

## MOBILE ADVERTISING: A USER'S PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract.** *The purpose of this study was to explore the preferences of mobile users when it comes to mobile advertising, what they perceive are the main characteristics and functions of mobile advertising messages. Qualitative approach was used in this data was collected through focus group discussions. Qualitative thematic analysis with the help of Nvivo has been used to evaluate the texts collected from the participants of the focus groups. The findings of the study revealed that the main functions of mobile phone are personal communication, advertising and information. Moreover, mobility, immediacy and personalization have been identified as the main characteristics of mobile communication and lastly, product centred messages and customer centred messages are identified as the main categories as far as the content of mobile communication is concerned.*

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### Introduction

Communications industry has experienced phenomenal technological development over the past decade or so. Introduction of latest technologies and growing demands of both current and potential customers have played a crucial role in the evolution of wireless communication (Park, Shenoya, & Salvendy, 2008). The introduction and growth of wireless communication offers huge potential for wireless advertising and marketers have realized the need to alter certain features of mobile and communications like the content and style of advertising messages so as to make it more meaningful and attractive to the consumers.

According to (Calin, 2011), mobile advertising is attractive due to its potential for high engagement and personalization. Each mobile device has great immediacy and is accessible around the clock as it is always in hand and as such linked to an individual. Being used as a communication channel, mobile phone is highly effective, interactive and present opportunities for effective alignment of advertising messages to the intended audience.

Since the deregulation of the telecom industry in Pakistan in 2003, telecom industry has experienced phenomenal growth in Pakistan over the last ten years attracting both national and international investment in the telecom sector. According to the estimates of Pakistan telecommunication authority released in September 2022, the number of cellular subscribers in Pakistan has crossed 180 million marks. This huge subscriber base present huge potential for marketers to communicate their messages to the prospective customers. The area of mobile advertising has been virtually unexplored till now by marketers in Pakistan. Off late a considerable number of marketers have diverted their attention towards mobile advertising. Before this promotional activities, over mobile phones were carried out mainly by telecom companies promoting their various promotional offers. Marketers can now communicate with their potential customers in a more personalized and unique way.

The aim of the paper is to find out the preferences of mobile users when it comes to mobile advertising. Apart from that, we have also tried to find out the main functions and characteristics of mobile communication messages from the users' point of view.

### **Literature Review**

Laszlo (2009) defined mobile advertising as “advertising or marketing messages delivered to portable devices, either via synchronized download or wirelessly over the air”. In literature we find SMS and MMS as two common methods that are used for mobile advertising (Samanta, Woods, & Ghanbari, 2009). Apart from this rise in technological advancement and use of internet over mobile phone offers new possibilities for interactive advertising through mobile phone (Laszlo, 2009).

The potential in mobile advertising has generated a lot of interest among researchers who have attempted to explore the adoption and success factors of mobile advertising in various countries (Park, Shenoya, & Salvendy, 2008). A study conducted by Bauer, Grether and Leach (2002) found out that location, time, information and personalization are the related factors to be considered for the acceptance of mobile advertising. In another study Barwise and Strong (2002) based on the theory of information processing argued that time, location, social norms, mode, motives of users and personal characteristics are the factors that will have an impact on the processing of mobile information by customers. In a study based on analysing the attitudes of consumers towards mobile advertising Tsang, Ho and Liang (2004) identified the effect of irritation and informativeness whereas (Bauer, Reichardt, Bames , & Neumann, 2005) found out that social utility, perceived information and entertainment are the factors that influence consumer attitudes. Xu and Gutierrez (2006) while exploring the influence of credibility, information, irritation, personalization, and entertainment on the behaviours of Chinese customers found out that all these factors have a positive influence on the attitude of Chinese customers.

