

## Understanding the Purposes and Problems of Using Mobile Phones among Youths in Malaysia: Some Preliminary Analyses

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**Abstract:** The present study attempts to fulfill two main objectives: To identify the purposes of mobile phone usage among youth in Malaysia and to examine the problems they face with mobile phone usage. This is a quantitative study which used a developed questionnaire to collect the data. Although, the findings represent preliminary data for the actual study to be conducted, they offer an early picture on how youths use mobile phones and what problems they face in relation to this. The analyses performed show that youths use mobile phones primarily to contact their families and for emergency purposes while fast changes in terms of mobile phone models were cited among the main problem faced in using mobile phones.

**Key words:** Youth development, mobile phone usage, problems of mobile phone usage, youth, Malaysia

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### INTRODUCTION

Mobile phones have become an integral part of society. Colour screens and camera phones are highly demanded in local markets, however there is still demand for traditional and inexpensive voice-centric mobile phones. The scenario in China, India, Russia and Brazil is that sales are driven by the availability of low-priced handsets and aggressive strategies by service providers to win subscribers. Similarly in Malaysia, mobile phones are considered to be valuable tools, particularly for communication and emergency purposes which make them a communication tool that is highly demanded by the public. This scenario has served to improve the rank of Malaysia in South East Asian countries whereby the current statistics revealed by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (SKMM, 2013) has confirmed that Malaysia is ranked in third place, behind Singapore and Vietnam in term of numbers of mobile phone users. In Malaysia, several established brands, including Nokia, HTC, Samsung and Sony are available on the market. There are two main mobile phone subscription types in Malaysia prepaid and postpaid wherein the majority of Malaysians (33.9 million) (though Malaysia has roughly around 27 million citizens, the figure of 33.9 million subscribers denotes that an individual might subscribe to more than one prepaid or postpaid service) subscribe to prepaid services while 7.4 million subscribers subscribe to postpaid. This has resulted in a penetration

rate per 100 inhabitants of 142.5 (SKMM, 2013). The mobile phone market is dominated by urban users (68.8%) and males (56.5%). In addition, Malaysians are considered heavy users of the Short Message System (SMS) for 2012, a total of 91 million SMSs were sent while for the first quarter of 2013 (January to April), a total of 20.8 million SMSs were sent.

Mobile phones are associated with youths in many ways. Indeed, mobile phone applications have always been youth and entertainment-oriented (MACRO, 2004). The inclusion of additional features in mobile phone, such as Short Message Services (SMS), mp3 players, games, internet and videos has led to an increase in the number of mobile phone users in Malaysia, particularly among youths. Mobile phones are used for several purposes, including interpersonal communication and entertainment (Dittmar, 2005; Rice *et al.*, 2011; Baro and Endouware, 2013). Studies by Wei and Lo (2006) and Campbell (2008) have confirmed that youths use mobile phones as tools to access social and political issues. In addition, Cumiskey and Brewster (2012), accentuated that mobile phones promote personal safety and act as an emergency tool for users, particularly females. Shaffril and Hassan (2012) provided another dimension and looked into the role of mobile phones in the business world. Balasubramanian *et al.* (2010) have added that mobile phone are used in education process, particularly with respect to seeking out current and updated news and information. Abdullah (2004) claimed that Malaysian

youths perceive having a mobile phone as an essential part of their life. This scenario has resulted from the fact that younger generations are born into a technological era and will naturally be drawn to technological gadgets. For young people, mobile phones are not just communication tools, they can also be used as a way for young people to express themselves and more importantly to keep up with current trends (Dittmar, 2005).

A number of problems with using mobile phone have attracted scholars' interest. Zulkefly and Baharudin (2009) associated mobile phone usage with a decrease in psychological health while Soh *et al.* (2012), Perry and Lee (2008) and Tindell and Bohlander (2011) confirmed that excessive usage of mobile phones can create addictive behavior. Financial constraints are another common problem associated with mobile phone usage among youths, since the price of certain handset models and the need to buy additional credits restrain youths from continuously using communication services. Baro and Endouware (2013) provided another view, accentuating problems such as weak networks, non-availability of recharge cards, unreliable or complete absence of power supply to charge batteries, high communication costs, stealing of mobile phones and lacking of skilled persons to repair phones.

