

RESEARCH REPORT

Mobile Lives: The Quotidian Use of Mobile Phone

Mohammad Golam Nabi Mozumder



Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS)

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Contents

List of Tables	iii
List of Images	iii
List of Spectrograms	iii
Abstract.....	iv
CHAPTER 1	1
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2	3
RATIONALE	3
CHAPTER 3	5
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	5
CHAPTER 4.....	7
METHODOLOGY	7
CHAPTER 5	9
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....	9
5.1 Vital Skill.....	9
5.1.1 Voice Searching and Texting: V2T & T2V	9
5.1.2 Enhancing Capabilities: Income, (Up)skill	10
5.1.3 Diverse Apps	11
5.2 Mobile Phone and Addiction	12
5.2.1 Professional use	15
5.2.2 Slide into Addiction	17
5.2.3 Self Counseling-Waj.....	20
5.3 Communication.....	21
5.3.1 Networking (Transnational).....	21
5.3.2 Social Transactions.....	22
5.4 Socation	23
5.5 Redefining the Device to Reclaim the Reality	24
5.5.1 Creative Expression	25
5.5.2 Vernacular Innovation: Vernography	27
5.5.3 Collective Ownership: Creative Negotiations in the Times of Insufficient Resources	29
5.6 Mobile is Life: Society is Technology Made Invisible.....	30
5.7 Mobile Phone and Gender.....	33
5.8 When the Tide Turns (the same people act differently)	34

5.9 Technology Alone is not Enough to Turn the Tide	35
5.9.1 <i>Productive Unease</i>	36
5.9.2 <i>Fruitful Negotiation</i>	37
5.9.3 <i>Enduring Trust</i>	38
CHAPTER 6	41
CONCLUSION.....	41
CHAPTER 7	43
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	43
CHAPTER 8	45
AREAS OF PROSPECTIVE RESEARCH	45
REFERENCES	47

List of Tables

Table 5.1: Attachment: Emotions and Concerns	14
Table 5.2: Sentient Relationships between People and Mobile Phone	15
Table 5.3: Technology Diary – Heavy Use (22 Y, male, CNG driver, 8th grade, Barishal)..	17

List of Images

Image 5.1: Professional Use – Beauty Parlour	16
Image 5.2: Heavy Use – Gaming and Social Media Posts	18
Image 5.3: Image: Home Screen of a Gamer’s Phone.....	25
Image 5.4: Decorating the Phone is a Way of Decorating the Self	26
Image 5.5: Visual Vernaculars—Users of which are not Just Laymen Consumers but Innovators	27
Image 5.6: Image: Co-optation of a Recognised Language.....	28
Image 5.7: Facebook Account Operated Jointly by Mother-son	29

List of Spectrograms

Spectrogram 5.1: Addiction Begets Fear: “Go Just Crazy if the Phone is [accidentally] left Somewhere”	19
Spectrogram 5.2: Extensive Addiction: “I would be fine without a girlfriend, but I can’t live without a mobile”	20

Abstract

Technologies that we habitually use in everyday life play a crucial role in making what we come to be or (en) act in social life (Doron, 2012). Marginalised groups of people appropriate technologies to combat the prevalent modes of domination (Eglash, 2004). This study focuses on a less studied issue, i.e., the quotidian use of mobile phones, particularly among the under-privileged segments of the populace in Bangladesh.

This qualitative study investigates what makes mobile technology a popular tool in (re)constituting the users as social subjects. Do the users redefine the device itself, i.e., a mobile phone? In-depth interviews of mobile users were conducted from all of the eight administrative divisions of the country, with particular focus on young users of 15-35 years of age. More than half of the respondents were female. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. We collected supplementary evidence, such as browsing history, activity log, social media posts, messages, images, and audio-video records. In addition, we conducted a tone analysis of selected portions of a few interviews.

The study finds that the little digital machine known as the mobile phone is not merely a device that they find themselves in awe with; “the little phone” often appears to be vital, the lack of which makes mobile users immobile, hapless, and “lifeless.” Four major types of use of mobile phones are the following: regular use, cultivating attachment, addictive use, and professional use. Users make 11 types of phone calls; they plan, initiate, execute, admonish, punish, and even imagine and outdo what we used to know as phone-calling. The un(der)educated young users of mobile phones invented their own language, which we call “vernography.” Extensive users frequently become addicted to the device; only in rare cases, users might overcome that seductive habit. Access to mobile phones does not always lift them to a higher status; female users from the disadvantaged sections strategise to bypass the seemingly invincible patriarchal barriers to access mobile phones.

In theorising the findings of this study, we argue that *society is technology made invisible*, which is an extension of Latour’s (1990) famous observation: “Technology is society made durable.” The device that comes to life with the social actuation of human bodies is critical to materialising the vitality of social beings. Digital devices facilitate building “mesh connections”; these connections are vital for underprivileged youth. Mobile is life! Mobile phones engender invisible yet unavoidable connections.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What a technological device can do and what it signifies depend less on the technology itself. Three interrelated things are crucial to understanding the sociological significance of technology: the user, the social setting, and the modes in which the device is at play (Roberts, 2012). Users make the device meaningful the way they find it worth doing; users deploy a device to perform their role as agents in the social setting they embody; and finally, the actual processes in which users realise the potential usefulness of the device. The same digital device might engender diverse changes; it might take unfamiliar characterisations not only in its technical use but, more importantly, in the mundane processes of everyday use. These insignificant functions of the device might get scant attention in the scholarly arenas known as science and technology, but they are of paramount importance in sociology.

Mobile phone, a digital device that was originally intended to be private, is at times used as a collectively owned technology (de Souza e Silva, Sutko, Salis, & de Souza e Silva 2011). The collective use of the device might seem uncanny, but it is the innovation of the originally unintended users of the digital device. Wit constitutes an essential precondition of innovation; “wit is the diagram of innovative action” (Virno, 2011). The new device gave rise to new modes of behaviours and also new etiquettes, new manners—known as “mobile manners” — as well as new tensions such as “mobile mania” (Srivastava, 2005). Technical codes correspond with social codes, and subordinate groups often challenge the technical codes (Feenberg, 1991, 2005). Vernacular innovation is usually made possible by groups of people who are often perceived to be just laymen, mere consumers. Those are expected to be the least important actors in innovating/generating ideas and tools that are essential for technological advancement. “[T]he lay public [acting as] as producers of technology and science” (Eglash, 2004:7) constitutes “the new centres of innovation and demand” (Bell, 2006:44). The public equipped with the technology plays a significant role in reshaping the facets of social subjects and matrices of sociality.

Technologies that we habitually use in our everyday lives play a crucial role in making what we come to be or (en)act in our social lives (Doron, 2012). Instead of focusing on access or lack thereof, this paper analyses the relationship between people and technology, as suggested by de Souza et al. (2011). Marginalised groups of people appropriate technologies as a strategy to combat the prevalent modes of domination; technological appropriation can potentially facilitate diverse forms of reconfigurations of dominant socio-cultural systems

(Eglash, 2004). Mobile phones allow adolescents to bypass parental supervision and exercise autonomy, that helps them form a more customised form of social identity (Campbell & Park, 2008). The users of mobile phones tend to practise “bounded solidarity” instead of an open and accommodating digital sociality (Ling, 2008). Having access to technology such as mobile phones can also reinforce, if not exacerbate, the discriminatory mechanisms inherent in a social body (Wallis, 2011). The use of the internet on a phone or computer fails to significantly improve the socio-economic conditions of the users, especially those from disadvantaged social backgrounds (Lee, 2008).