In a study (Peters , Amato, & Hollenbeck, 2007) aimed at analysing the causes that determine the adoption of mobile advertising by customers, highlighted various kinds of causes like social and content needs and process motives. Similarly, Jun and Lee (2007), identified seven possible factors that may affect the attitude of customers; information, convenience, multimedia service, functional service, entertainment, and sociality. The findings of their study revealed that the influence of multimedia service and convenience were statistically significant. Some researchers (e.g., Ma, Suntompithung, & Karaatli, 2009) using quantitative approach tried to identify various factors that are influencing the acceptance of mobile advertising by customers. The findings of their study reveal that the adoption intention of the customer is significantly influenced by the credibility of perceived messages and the ability on part of consumers to embrace new technology and their motivation also influence their personal behaviours. In study conducted by (Vatanparast & Butt, 2009) considered four categories of factors in order to analyse the factors that affect the use of mobile advertising. These factors included consumer factors like performance, privacy and purpose, message factors like customization, content and credibility, media factors like policy, process and price and lastly device factors like intelligence, interface and interactivity. In spite of the importance of current research, it is quite easy to identify the inconsistencies between findings of various contemporary researches. This limitation of research may be due to the conceptualization and measurement of specific variables or due to the differences in empirical setting.

### **Methodology**

The aim of the study was to identify the preferences for commercial wireless communication among mobile users in Islamabad. The reason for conducting the study in Islamabad was that people in the city are technologically more advanced as compared to other cities that were within our reach. It was also believed that people in city will have much more awareness about mobile advertising as compared to other cities. In order to achieve the overall aim of the research study, three main objectives were defined for the study; a) to identify the user perceived characteristics of mobile communication, b) to explore and analyse the main functions of mobile communication as perceived by its users, and lastly, c) to explore and analyze mobile phone user's preferences as far as the content of mobile communication is concerned.

This research study was divided into two phases. In the first phase existing literature on the topic concerned was reviewed for the identification of relevant variables that will be useful in the development of the conceptual framework. In the second phase, three focus groups each consisting of eight mobile phone users were formed. The participants of the focus group were aged between 18 and above.

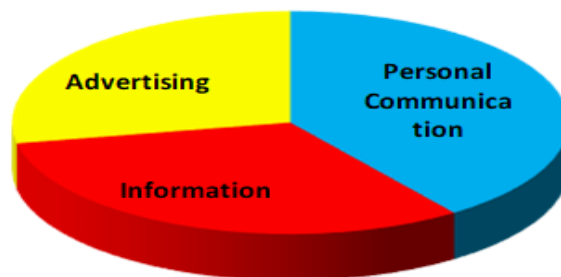
The age group of participants was divided into four broad categories; 18-27, 28-37, 38-47 and 48 and above. Each focus group comprised of two participants from each age group category. Also, in each focus group a 50% male female ratio was maintained. The reason for dividing the age into four categories was that it will ensure representation of all age groups of mobile phone users. The discussion in the focus groups lasted for about 40-45 minutes and the main focus of the discussion was three main issues: functions of mobile communication, its characteristics as a medium of commercial communication and the preferences of users in terms of commercial messages and their contents received on their mobile phones.

The discussions of the focus groups have been recorded and then transcribed. Qualitative thematic analysis with the help of Nvivo has been used to evaluate the texts collected from the participants of the focus groups. Thematic analysis helped in exploring and interpreting the convergent themes discussed by participants in their focus group discussions.

## **Finding and Discussion**

### ***Main functions of mobile communications***

Based on the discussion of the respondents in the focus groups, three broad functions of mobile communication have been identified i.e., advertising, information and personal communication. In two focus groups, personal communication was considered as the main function of mobile communication. However, in the third focus group the participants argued that the idea of personal communication is way too vague to be considered as an important function of mobile communication. They emphasized that the other two functions: information and advertising are the primary functions of mobile communication. “In my personal opinion advertising and information are the main functions of any form of mobile communication. Generally personal communication is regarded as a common way of mobile communication and since mobile phone is considered to be a very personal device... so any communication over mobile phone in which the users participate is representing a kind of personal communication” (M.J., 28 years, female).