To date, little is known with regard to mobile phone usage among youths in Malaysia, particularly with respect to their purposes and problems in using such gadgets, therefore this study aims to fill this gap. The following research questions are raised in the present study:

- What are the purposes of using mobile phones among youths in Malaysia?
- What are the problems in using mobile phone among youths in Malaysia?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a quantitative study in which the findings were mainly based on the preliminary results. The main tool used for collecting the data was the questionnaire which was developed based on a review of the literature and questions from past studies. The questionnaire was validated via a number of instrument development meetings. Although, the original questionnaire consisted of 13 parts, in order to fulfill the objectives of the present paper, only three parts have been focused on, namely demographics (9 questions), purposes of mobile phone usage (18 questions) and problems with mobile phone usage (12 questions). For the demographic section, the respondents were provided with both open-ended and closed-ended options by which to answer. In relation to

purposes of using mobile phones, the respondents were provided with a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never)-always (5) while for problems with internet usage the respondents were given a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). After developing the complete questionnaire, it was pre-tested among 47 undergraduates of University Putra Malaysia. The process took place in June, 2013. The respondents were asked to practice the self-administered method when completing the questions and the process was monitored by the researchers. To analyse the data, SPSS was utilized whereby analyses of aspects, such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were employed. To identify the level of mean score for patterns of and problems with internet usage, a calculation was conducted based on  $5 \text{ (value of maximum mean score)} / 3 \text{ (number of levels)}$ . The calculation produced three levels of mean score, namely low (mean score between 1.00-2.33), moderate (2.34-3.67) and high (3.68-5.00).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 depicts the demographic data for the respondents. More than two-thirds of the respondents are female (68.1%) which is common within higher-learning institutions in Malaysia. The mean score for the respondents' age was 22.6 years old with the majority aged 21-22 years old.

Table 2 describes the patterns of mobile phone usage among the respondents. On average, the respondents have been using mobile phones for 8.2 years, the mean score for respondents' age denotes that most of the respondents have used a mobile phone since they was 14 years old (22.6-8.2). It is positive that the majority of respondents (68.1%) have internet connection within their mobile phones, as this will broaden their access to the online world. The main language used on their mobile phones is English, though a small number of respondents use Malay. The respondents seem not to spend too much on their mobile phones, as a total of 53.2% of the respondents spend between RM26 and 50 month<sup>-1</sup> (roughly equal to USD8.7-16.6). With respect to trends in terms of type of subscription, the data is in line with the findings of Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (SKMM, 2013) which concluded that Malaysians prefer to have a prepaid subscription as it is more affordable and free from monthly fee commitment. This study also revealed that the mean score for SMSs sent was 48.1 while the mean score for SMSs received was 52.3; these findings are supported by data from SKMM (2013) which confirmed that Malaysians are heavy users of SMS services in 2012, a total of 96 million SMSs were sent by subscribers. Among the main reasons for this scenario is that SMSs are cheaper than voice calls or MMS services.

Table 1: Respondents' demographic data

Factors	Frequency	Percentage	Mean
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	15	31.9	
Female	32	68.1	
<b>Age (years old) (n = 34)</b>			
21-22	23	67.6	22.6
23-24	7	20.6	
25-26	4	11.8	

Table 2: Patterns of mobile phone usage among the respondents

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage	Mean
<b>Experience in using mobile phone (years)</b>			
<5	9	19.1	8.2
6-8	17	36.2	
>9	21	44.7	
<b>Has internet connection</b>			
Yes	32	68.1	
No	25	31.9	
<b>Language used (n = 46)</b>			
English	44	95.7	
Malay	2	4.3	
<b>Type of subscription</b>			
Pre-paid	37	78.7	
Post-paid	10	21.3	
<b>Amount spent per month for subscription (RM)</b>			
<25	6	12.8	54.1
26-50	25	53.2	
>51	16	34.0	
<b>SMS sent</b>			
<10	12	25.5	48.1
11-30	19	40.5	
>31	16	34.0	
<b>SMS received</b>			
<10	13	27.7	52.3
11-30	16	34.0	
>31	18	38.3	

Table 3 demonstrates the purposes of using the mobile phones as highlighted by the respondents. Out of 18 purposes listed, a total of 13 purposes recorded a high-level mean score while the remaining five purposes recorded a moderate-level mean score. Communication seems to be the main reason why the respondents use their mobile phones, as responses such as to contact family members, for emergency purposes and to contact colleagues recorded the three highest mean scores. This scenario is not surprising, as a number of studies have portrayed similar findings (Dittmar, 2005; Rice *et al.*, 2011; Baro and Endouware, 2013). Although most of the respondents live far away from their family, mobile phones enable them to ensure that they are always connected to their family members and colleagues. Mobile phones are also a great tool for emergency purposes youth in any emergency setting can easily contact their colleagues or family members through mobile phones to ask for help. Cumiskey and Brewster (2012) confirmed that youths, particularly females will feel safer if they have communication devices such as mobile phones with them. The researchers further added that mobile phones can be a weapon of self-defense and that they are more effective than a more traditional weapon, like pepper spray.

