aged participants use pre-paid telephones. Participants also complained about poorly explained mobile telephone plans and difficulty in keeping track of call costs (Carroll et al, 2002). Another research carried out by James and Drennan (2005) in Australia discovered that one of the major negative consequences of addictive mobile phone use is financial cost or really expensive mobile phone bills. Among the addictive mobile phone users the average monthly bill was \$140, which is very costly given limited student incomes (James & Drennan, 2005).

#### **5. Young Mobile Phone Users and the Society**

Some previous studies have mentioned different benefits of the mobile phone technology, such as, (Srivastava, 2005; Ling & Yttri 2002; Power & Horstmannshof, 2004). Still, the everyday frustration consumers and other stakeholders have experienced with these technologies such as, mobile phone have not been addressed properly. Excessive mobile phone users may harass others and intrude in the privacy of others in the society (Australian Psychological Society, 2004). Some of the youth has been victimized of cyber bullying, as they were bullied by texting (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Work of Ling (2005) revealed connection between teenager criminality and high mobile telephone consumption. Heavy mobile phone users are over represented between those who are involved in various forms of violations such as, excessive use of alcohol, narcotics use, and different types of theft among others (Ling, 2005). A research in Australia by Mathews (2004) reported that young respondents revealed that their parents often force them to stop their mobile phone use late at night, which was the most common disagreement among them and their parents (Matthews, 2004). Often conflicts are created among the Youth and their parents because of heavy, late night and mobile phone use by the youth during meals at home (Kamran, 2010).

Mobile phone consumption in the school setting has unexpectedly attracted little attention of the researchers. It is astonishing given the often contradictory priority of youth, parents and teachers in relation to the mobile phone technology, with teachers worried about control and discipline issues during the lessons and parents worried about being able to stay in touch with their offspring at any time (Srivastava, 2005). Parents remain eager to maintain contact with their children through the mobile phone. So, the mobile phone has become a part of classroom. Therefore, this device has weakened the schools authority and deteriorated their control over the pupils. The main problem for

the teachers in the class room is that mobile phone use among the youth disturbs the classroom learning, as because of mobile phone students can communicate through mobile phone inconspicuously (Geser, 2004). Mobile phone consumption during classes not only decreases the learning prospects for the individual user, but probably for most of his class mates as well. As, one class fellow using the device tempts others in his/her activities (Kamran, 2010).

### **6. Use of Functional Features of Handsets**

Mobile phone manufacturers offer new and upgraded handsets to market by focusing on the heavy users (i.e. youth). As youth is grown up with the technological products such as mobile phones therefore, they do not face any difficulty when it comes to using dozen of handset features. As according to Hansen (2003) beyond the conventional role of calling and texting, mobile phones are commonly used for phone payment, playing games, mobile email, internet, audio, video, taking picture, listening music player, radio and television connectivity, data transfer and storage among others (Hansen, 2003) the same or most of it applies to youth in Pakistan too. Though some mobile features may be used greater than others by youth but either they have knowledge to use or they themselves use different features of their handsets. There are some other issues that are observed in Pakistani context when it comes to youth using their mobile handset features such as audio and video etc. For instance, some youth occasionally may do recording of lectures without prior permission of teachers, make pictures and movies of others without informing them and use of internet on mobile Phone in classroom setting are some of the other issues associated with the consumption of mobile handset features. These types of consumption patterns would generally invade in privacy of others and create problems for others in the society.

### **Potential Research Areas with Reference to Problematic Consumption of Mobile Phone among Youth**

Some previous researchers such as (e.g. Kamran, 2010; Ling 2005; Srivastava, 2005; James & Drennan 2005; Matthews, 2004; Palen 2008,) among others, explored the problematic areas of mobile phone consumption among youth. But, all of these studies were of exploratory nature. Further, these studies focused only on the problematic consumption of the telecom packages and failed to discuss the consumption of other mobile phone hand set features such as, video, audio, music, MMS, Internet etc. Studies related of mobile phone use are few (Palen et al, 2008), more particularly research into the problematical consumption of the mobile phone technology is hindered by a lack of good quality data (Australian Government, 2005, p. 32). This may be because of the fact that real mobile phone proliferation especially among the youth segment happened in the last decade or so (Kamran, 2010). Similarly, conspicuous consumption of mobile phone, issues raised for the teachers, and for parents by young mobile users is also an ignored area by the researchers. Therefore, firstly their remains a great potential of quantitative /survey research with reference to the financial issues, conspicuous consumption and effects of mobile phone consumption on the society such as peers,