Underprivileged groups of users, especially in the Global South, also perform innovative activities with the phone, e.g., “tinkering” unlike the Western DIY culture; contrary to the popular perception, they have integrated into a new level of flexible manufacturing system that bypasses the intellectual property regimes (Valdivia, Wallis, Linchuan, & Ling, 2013). Ling and Horst (2011) comprehensively reviewed the literature on the extensive use of information technology in the Global South to highlight the thriving innovative practices of information and communication technologies or ICT, especially among the less advantaged segments of the population.

Affluent users tend to use phones for productive activities, while users from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds use the device for entertainment (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). Women and teenagers from minority backgrounds use phones for multipurpose social engagements (Park, 2015). Access to mobile phones makes a distinct difference in the lives of some of the most disadvantaged segments of users (Rice & Katz, 2003). The lack of access to smart devices or computers at home, known as the “device divide”, adds further odds to the disadvantaged users of mobile phones (Pearce & Rice, 2013). However, researchers also need to investigate the apparent over-dependence on smartphones (Marler, 2018).

“The mobile is a symbol in itself, an obscure object of desire and a sign of the times” (McGuigan, 2005). “[T]he presentation of the self in everyday life” in the age of ubiquitous use of technology deserves careful attention from sociologists in the digital age (Torpey, 2020). Torpey identified more areas of prospective research, such as the transformation of everyday life in response to the inundation of technological devices and the prospective rural-urban divide in terms of the use of tech.

CHAPTER 2

RATIONALE

Previous studies found that children of affluent and educated elites use mobile phones in productive ways (Park, 2015), but there is a lack of research on the use of mobile phones among the underprivileged segments of the populace. Three key importance of the study are the following. First, this study examines the non-conventional, creative use of mobile phones in Bangladesh. Second, it focuses on the unintended use of the digital device: the collective use of the device that was originally envisioned to be a private technology. Not surprisingly, the mobile phone is known as the “cell phone”; with the popularisation of the phone “at the opening of the twenty-first century, the fixed telephone had been officially eclipsed – by its mobile counterpart” (Goggin, 2006). The users of mobile phones might also be considered originally unintended groups: Illiterate or semi-literate folks living in the remote rural areas of the Global South. Third, there is insufficient research on the sociological understanding of the widespread use of a mobile phone in Bangladesh.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study examines how the disadvantaged segments of the population—those with little or no formal educational qualification and those from poor socio-economic backgrounds—use the phone in their everyday life in Bangladesh. The technological device itself plays an insignificant role in extending opportunities for disadvantaged users (Arie & Mesch, 2016). One of the goals here is to investigate whether access to mobile phones facilitates realising the potential (if there is any) of creating opportunities amidst the seemingly insurmountable odds evident in the lives of the distressed.

How does a technological device transcend its usual nature and importance? Why does a mere piece of technology appear to redefine its users, at times seem to be equivalent to “life”? What makes mobile technology a vital tool in (re)constituting the users as social subjects and in cultivating dynamic relationships between users and their social settings? Finally, what makes a mobile phone redefine itself?

Teenagers in Dhaka extensively use smartphones to perform innovative activities, such as collaborating with friends to prepare science projects (Mozumder, 2019). About 90 per cent of teenagers have access to a mobile phone; not all of them, however, own a device (Bangladesh Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey 2019-20). What do the users of do who do not own a device or do not have frequent access to the phone? The non-owning users of mobile phones, e.g., migrant workers staying far from family members, strategically use the device to communicate with family members and relatives, especially during difficult times in their lives (Rashid, 2011). How do they make use of the device who are “precariously employed youth” (Furlong et al., 2017), who are uneducated or with little educational qualification, and who are currently unemployed or underemployed in the informal sector? What is the nature of the use of mobile phones among the underprivileged rural teens, informal sector workers—dropped out youth? What kind of innovative works do they do using the device? Using the “creative social expression lens” (Wong & Ling, 2011:285), this study seeks to understand what kind of “social animals” they have become “fueled by mobile use” (Wong & Ling 2011:286). Simultaneously, how the mobile phone as a technical device has transformed—taking new meanings, a noble character in the dynamic interactive process—in the ways of being enmeshed in the lives of the “*bokhate*” or “the spoiled,” for example? How the social fabrics the users embody are (re)shaped by the widespread inclusion of a technological device? The findings were analysed to elaborate on the diverse kinds of social conventions and moral obligations that the unconventional use of the mobile phone necessitates.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes in which social phenomena take place (Maxwell, 1992). It aims to empathetically understand the deep social reality (Leavy, 2014). Drawing inspiration from interpretive sociology, we employed an inductive approach to analyse the narratives that emerged from the testimonies of the respondents. The desired respondents were identified from all of the administrative divisions of the country using multi-stage cluster sampling.

In-depth interviews were conducted to collect primary data. *Three main phases of the data collection* process are exploratory interviews, in-depth interviews, and follow-up interviews.

- In the beginning, 240 exploratory interviews were conducted in eight divisions.
- From those interviews, 40-80 proficient mobile phone users—five to ten from each division—were identified to conduct in-depth interviews.
- Around 20 interesting users of analytical interest were identified for follow-up interviews.

The study focused on young users of 15 to 35 years of age. The young users are of interest because of their innovative and diverse use of technology (Mozumder, 2019). They have been purposely selected from the eight administrative divisions: Barishal, Chattogram, Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Mymensingh, and Sylhet. Young, proficient users were primarily selected, followed by the elders. To ensure gender balance, fifty per cent of the respondents are female. Respondents have been interviewed from urban, rural, and semi-urban areas. Snowballing techniques were used to identify avid users of mobile phones. Sequential interviewing processes continued until a reasonable level of saturation was achieved (Small, 2009).

A detailed checklist was used to conduct the interviews. Supplementary evidence, such as any work done using mobile phones, was collected to enrich the interviews. An email diary (Jones & Woolley, 2015) was intended to be constructed by accumulating the digital communication history with the respondents. To attain deep insight into the stories, we have conducted follow-up interviews with selected users, around 30 of them. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated. Broader theoretical implications have been elaborated following the grounded theory model (Suddaby, 2006). Finally, policy suggestions have been provided based on the findings.

We purposely identified expert users as respondents for in-depth interviews. They were our gatekeepers; we used snowballing techniques to reach other interviewees referred by these

respondents. However, we deliberately broke the cycle and found respondents from different networks and locations to ensure variations in the experiences. Female research assistants mostly met the female respondents at their homes and spoke privately; in a few cases, male interviewers had to bring a female friend with them to privately interview a female respondent.

The research proposal and data collection protocol for this study were approved by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) ethical review committee. Following the standard protocol, respondents were first briefed about the study, the organisation that sponsored the study, and its overall objectives. In most cases, the respondents signed the consent form. Those who could not read or write or expressed reluctance to put a signature on paper were offered the option of verbal consent; they agreed to record their verbal consent to participate in the study. With the permission of the respondents, we recorded the interviews, and subsequently transcribed, and translated the selected interviews into English. They also agreed to share supplementary evidence such as their browsing history, social media profile, messages exchanged, photos taken, and audio and video records on the phone. We clearly told them that the evidence we collected would be used only for research purposes. More importantly, we clarified that we would remove all actual identifications to anonymise the evidence while including them in the report.