*Figure 1* Three Broad Functions of Mobile Communication

In the focus groups discussion, many participants were of the view that it is difficult at times to identify in mobile messages only one among these three forms of communication functions. There is a tendency to develop communication messages having hybrid functions like infortising (advertising + information) (Westerink & Majoor, 2000). One of main reasons for the use of hybrid functions in mobile communication is their better efficiency and effectiveness at the communication level. "On mobile phone advertising may not be eye-catching enough as the user of the mobile phone is busy in various other activities, so in order to increase the motivation level of mobile phone users it has to include a reasonable amount of entertainment in their mobile communication messages" (Z.R., 35 years, male).

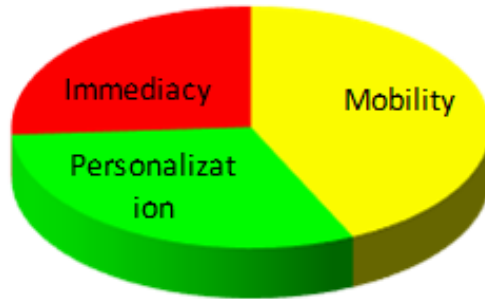
From the marketing point of view, one of the main problems identified in the use of these mobile communication functions is the lack of consumer control and interactivity. "These marketing guys are ignoring the characteristics of new technology and are still involved in using old and outdated advertising techniques. The success rate of mobile communication messages is so low because of the fact that a design message is sent to a number of people without trying any real target or interaction. You may receive a message that you don't want or is about the product that you don't want or at the wrong moment... Some customer defined filters must be used by them to avoid such things from happening" (M.N., 56 years, male).

Some of the participants address the problem of permission marketing. "Regarding messages that require user permission to send messages do not work the way they are supposed to be. All of sudden you are flooded with information messages which you may not want after agreeing to a particular type of message" (B.A., 29 years, female). In this regard the participants of the focus groups proposed solution in which customer have control over such things. "I would prefer to have an application system that is customer controlled and gives you choice to ask for specific messages" (S.Z, 26 years, female). (Bauer, Grether, & Leach, Building customer relations over the Internet., 2002) and (Xu & Gutierrez, 2006) also found similar results in their respective studies on mobile advertising.

### ***4.2 Specific characteristics of mobile communication***

The participants of the focus groups identified mobility, immediacy and personalization as the three main characteristics of mobile communication. "If one compares traditional communication devices with mobile communication one advantage that mobile communication has over traditional communication devices is mobility" (J.A., 32 years, female). Furthermore, mobile phones have pushed the mobility to extreme levels as the user can be contacted anytime and anywhere. When mobility is lost or limited for various reasons like customer has lost or

forgotten his mobile phone somewhere or due to limited or no coverage, the customer feels dissatisfied and isolated. “if due to some reason my mobile phone is not working and I am out of my residence and I need to call back home to my parents, it can be very inconvenient and problematic as it is extremely difficult to find public phones in Pakistan” (G.S., 32 years, female).



*Figure 2* Specific Characteristics of Mobile Communication

The participants of the focus groups identified personalization as the second important characteristic of mobile communication. “Cell phone is an extremely personal tool. It carries personal information like messages, videos, pictures etc. which we do not like to share it with anyone” (F.A., 41 years, female). On the other hand, due to technological development the functions of mobile phones have expanded considerably which has increased their utility as well as user dependence on them. “If I lose my phone, I don’t know what I would do, I may feel lost and cut off from the world” (A.S., 28 years, male).