teachers and family etc. Secondly, as mentioned above previous researches were mainly qualitative and exploratory in nature, therefore, mobile phone consumption with reference to time of use, purpose of use and place of use can be investigated through survey research. Thirdly, there is a great potential to examine consumption of different features of mobile phone among youth (eg: Video/ Audio Camera, Internet, Music player etc) and how these create issues within a society. For instance: making movie without consent of other person possibly intrudes in their privacy and alike. Lastly, no research has been carried out which emphasized on the need of social marketing campaigns with reference to the problematic mobile phone consumption amongst young consumers. So, there is a potential for the social marketing campaigns for changing the youth cellular communication behavior. The social marketing strategies are planned to be formulated after input from the target market- the youth group.

### **How to Protect Young Consumers from negative consequences of Mobile Phone Consumption?**

It can be said that young consumers of mobile phones tend to be more involved in problematic consumption than anyone else because the telecom operators provide them those packages which potentially tempt them to involve themselves in inappropriate mobile phone consumption (i.e. late night call packages and very low priced SMS bundle packages targeted to young consumers). A number of problematic mobile phone communication patterns have been highlighted by researchers both in Pakistani context and in other countries.

Young consumers are considered vulnerable consumers in the market place (Office of Fair Trading, 1998). Now one fundamental question which should come to our minds is that who is responsible for these issues among young mobile phone users? Definitely the answer is not young people alone, but other stakeholders who should educate and protect the vulnerable young population. Hence, it is a collective responsibility of telecom companies/ operators in Pakistan, advertisers, teachers, parents and regulators to inform, educate and protect young people in their own spheres from the negative consequences of inappropriate use of technology. But, unfortunately the role of telecom companies products and promotions are rather irresponsible in Pakistan. For instance: late night low rate call packages targeted to young people by telecom companies is not an appropriate product as most of urban youth goes to schools or colleges. If youth involves themselves in late night mobile phone communications then how would they sit attentively in their classes? Similarly, telecom companies often show those roles in their advertisements in Pakistan which can be labeled as inappropriate consumption of mobile phone with relation to purpose, time or place of use. For example: so many advertisements show youth talking over mobile phone late night with others, using it in the classroom/library setting etc. These types of advertisements are not just unethical but certainly tempt young people to indulge in problematic mobile phone consumption in a variety of settings. This sometime has implications and negative consequences for society too. Furthermore, the regulator, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) is not either fulfilling their responsibilities in an efficient manner as they have never taken



any action against those packages, marketing campaigns of telecom companies and advertisements which potentially entice youth in inappropriate consumption of their mobile phones. So, negligence of telecom companies and regulators are also causing youth to indulge in inappropriate consumption of mobile phones. However, this cannot be said either that if telecom companies, and regulator fulfill their responsibilities, it will eliminate the problems of inappropriate mobile phone consumption completely among youth. However, it may considerably decrease inappropriate consumption of mobile phones among youth.

Based on the above discussion, we believe that following strategies may be made to inform, educate and protect young consumers with reference to the technological products (i.e. mobile phone) consumption. (1) Mobile phones and other technologies (internet, computer etc) have become daily use products but dangers and risks resulting from wrong use cannot be ignored (especially among young people). Therefore, schools and colleges should offer a very basic level short course on ethics of technological products consumption. This will help young people to understand about right and wrong use of technology in a variety of settings. (2) It should be made mandatory for telecom companies in Pakistan, while selling their sim cards to consumers, to provide a pamphlet explaining appropriate and inappropriate consumption and consequences of inappropriate consumption for youth and for others in the society. (3) Those packages which put youth's wellbeing at risk must be banned by regulator (i.e. late night package). (4) Social marketing campaigns may be launched by the regulator for behavioral change of young mobile phone consumers.

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Sohail Kamran is assistant professor at Department of Business Administration, Fatima Jinnah Women University. His research interests include consumer behavior, services marketing, societal issues related to marketing.

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