The transcripts of the important segments of the selected interviews constitute about 800 pages. The transcripts of the interviews were translated into English. Subsequently, we coded the interviews and systematically analysed them to find out salient themes. We started with open coding, followed by axial coding, and finally thematic coding (Williams & Moser, 2019). The translated transcripts were categorised and analysed by collating collections of relevant statements from the interviewees under separate headings using Microsoft Word. We coded the interviews, and identified the following themes: activities (common, uncommon, and favourite), everyday use, entertainment, communication, learning new things, making videos, searching online, voice search, learning about Islamic rituals, apps (common and uncommon), activities with friends (online and offline), code of conduct (with friends, known people, and unknown people), decoration of mobile phone (male users and female users), safety precautions (male and female users), anxiety and depression, support system and expert community, conflict prevention and arbitration, privacy and confidentiality (male and female users), attachment with the phone, strategies of finding missing phone, perception on phone use, self-counselling, collective use of phone, disputes regarding phone use, financial transaction using the phone, dealing with emergencies, deviant activities, unpleasant experiences, proficient use of the phone, fighting addiction, nature of use among female users, unpleasant experiences of female users, harassment of female users, strategies of avoiding the potential harassments, cultivating romantic relationship, and stress and coping mechanisms. Employing an inductive process, we proceeded from the level of identifying scattered themes to the consolidation of concepts and finally theoretical propositions.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Vital Skill

The mobile device, in its diverse use, made possible what was seemingly impossible, at least temporarily. It brought home much-needed opportunities to provide for the self (small/temporary but significant). In this process, the users ventured into uncharted territories, made unknown allies, and got involved in the process of ushering in a novel subjectivation.

5.1.1 Voice Searching and Texting: V2T & T2V

“No need to type, very easy,” a 20-year-old girl in Naraynganj (Dhaka 78) prefers voice-to-text typing (V2T). They do not have to say the complete word or sentence; just uttering the word partially or briefly does the trick. They send voice messages and get voice message replies as well. “I can hear whatever they wrote by pressing in that software. [--] Then they [friends] send voice recordings too. [--] I then reply. Whatever I need to say, I say [record] that,” a 22-year-old married woman in Rajbari shares her experience using the text-to-voice option (T2V). A 26-year-old auto van driver who completed grade 3 in Chattogram also used the V2T option (CHT 23). “Can’t do it by writing, but there is voice [option]. Just press that and everything pops up,” frankly told a 34-year-old man, a businessperson in Savar. He also remarked, “Whatever I cannot write, I just say it. [I] say it, and it shows up [in writing]. For example, I say a new Bangla song, it just shows up in writing, a new Bangla song. Just need to say any singer, any singer’s name and just that.” “Even if I write one or half of a word, [the whole word] pops up. Also, did that system [with the help of] a friend,” told a 24-year-old barber in Pabna.

In doing so, they find the oral expressions translated into written words, which appear to them as legible images. Repeatedly seeing and thus being familiar with the images of the commonly used oral expressions helps the users of mobile phones identify the written forms of commonly used oral expressions or words.

Voice-to-text typing and searching on the internet made possible *two extraordinary things*: First, breaking the barrier between formal written worlds and the colloquial or oral world; second, bridging the world of known-local people residing in the physically accessible space, on the one hand, and the global-virtual world, on the other. On top of that, exchanging voice messages allows them to enjoy the third core element of communication: *Tone exchange*. The

recorded voice messages differ from talking over the phone; recorded voices can be played at their convenience. While talking to a person directly, users need to respond instantly to the counterpart, whereas recording voices does not need paying attention to the listener at the same time. Sometimes, they record calls and listen to the call records later, which serve a similar function. While exchanging emojis allows them to enjoy the visual expression of emotions, hearing recorded voices or tones allows users to make use of an additional load of ammunition already available in the armature of the human sensorium.

5.1.2 Enhancing Capabilities: Income, (Up)skill

Users of mobile phones (up)skill themselves by watching relevant videos online using the phone. A 20-year-old married homemaker woman in Pabna reportedly “watch[ed] YouTube to learn tailoring [--] to make kameez, salwar, [and thus] earned a little bit.” Another girl who attended school until grade 2 in Savar learned how to raise birds by watching videos on the phone; later, she started raising pet birds for commercial purposes. A part-time auto driver in Bhasantek, who completed grade 3, used the phone to learn to raise budgerigar pet birds, especially how to treat the ill birds when they get cold, and so on. Later, she started earning money by selling pet birds. Users also install various financial apps on the phone, e.g., bKash, Nagad, Rocket, and MyCash. Using the phone, they open accounts to receive their children’s stipend and pay utility bills or insurance premiums. They also regularly purchase internet packages (MB) to use on the phone; they recharge the balance of the phone often from mobile bank accounts; at times, they receive international remittances on their phone accounts.

A 34-year-old unmarried girl in Barishal learned a diverse style of cutting clothes and designs online using the phone. She usually takes a picture of the designs and makes a copy for herself. Not only does she collect designs to reproduce, but she often customises the collected designs to meet the demands of her clients. That is how she attracts potential customers and earns money. She learns mostly by themselves, often with the initial help from friends and relatives. Male partners of female users reportedly also cooperated. Most of the time, these are self-help endeavours; with access to the internet on a digital device, they up-skill and often re-skill themselves. With the availability of the little digital device, these disadvantaged users of mobile phones create opportunities, provide much-needed support, and help realise the untapped potentials—otherwise unrecognised, even beyond imagination.

With the help of the phone, they access the internet and digital content to learn foreign languages, such as English, Tamil, Arabic, Hindi, and Urdu. Others use the phone to watch Pakistani dramas, Bengali, and Madrasi films and listen to Ghazal of their choice. Some install a calculator app and use it extensively; at some point, they learn to identify the numbers and

do the preliminary calculations. A mobile user watched digital content online and taught himself the lessons to become a professional mechanic who fixes iPhones, lights, fans, and LED switches. An illiterate 23-year-old musical instrument mechanic in Rangpur instantly calls his dealer to know whether an item is available so that he can meet the demand of a customer.

Another user, a 22-year-old CNG driver in Barishal, used the phone to do graphic designing and shared that on WhatsApp. He elaborated: “Now, I do a lot of things for my job. I need to share a design, and when I design something, others need that. One calls me and asks, Brother, do you have that design? Then, if I have that design, I share it via Telegram, IMO, or WhatsApp, or when needed, I exchange things with others.” Mobile phones come in handy in seeking employment opportunities overseas. They send important documents to prospective employers overseas, e.g., in the Middle East. They exchange documents instantly by taking photos of them on the phone and sending them via WhatsApp, IMO, for example. Using social media apps, they make friends across national boundaries. A 25-year-old 8th grader in Chattogram uses IMO to talk to a friend located in South Africa on the phone. A 19-year-old girl in Mymensingh uses the phone to learn dance by watching YouTube; she is a dancer-performer and a member of a local dance club. A mason—a 19-year-old male—in Rangpur learned to lip-synch by watching relevant audio-video clips on the phone. Another user reportedly used the phone for the election campaign.

5.1.3 Diverse Apps

The less educated, underprivileged mobile users find out, download, and learn to extensively use relatively less known but handy apps, such as Snaptube, Snapchat, Hotstar, VidMate, InShot, Snap Camera, Lightroom, Light Motion, Bigo Live, Messenger, Likee, IMO, Facebook, and Telegram. They also find apps for traditionally popular games that are almost lost but have resurfaced online, such as Bead 16 or *Sholo Guti*, Bead 12, and Teen Patti game. A 45-year-old domestic help in Barishal exchanged engagement rings over a video call; she does not have any formal education; the couple hasn’t met in person as the groom works in Saudi Arabia. The sense of privacy is not neglected altogether. One user clarified: IMO is no good; WhatsApp is great because miscreants cannot hack an ID. Some of them learned to block unwanted content and contacts. Often, they use the available privacy options such as profile lock or black listing unwanted contacts. One of them uses the WTMP app to monitor anyone who touches the phone in the absence of the owner by video recording.