Immediacy was identified as the third most important characteristic of mobile communication identified by the participants of the focus groups is immediacy. Immediacy is concerned with real time information exchange over the mobile phones. “Since the communication over mobile phone take place in real time it allows the opportunity to solve various problems immediately” (D.A., 52 years, male). Some users might perceive immediacy as a burden to them. “sometimes I receive job related calls from my immediate boss especially on non-working days that there is a particular problem and you need to address it now and at that time I wish if they would leave me alone for a while as I have to give time to my family as well” (N.R., 37 years female). In studies conducted by (Xu & Gutierrez, 2006) and (Calin, 2011) also found that personalization and mobility are the main function of mobile communication.az

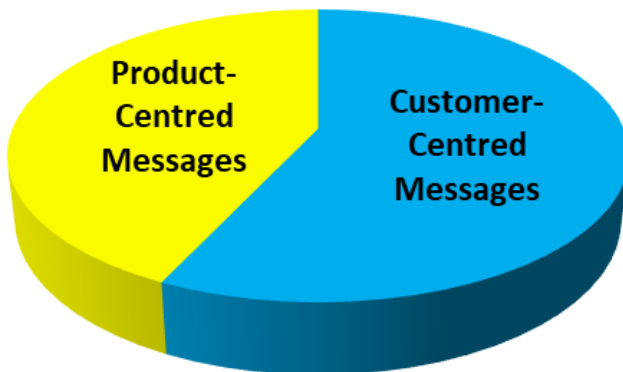
As it is clearly evident from the discussion of the participants, there is an obvious linkage (positive as well as negative) between mobile communication specificity and the social and functional characteristics of mobile phones. Another important feature extracted from the discussion of the participants is the complexity in the views expressed by them. The participants highlighted both

positive and negative aspects of mobile phone communication. Negative aspects are generally related to the lack of control on the flow and frequency of communication by the user. “there is no doubt that cell phone is an important device and has become part of our daily life but I don’t like to be disturbed and harassed by people whom I don’t know. For that reason, I take great care in giving my cell number to people who are close to me and are part of my family and friends” (O.K., 47 years, male). The desire for more control as highlighted by some participants presents a limitation in the process of designing and implementing mobile advertising campaigns. The situation gets even more complex considering the fact that the level and magnitude of tolerance varies from person to person.

### **4.3 Content of mobile communication**

The participants in their discussion identified two main categories regarding the contents of mobile communication.

Customer-centred messages are those kinds of messages that are personalized in nature. Customers need to develop long-term relationship with companies or specific brands to receive this form of content. The continuous interaction between the customer and the organization provides valuable information for the firm that can be used productively to customize advertising offers and messages.



*Figure 3* Contents of Mobile Communication

Product centred messages involve advertising messages that one way or the other directly present the main features and benefits of particular products. By segmenting the market and targeting only those customers who may be interested could improve the efficiency of such messages.

The participants in their discussion highlighted the fact that ideally mobile communication messages should include both types of content. Messages should

be designed in such way that not only provides meaningful information about product that will ultimately help them in their purchase decision but also not intrude their privacy and annoy them. Many participants agreed that increased interactivity and customer control can significantly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of mobile communication. "Suppose I am looking for a restaurant in a city where I am relatively a stranger, if I just access my mobile phone and touch a few keys that will provide me with information about good restaurants in the nearby areas with promotional offers in any then this I would say will be a good commercial communication" (I.A., 45years, male).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the preferences of mobile users when it comes to mobile advertising, what they perceive are the main characteristics and functions of mobile advertising messages. The findings of the study revealed the need for using a qualitative approach in exploring the principles and applications of mobile communication. Though previous researches in this area identified significant variables that are helpful in determining the attitude of users of mobile phones towards mobile advertising, we still lack in understanding the particular needs of the customers and their reactions to mobile advertising in real life situations. During the focus group discussions, participants actively participated in these discussions and they believed that there is great potential in revolutionizing commercial communication through mobile advertising if they focused more on catering the personal needs of the consumers. However, it will be difficult to realize this without enhancing the control of mobile phone user over the contents and functions of mobile messages.

This study has a number of limitations. These limitations are primarily determined by the selection and application of specific research strategy used in this study. The study involved participants from only one city and the number of participants in the focus groups was relatively small, hence, the findings of the study may be not be useful in drawing generalizations at the national and international level. Future studies can be carried out within this area as well as other related areas involving different research methodologies.

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