Table 3: Purpose of using mobile phones

Purposes	Mean
Contacting family members	4.51
For emergency purposes	4.47
Contacting colleagues	4.43
Using applications within mobile phones (e.g., Instagram, WhatsApp, keek, WeChat, LINE, Foursquare, Tango)	4.40
Surfing the internet	4.36
Taking pictures/videos	4.26
Sending SMSs/MMSs	4.17
Sending/receiving pictures/videos	4.15
Receiving SMSs/MMSs	4.09
Accessing entertainment by viewing videos/online TV/listening to music	4.09
Gaining information regarding academic activities (e.g., coursework, research)	3.77
Playing online games	3.70
Contacting teachers, lecturers, employees	3.70
Accessing information regarding associations' activities	3.62
Accessing information regarding courses conducted by associations, ministries, universities	3.62
Accessing recent news and updated information	3.62
Accessing information regarding business/entrepreneurship	3.00
Accessing information regarding politics	2.91

Another purpose for using mobile phones among youths is to fulfill their entertainment needs. Most of the youths in this study prefer to use advanced applications, such as Instagram, WhatsApp, keek, WeChat, LINE, Foursquare and Tango. Moreover, they also use it to surf the internet and play online games. Priyanka (2010) demonstrated that advanced applications in mobile phones are able to fulfill the entertainment needs of youths as they are always created in line with the youth interests and ability. Nevertheless, it is a concern that excessive exposure to entertainment may lead to problems, such as violent games, pornography and gambling (Soh *et al.*, 2012) while Perry and Lee (2008) and Tindell and Bohlander (2011) raised concerns relating to the fact that excessive usage of mobile phones among youths can lead to addictive behaviors which might distract their daily routines as students.

Except for gaining information with regard to their academic activities, other purposes related to seeking information recorded a moderate-level mean score. An explanation for the fact that academic activities were an exception could be that the respondents prefer to use a device such as PC, tablet or notebook which possess a bigger screen and thus facilitates better understanding of the information read and received. Seeking political information recorded the lowest mean score, this finding is expected, as youths belief that politics do not really affect them and thus leave political matters to the senior members of their family.

Table 4 portrays the problems faced by the respondents in relating to using mobile phones. Out of 12 problems listed, 1 problem recorded a high-level mean score, 7 problems had recorded a moderate-level mean score and 4 problems recorded a low-level mean

Table 4: Problems with using mobile phones

Problems	Mean
Mobile phone models change too quickly	3.77
Battery lifespan too short	3.43
Expensive costs involved for continuous usage	2.98
Communication signal low and inconsistent	2.81
Internet access slow	2.72
Memory space limited	2.68
Device easily broken/damaged	2.53
Screen size too small	2.49
No access to internet (prepaid user)	2.26
Difficult to use features on mobile phones	2.11
Difficult to send SMSs (keypad too small)	2.11
Not user friendly	1.98

score. Technical problems with regards to batteries, low communication signals, slow internet access and limited memory spaces are among the main problems faced by the respondents in using their mobile phones. Most of the youths have good skills in terms of using mobile phones, as problems regarding mobile phone features and SMSs recorded the second and third-lowest mean scores. The lowest mean score was recorded in relation to the problem of mobiles not being user friendly.

Further, analyses demonstrated that the main problem faced by the respondents is that phone models change too quickly. In Malaysia, it is common to see new models of mobile phones being launched almost every month, while established models, such as Nokia, Samsung, HTC and Sony dominate the local markets. Although, such fast changes provide more alternatives for youths in terms of which phone model to choose, it actually poses a financial challenge to them as well. This may be because they possess a high level of eagerness towards owning such gadgets and feel that owning them is important, as it demonstrates their status and shows that they are in line with current trends (Dittmar, 2005; MACRO, 2004). Nevertheless, having a new model every month is almost impossible, as most students are restrained by their finances.

Technical problems, such as low and inconsistent communication signals and slow internet access were highlighted by the respondents and this scenario provides vital information to concerned parties that there is a need for improvement in the communication services with regard to communication signals and the internet. Financial problems were raised by the respondents as one of the main issues, as the communication cost for continuous usage is not cheap since the respondents are still unemployed and any extra financial commitment will be a burden to them. Furthermore referring to the demographic data (Table 1), the financial restraint might encourage the respondents to use SMS more than voice calls which offer a cheaper service price.

The problem that mobile phones are not user friendly recorded the lowest mean score ( $M = 1.98$ ), this scenario is not surprising as youths always display their knowledge and skills on using such gadget. Priyanka (2010) stated that youths are the fastest learners of advanced technologies such as mobile phones, as the gadgets are in line with youths needs, particularly in relation to communication and entertainment. Akiyoshi and Ono (2008) added that the advanced features of mobile phones, especially in relation to internet surfing have made it important for them to stay up to date with such technology.

## CONCLUSION

Deriving suggestions from the present study is seen as unsuitable as it only represents the opinions of a total of 47 respondents. This number is too small to be claimed as representative of the youth in Malaysia, however the findings at least portray an early prediction of the actual data collection which is yet to be conducted. From the early findings it can be concluded that communication and emergency use are the two main purposes for youths to use mobile phones while the fast pace of mobile phone model updates is their main problem. The present study plans to collect a bigger sample size involving a total of 400 youths who will be selected from among the participants of courses or seminars conducted by related youth agencies. Performing an analysis from a bigger sample size will offer a clearer picture regarding their purposes for and problems with using the mobile phones. Furthermore by conducting a bigger study, it will assist concerned parties and scholars to develop a new discipline, culture and theory with regards to the usage of technology, such as mobile phones.

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