A few of them use a dictionary by installing a dictionary app. Another 24-year-old female user learns good-looking handwriting by watching videos on YouTube. A great many of them

use TikTok to make and upload videos. They use various apps, namely TikTok, Likee, and CapCut to edit the raw footage. When one respondent was asked whether others get annoyed with them because of making the videos, a 23-year-old Hindu TikToker girl replied, “Everybody around [us] runs TikTok, who would say anything to whom!” However, TikTok users are often scolded by people they know. They are looked down upon. Family members, especially male and female partners get into trouble both within and outside the family because of making the videos. FreeFire and PUBG are two games to which many of the users reportedly get addicted. They often reportedly lost their sense of balance and got into deep trouble because of the failure to maintain healthy relationships with family members and friends. However, some of them have become stars on Likee or TikTok. An 18-year-old tailoring staff in Mymensingh has 30,000 followers on Likee and 2200 on TikTok. Some use Snapchat for taking and editing pictures and Vidmate for listening to *Waj* and music. Making video content on the issues of their preference makes the popular users create a world of stardom. The dearly missed fame gives the otherwise underprivileged segments of the population a precious few avenues of feeling recognised, valued, and distinguished. A mobile phone becomes a “physical icon” (Katz, 2017).

5.2 Mobile Phone and Addiction

Users tend to get addicted to mobile phones often because they suffer from loneliness (Park, 2005). These addicted users of phones feel irritated, nervous, and at times upset when they do not have the device at their disposal. These symptoms are considered “troubling signs of depression” (Park, 2005:267). The more shy and lonely someone is, the higher the possibility of the person getting addicted to a smartphone (Bian & Leung, 2014). Three indicators of addiction are: always keeping the phone on, always preferring a mobile phone to a land phone, suffering from a financial crisis due to excessive use of the phone (Roos, 2001). Addicted users like to hide their excessive use of the device from family members, get anxious while fail to have access to the phone for a while, routinely fail to control the overuse of the phone, and like to find refuge in the device while facing regular issues in their lives (Bian & Leung, 2014: 160). Research also shows that disadvantaged users tend to spend more time using mobile phones in a non-productive manner (Peña-López, 2016). The probability of being problematic users of the phone is higher among users from lower socio-economic backgrounds and among the younger population (Roos, 2001; Sahin, Ozdemir, Unsal, & Temiz, 2013; Leung, 2007).

Analyses of the transcripts of the interviews show that there are four major types of use of mobile phones:

Regular use

Cultivating attachment

Addictive use

Professional use

The regular use of mobile phones includes staying in touch with loved ones; listening to music; watching movies; playing games; watching TV Shows or serials, *Waj, Ghazal* (stored on a memory card) and cooking videos on YouTube; getting news updates, notifications on bank transactions, and so on. Making phone calls is the most frequent use of the device. Phone calls using a mobile phone include interactions among two or multiple users. The callers do not merely exchange messages or share emotions; users plan, initiate, execute, admonish, punish and even imagine and *outdo what we used to know as phone-calling*. Analyses of the transcripts show that users make at least 11 types of phone calls.

11 Types of calls: Audio/video call with/without chatting, missed call, group call, wrong number call (calling someone using a wrong number), accidental call, fake call (calling someone by using a fake name and identity), harassment call (don't talk just listen to the other end), emergency call, conference call, call for help (999), clarification cum pre-emption call to unknown users (to avert potential hassle), "fraud call" (pretending to call from a service provider such as bKash), and revenge call after heated exchange of words.

Mobile phones keep the lives of users going, not only in the sense of making the process smooth but also making it meaningful, eventful, exciting, and often stressful (at times knowingly and often unintentionally). Mobile phones introduce potentially equal amounts of joy and anxiety to users; the digital devices not only make users' lives convenient but also expose at times the device, in its expediency, plunges the users into inevitable tensions. The device is both loved and awed, often the same way as a trusted friend and life-partner is. It is for the same reasons the device turns out to be a cause of shock, disappointment, frustrations, and at times anger.

The intensive and extensive use of mobile phones appears to make users an inseparable part of the device itself, a keen observer would argue. Users cultivate a strong attachment to the device; it is for the same reason that the loss of it or even temporary failure to access the device causes severe distress.

The following Table is an updated version of the similar one published by Vincent and Harper (2003). Based on the findings of the current study, I added new types of emotions. I

replaced the category of panic with sad and stressed, and added a new category of excitement and adventure, and omitted “being cool.” The examples of expressions are also updated using relevant texts from the interviews of our study.

Table 5.1: Attachment: Emotions and Concerns

Emotion	Expression
Sad and Stressed	Sudden loss of phone badly impairs life; feel like paled in pain Restless life, sleepless nights if the phone is not handy, if it does not work properly.
Excitement and Adventure	Gaming, watching funny videos, YouTube, TikTok, Likee, watching games and news updates. Preserve happy moments and fond memories; “Warms my heart.”
Longing and Emptiness	If the mobile phone is not handy with the user, it feels like something is missing, feels empty, handicapped, feels like “an orphan.” Fingers keep tingling; mind gets restless.
Irrational Behaviour	Addicted to gaming; breaks phone; forgets it’s time to eat.
Anxiety, Estrangement, and Disorientation	Precious and precarious phone. Fear of losing the phone set and the contacts.

Source: Updated table originally produced by Vincent and Harper (2003)

Not only do the portable technical devices bind users through their use (as a piece of technology usually placed external to the body), but mobile users also find their sense organs of the body accordingly trained and recalibrated to the needs of the little machine. The following table summarises how the sense organs of the body of users of mobile phones are used to mediate the sense organs of an embodied self.

In the following updated table, I added talking and hearing in the place of “hearing” and added “with and without sound” in the category of sight. Examples and summary statements were also added from the interview transcripts of our study.

Table 5.2: Sentient Relationships between People and Mobile Phone

Sense	Manifestation of social practices in relation to mobile phone use
Touch	Always carry the phone in hand; “the way the soul is attached to the body, the same way the phone must be with me”; use a finger(s) or the face to lock the device; put it under the pillow while sleeping; carry it in the side bag; carry the phone while working in the field; strong screen protector and heavy casing to shield the device; trust own body and deploy handy organs—hands—to protect the machine.
Talking and Hearing	Talk to transmit the voice; listen to the voice; record voices; sing to record and share online and offline; send an audio-recorded message; play recorded voice, music, movies, audio-video-clips; listen to recorded audio calls; listen to audio-video recorded Waj (religious preaching); hear the sounds embedded in games and other applications; watch-hear the recorded/live news.
Sight with and without Sound	Video call; live streaming; seeing and sharing pictures; colourful, edited, decorated, customised pictures and videos; solo and group pictures/Selfie; animated image; collect and create designs; customise decorations, colours and designs; share the content online, YouTube and TikTok, for example; create associations/fan clubs of similar choices.
Smell and Taste	Learn cooking on the phone; new and popular recipes; and virtually share the taste/feeling and experiences related to the taste and flavour, e.g., of food and flower.

Source: Updated table originally produced by Vincent (2005).

The senses of the body get enmeshed and enlivened by the use of mobile phones. The body and the device happily embrace each other at their convenience. The potential hazards are often ignored (such as irritation in the eyes or pain in the neck) to make the most of the benefits of or indulging in the charms associated with the impulsive use of mobile phones. The extensive use of the phone also helps users (at least of them) run profitable businesses.

5.2.1 Professional use

Cultivating some sort of attachment to the phone is the most dominant pattern of the use of mobile phones. Addictive use is not quite uncommon. Getting addicted to using the phone is easy, but combatting that addictive habit is just the opposite: Nearly impossible. Only a handful of mobile phone users we interviewed could reportedly break the habit of addiction. Some of them might fall back on the unhealthy habit after a temporary break.

An example of the professional use of a mobile phone can be identified in the following statement by a 20-year-old, male security guard at Mongla Export Processing Zone: “my job as a security guard, locking door, sealing — these things I have to show over a video call; even they take screenshots and check next day whether it’s taped in the same way.” The security guard has to use the phone to remotely record the locked doors of the store to show the owners so that the security of the shop is ensured and seen (witnessed) every night. *Security and reliability are digitised and virtually calibrated.*

A woman entrepreneur remotely contacts their customers over the phone by avoiding the inconveniences of meeting and talking to unknown (male) customers in person even after regular hours (which could be culturally restrictive and uncomfortable individually). Searching for jobs and applying online is also done on the phone. Prospective renters of a car call on his number to take service of hiring a vehicle. Businesses done remotely allow people to contact potential service providers regardless of location, time, gender, and nature of business. *The flow of words and money takes the same route: The virtual highway.* At times, there are hazards (such as unwanted calls), but the increased access, affordability, and security make it a prudent choice for the users of mobile phones to go digital. Markets and public places remain somewhat far from the private space or home, but the uninterrupted and unbound access to the phone makes it virtually impossible to draw a fine line of separation between the private and public realms.

Image 5.1: Professional Use – Beauty Parlour



The beauty parlour is run by a 23-year-old female who completed Grade 5 in Netrokona; and the user used this image to publicise her business.

Sometimes, the mobile spaces of businesses bring home unknown people at their doorstep, not as strangers or unwanted visitors but as desired guests (customers) and much-needed interlocutors who would initiate business transactions and expand personal networks. Bringing home distant guests does not require stepping out of the home or the comfort zone; the mobile device makes it possible to retain the comfort of staying in the bedroom (possibly under the blanket, sometimes only using the audio call option or texting) and yet participate in business interactions.

5.2.2 Slide into Addiction

The extensive use of mobile phones might mean additional health hazards and deviations from cultural norms. Sleeping late at night or staying awake until early morning is considered a deviation from the usual norms of nocturnal life. Users of mobile phones often encounter cultural backlash against the use of mobile phones overnight or during late-night.

Our data collectors randomly requested some mobile phone users to tell them what they did using their mobile phones on the day of the interview and the day before. Based on the information given by those who agreed to share the details, we prepared the following table.

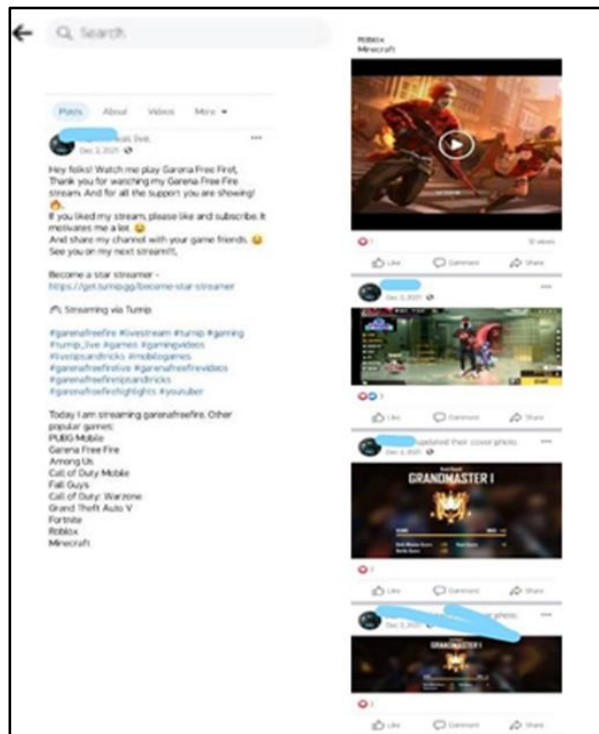
Table 5.3: Technology Diary – Heavy Use (22 Y, male, CNG driver, 8th grade, Barishal)

Time	Activities
11.00 am	Woke up from sleep, had breakfast
11.30 am-3.00 pm	Played games on the phone with friends
3.00 pm-10.00 pm	Bath time, lunch time, nap time, playing games before taking a nap, playing games after the nap, hanging out with friends, dinner time
10.00 pm-	Went to bed at 10 pm but played games till dawn.
Summary of daily routine	“I went to bed at 10 but played [games on the phone] till 3 AM. Then slept. Let’s say I woke up from sleep and had some breakfast at 11:30 AM. Then played again with friends and kept playing even until 3 PM. Then took a shower and ate. Upon eating, I slept again after playing one or two games. After waking up, I played again a little bit. After playing, I went to hang out and then started playing again at night after taking dinner; then, I started playing again until 2 AM or 3 AM, even till morning, and then went to sleep.”

The example of a heavy mobile phone user presented in the Table above shows that the user often forgets that the night is over. *The sleepless night is not an unhappy enforcement; instead, it is a pleasurable obsession, rewarding immersion.* This practice may have severe health consequences if continued for a long time, but researchers better pay careful attention to the payoff that keeps the users engrossed, and glued to the phone.

A 27-year-old former expatriate labour in Khulna became addicted to gaming. He is obsessed with gaming and regularly posting about his gaming achievements on social media platforms. The images of his scores and videos of the game posted online work as a “fishing net”; the posts attract potential gamers, who would eventually contact the experienced veterans and ask for their help in participating in the adventure. He kindly agreed to show us some of the posts he shared on social media. The reward he earns by posting those gaming accomplishments also provides him with an inflow of distinguished awe from his peers. This reward and awe play a crucial role in making them addicted to gaming and the device that is used to play the game. The depth of the dependency on the device and the obsession with gaming becomes evident when they occasionally miss the phone set or accidentally leave it somewhere.

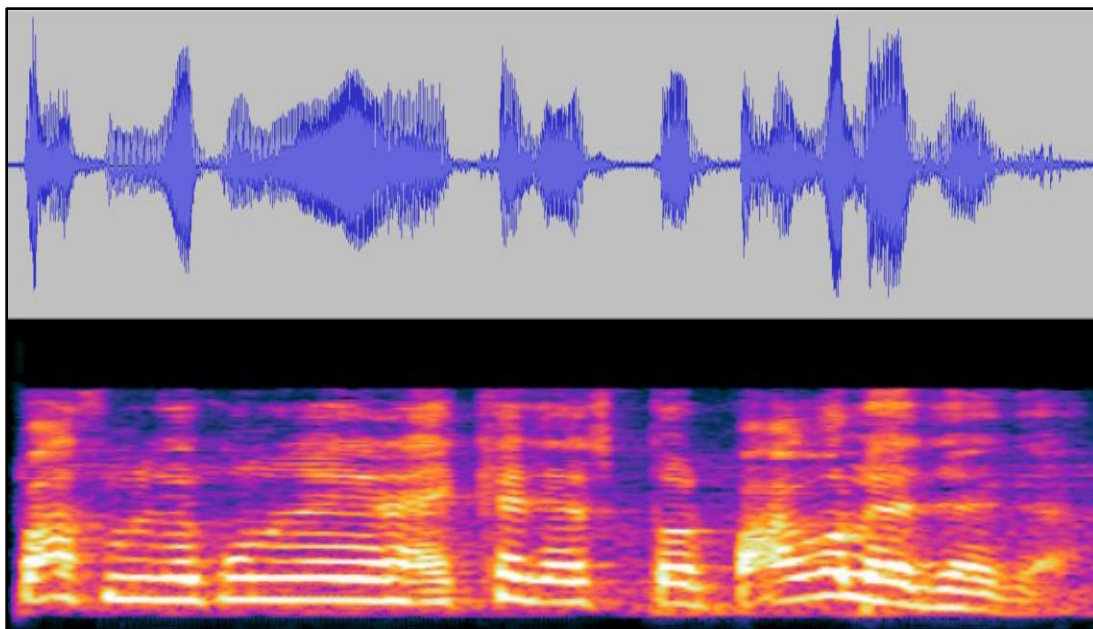
Image 5.2: Heavy Use – Gaming and Social Media Posts



When the extensive users talk about their experiences of missing the phone set, their tones appear heavy, saddened, and deeply disturbed. A tone analysis of the depressed voices of addicted users of mobile phones shows that when they talk about their painful experiences, their voices appear dull and sombre. The colour of their expression presented in the following spectrograms is blue to deep blue. Their voices show less excitement and enthusiasm; they sound pale and moribund. They say it would drive them “crazy” if they did not have the phone virtually all the time. Some of them compared the feeling of losing a life partner with the loss of the phone.

The following spectrograms show how mobile phone users feel when they talk about their strong affinity with the device. The intensity of emotion is visualised in blue colour and in spectrogram 5.1. The respondent is a heavy user of mobile phones in Brahmanbaria; he expressed the tentative despair he might be in if he had to lose the device. The rhetorical expression of comparing merely a technical device with someone’s closet company or life partner is indicative of the importance they ascribe to the phone.

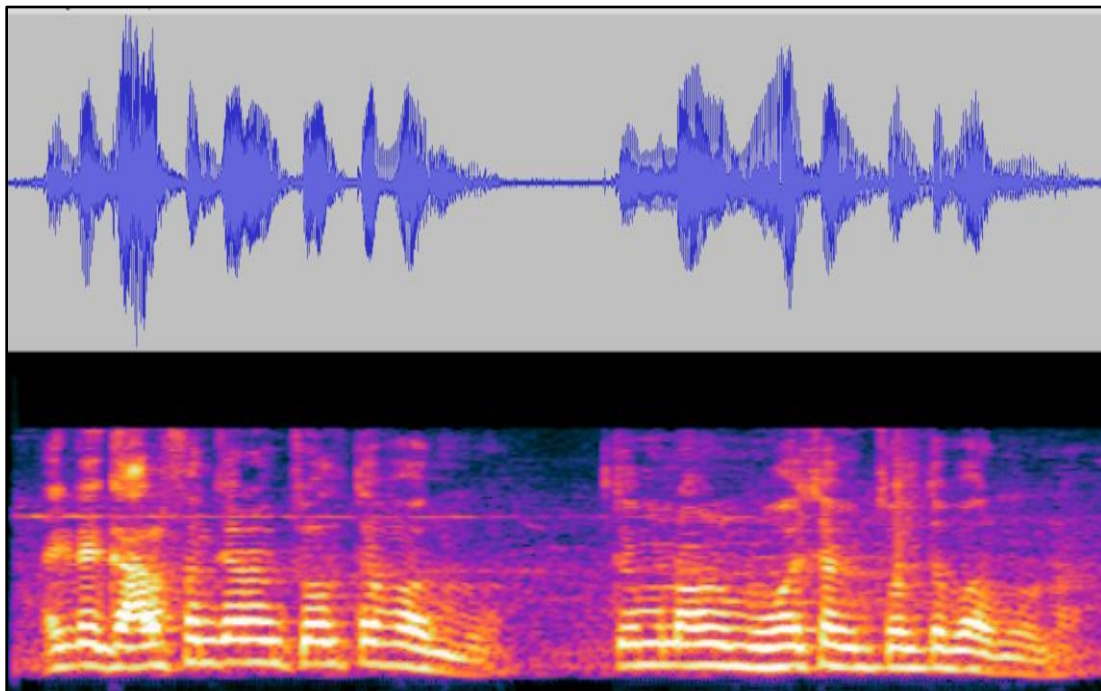
Spectrogram 5.1: Addiction Begets Fear: “Go Just Crazy if the Phone is [accidentally] Left Somewhere”



We analysed the tone of selected segments of recorded voices of the above-mentioned respondent by using tone analysis software named Audacity. We took help from a computer scientist to conduct the tone analysis. The dark blue represents the low voice and sombre mood of the speaker. Conversely, the brighter the colour in the spectrogram, the higher the amplitudes of the tone; the stronger the mood of the voice, the happier the state of expression.

When the user of a mobile phone uttered the words that he couldn't live without a mobile phone, the tone of the respondent was sombre. And the deep apprehension attached to the prospective situation is visualised in the deep blue lines of the diagram. Notably, spectrogram 5.2 looks more painful than the first one. The first one projects the possibility of not having access to the device for a short time, and the second one represents a long-term life status without using the digital device. If the first one is considered a shock, the second one would be tragic. The two different states regarding access to the same device generate two senses of dispossession.

Spectrogram 5.2: Extensive Addiction: “I would be fine without a girlfriend, but I can't live without a mobile”



Once they realise that they are addicted to using the phone, they try to overcome that habit. Only in exceptional cases users successfully overcome that addictive habit and cut down on the habit. It is rare but possible. On top of that, overcoming addiction is not a one-way process. It is reversible; one can retain that addictive habit after a temporary comeback.

5.2.3 Self Counseling-Waj

“When I heard the *Hujur*'s words, I started feeling something. At night, I went to sleep playing the *Waj*. [--]I felt really well after waking up. The night goes by well, really well after

listening to the *Waj*. I became a fan of Mr. Azhari. I convinced my friends [by explaining] what we got by doing TikTok: People’s castigation, cursing [--]. I listen; I very much enjoy listening. I crave to listen more; the more I listen, the more I like. My mind sort of sank.”

The above statement is made by a 22-year-old man, who is a barber and who attended school up to grade two in Chattogram; he narrated his journey back from obsession. A sermon by a famous Islamic scholar convinced them to take a radical break and stop wasting time on the phone like an addict. He added that gradually his friends followed suit. They stopped the old habit too and started praying regularly. They all gradually stopped TikTok. This is one of the rare cases where users successfully recover from the addictive habit.

Teens are obsessed with making (new) connections, not with digital devices (Boyd, 2014). I argue that addiction to technology is often used as a misnomer. They are not obsessed or addicted to the device; instead, the overwhelming focus on the device overshadows the predominant social situations in which the users of mobile phones are caught up or relentlessly encountered.

5.3 Communication

With the aid of the mobile device, the human connection—both within and beyond the family—is no longer “bounded.” There are viral connections that go beyond physical mobility. The virtually connected embodied humans nurture diverse forms of disposition and sensibilities, often with the strong intervention of the portable digital device; the sensibilities of the mobile users are wave-cloud mediated. The affective relationships that digital devices enact generate a screen-sponsored affect. The instantly aired news, alerts/notifications necessitate affective responses such as outbursts. Mobile phones help people mobilise for collective actions and diverse forms of civic engagement (Rezki, 2023).

5.3.1 Networking (Transnational)

A 45-year-old lady, who worked as a domestic helper in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), used a mobile phone while staying in Saudi. She said, “I still talk to them, some in Sri Lanka, some in Indonesia. We got to know them there and talked to them. Still, upon coming here [in Dhaka], maintain [a regular] contact with them.” Another former migrant worker in the KSA accidentally made friends with a person while using the phone. The family members who live in the host country, i.e., Bangladesh, use the phone to stay in touch with their core family members currently staying abroad. An 18-year-old unmarried homemaker in Sylhet pointed out: “One of my brothers stays in Oman. [He] talks to [our] father-mother on IMO. If the phone is switched off, both of the father & mother start worrying a lot. [...] he calls every

day upon finishing his duty.” Day-long phone calls, often video call, is a routine activity in those *physically detached but virtually glued families*. Their family stretches beyond the border; on top of that, their relationships made the conventionally required physical proximity or touch, at best, a luxury and at least unnecessary.

A 23-year-old musical instrument mechanic, who completed grade 2 in Rangpur, regularly uses the phone to provide quality customer service to run his business. He said, “When a customer came and said I needed this particular item, and it’s available in that store, in that case, I called to say that I need that item. Sometimes I call the shop owner to tell him that I need an item. Or I do not know the price of an item, and then I call the owner’s phone and know.” The customer and the sellers get instantly connected both to make business transactions and social connections. Not only do they make money by selling products, they also make durable social connections by saving the contacts of the actors of the potential agents of the prospective business cum social interactions.

5.3.2 Social Transactions

Mobile phones with an internet connection make some of the most important elements of social transactions available at users' fingertips. Hearing news or rumours and participating in (in)formal public discussions are often just a click away. The device habitually remains attached, close to the body of mobile users. Unlike the traditional mode of participation, mobile phone users use apps to stay in the loop and demonstrate their agentic behaviour. Mobile phones also invite disagreements and, at times, discontent. It also works as a medium to resolve some of the issues. A 35-year-old widow living in a low-income neighbourhood named Bhasantek uses her phone for therapeutic purposes; she clarified: “Bickering with him gives me pleasure” [...] “unburdens me” [“ঝগড়া করলে হালকা লাগে”].

TikTok is hugely important in their social life. TikTok keeps them engaged; many of them become obsessed with it, on many occasions for less important, yet dearly missed purposes. Messenger, Likee, and WhatsApp are also heavily used. An 18-year-old “canteen-boy” reportedly makes about five videos in a week and posts them on TikTok. He has about 5K followers on TikTok. Creating and posting TikTok videos often invites resentment from fellow villagers or neighbours.

My nephew makes TikTok videos; there were a lot of quarrels because of this. Last night, I tried to solve one such issue. One sort of stabbing! [...] especially due to some online [channels], the merits of the kids of our country have been wasted. A generation has spoiled. TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp should be banned. Free Fire, PUBG, spoiled [everything] [...]. Can't tell you the truth.

TikTok is extensively used by the study population; this app surpasses its peers in the world of social media among the specified groups. Facebook and Messenger are almost common for everyone. Family members, friends, and relatives stay connected on FB. IMO and WhatsApp keep them glued to their relatives, colleagues, and fans. Virtual meets did not completely replace in-person visits, but the convenience of the former almost made the latter almost a luxury. In-laws and less-known-people also stay closely connected in the virtual world. FB often replaces TV; people watch live events—“various types of accidents”—on FB.

Mobile banking made life easy for the less educated, socially disadvantaged users as they receive children’s stipends on the phone and notifications from banks on transactions. Mobile banking also creates additional hassles as well. Sometimes, they receive fake calls too; sometimes, the transactions go to the wrong accounts. When they accidentally receive money, many of them reportedly return the unexpected amount to the desired account.

5.4 Sociation

Known unknowns reign in the world where mobile phones connect people across time, space, nationality, and identity. In the presence of the digital little machine, the familiar world re-appears in unfamiliar ways. The conventional world of pleasure or entertainment takes a radically different form. The exoticisation of pleasure, including religiosity or spirituality, is notable. People often search for solace in seemingly strange, eccentric realms.

Users of mobile phones keep talking offline and online, with people usually unreachable without the aid of a technological device. The mode of conversation has changed; their frequent use of English words is noticeable. The English words that would seem unfamiliar and strange in the past have become common. Some of those non-native English words are used randomly and regularly by some of the un(der)educated mobile users. An avid user of mobile phones who attended only up to grade 6 frequently used English words such as recovery, draw, try, update, control, two-factor code, verification, Facebook and Instagram, connected, latest, database, voice changer, option, search, technical terms.

While using the mobile device, users practise a noticeable form of sociality. “Sociability is the art or play form of association, related to the content and purposes of association in the same way as art is related to reality” (Simmel, 1949:254). Their sociability is more about spontaneous, playful forms of conversation and negotiation. Their way of sociation (Becker, 1932) is full of excitement and fulfilment. It is also filled with tension, grief, frustration, and sometimes conflict. They choose nonconventional platforms such as Toffee to watch games. A 22-year-old illiterate man reportedly uses Netflix to watch movies. Another user uses Likee to watch live *Waj* (Islamic sermon). An 18-year-old girl, the daughter of a rickshaw puller in Netrokona, was reported to have made 2000 videos on Likee. Gaming, making fun, watching

people have fun in different forms, and telling different stories make the otherwise underprivileged lives of mobile users bearable, at least for the time being. They communicate among themselves via mobile devices; in doing so, they form invisible guilds, for example, TikTokers.

5.5 Redefining the Device to Reclaim the Reality

The digital machine known as the mobile phone finds its noble meanings in the ways users express how they feel about the device, how they decorate it to match their embodied self, and the way they become creative in appropriating the little device in everyday life. Mobile phones take a new meaning and significance in the lives of the disadvantaged youth in Bangladesh. One user candidly identifies the phone with “কলিজা” [liver]— a vital organ of the human body. Mobile phones make possible the vital connections human beings crave for the social setting they live in. What a mobile phone means in their life becomes evident when they lack access to the device. A 22-year-old man in Chattogram put it candidly:

“Without a mobile phone, I can’t stay. Feels like something is missing inside me.”

Another user, a 32-year-old self-employed unmarried male in Dhaka summed up his feelings in the following way:

“The world is dark! Without the phone, [I] feel like the world is missing.”

Users of mobile phones characterised the device as the beat of the heart, the great educator, and the saviour, without which they would have no access to the internet, among others. The underprivileged users can not typically afford to travel to their places of interest both within the country and beyond; they often fail to themselves dress well or arrange entertainment parties and enjoy trendy treats; in this backdrop, the little phone becomes their only refuge. With the phone, they actively participate in the digital world as gamers, content creators, singers, and so on. That machine becomes the only vehicle that transports them close to realising their long-cherished but unrealised dreams; without of the device, they have to endure the pain of not being at par with mates residing nearby or happen to meet online. For the underprivileged groups of mobile phone users, the key is having access to the device itself, whereas for the affluent, it is mainly the acquaintance (Mozumder, 2019). The undereducated users interviewed in this study often find it difficult to own a decent mobile phone or “touch phone”, as they like to call it. Mobile users experience “the sense of nakedness and withdrawal” (Chuma, 2014:407) when they inadvertently lack access to the phone. The users that we interviewed in this study feel like they become helpless or dispossessed, or *etim* [orphan]. Mobile phones are found to be an “all-weather companion to the youth” and “new talking drums of everyday Africa” (De Bruijn & Nyamnjoh, 2009). In Bangladesh, a decent

mobile phone set appears to be a permanent and trusted buddy, separation from which, regardless of the duration, makes the users restless and at times “senseless.”

5.5.1 Creative Expression

I am what the home screen of my phone is; I am what I do with my phone! Mobile becomes a way of expressing who a person is in terms of that person’s interests, obsessions, and desires. Mobile phone users use their phone's home screen as a suitable space to express what characterises their passion, their core self.

Image 5.3: Image: Home Screen of a Gamer’s Phone



Modern societies consume images, not beliefs; images allow users to taste the pleasure of experiencing (Barthes, 1980). Mobile phones work as a noble site for the users to experience

the pleasure of self-expression. A key social function of images is to sustain the taste of the happy moments of everyday life that in turn ushers a way of solidifying the relationship among the family members (Bourdieu, 2003). The home screen of mobile phones works as another medium of (re)storing happy moments and sharing them with the world of their choice. The digital devices allow users to preserve and produce the digitally mediated taste of joy. The joy binds them on-site; the happy moments (re)produced digitally promise to cultivate attachment offline, too. “The desire to fix a specific moment is triggered by the unexpected thrill of a situation, a mood or event, a feeling experienced spontaneously” (Rivière, 2005:178). The thrill could have been a fleeting moment, but the digital device aids the users by making them durable and infinitely sharable pieces of experience.

Image 5.4: Decorating the Phone is a Way of Decorating the Self



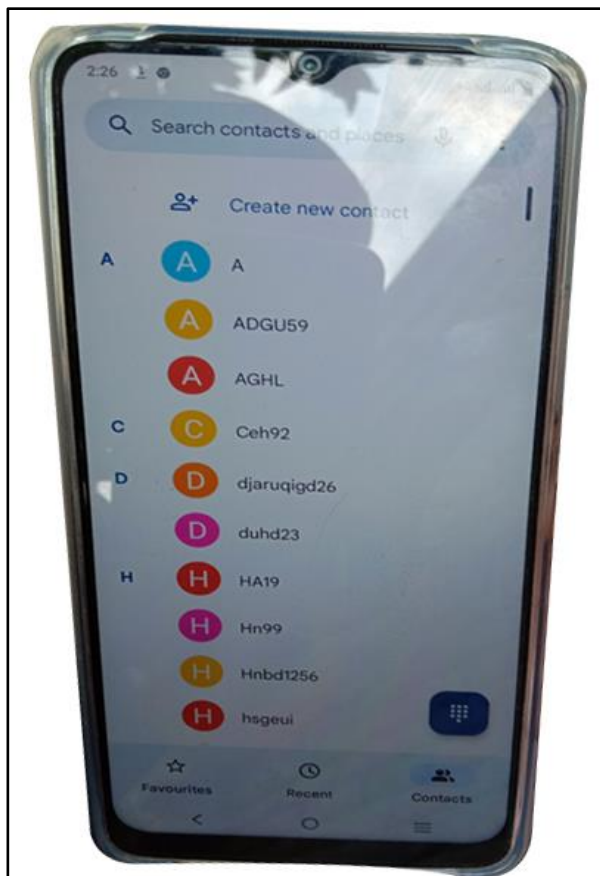
Users of mobile phones use “dangles, ringtones, cover, buttons, lanyards, face plates, services, carry cases, numbers” to decorate their phones (Bell, 2006:51). Decorating the phone is a way of expressing their gendered preferences. The two images of the back side of mobile phones of two female users show two notable features: pink colour and roses. While presenting

the findings of this research, we asked the audience if they could identify who could be users of the phones shown in the two images. Often we found the right answer, which is female users.

5.5.2 Vernacular Innovation: Vernography

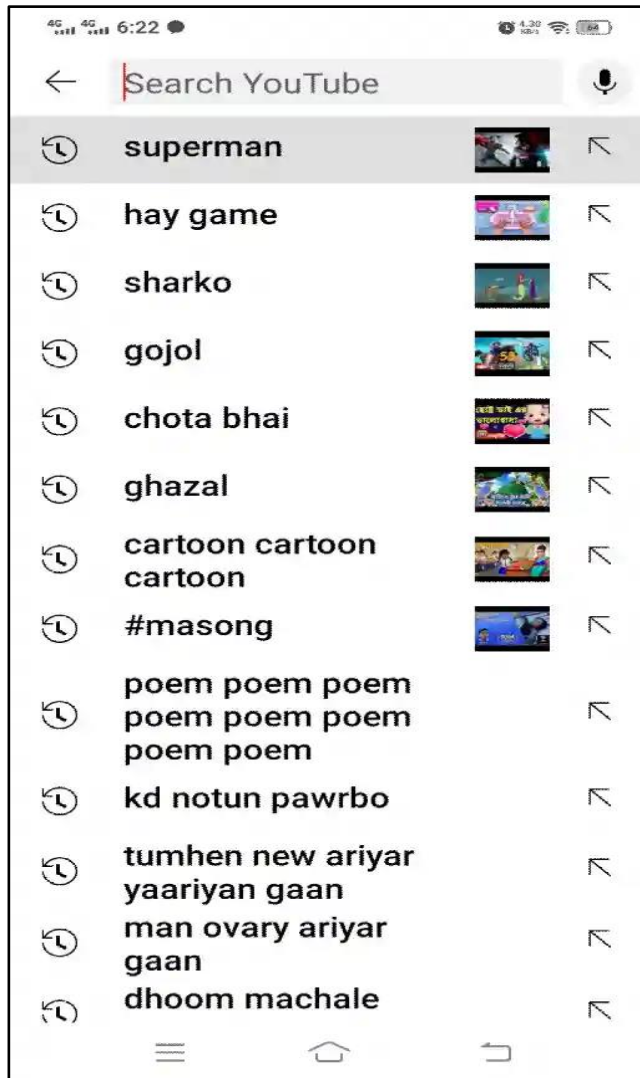
Constraints create the conditions for (re)generation. The (under)educated young users of mobile phones came up with their own language, specifically a system of signs. An example is the following image; I conceptualised the content of the image as an instance of *visual vernacular*. The users came up with an innovative idea, which is to name the contacts with codes that combine both numbers and letters. This is not cryptography, I insist. It may be called “*vernography*”, which represents the vernacular science of communication made possible by the accessible and affordable technology available at the hands of the underclass (Marks, 1991). This vernography might be understood only by those who have had the privilege of being literate and educated in that language.

Image 5.5: Visual Vernaculars—Users of which are not Just Laymen Consumers but Innovators



Another example of the creative use of language is the following image. It shows that mobile phone users use the alphabet of their first language to search online even though there is no recognised language for this. They use the English alphabet to write the Bangla words, and it does the trick. As lots of users have already used this technique to write and search online, there is a good database available in search engines.

Image 5.6: Image: Co-optation of a Recognised Language



The undereducated users of mobile phones use words or combinations of letters as photographs or images. “Photographs speak a kind of silent language. Likewise, words are often quiet pictures.” The author elaborated, “Images of all kinds rise into our mind whenever

we see a word.” The words make us actively participate in the visual play. “The plain, joyful, new accessibility of the camera to everyday people not only made general vernacular photography available, but it also made visual play accessible” (Lewis & Onabanjo, 2023). The availability of a technological device—the mobile phone—made the (under)educated people play an agentic role in the meaning-making game. The new rules of the game already in use in the lives of those users provide a good recipe for tech scientists to consider in designing user-friendly software for the undereducated users of mobile phones.

5.5.3 Collective Ownership: Creative Negotiations in the Times of Insufficient Resources

Mobile users often become creative in surviving with insufficient resources and cultural restrictions. An individual's lack of access to a mobile phone often becomes a key challenge for disadvantaged users in Bangladesh. One way of dealing with the restrictions is to share resources. They often are forced to share the phone set with family members. Female users, the users lacking sufficient resources to buy a phone set or who do not have secure and quality access to the internet, and teenagers along with children are the ones who often have to bear the brunt of having insufficient resources.

Image 5.7: Facebook Account Operated Jointly by Mother-son



The joint ownership refers back to the idea of “dividual” in the Indian subcontinent (Dumont, 1986), but the use of this device also helps many of the users become a good candidate to be an “individual” (Marriot, 1989). The above image shows how a mother and her son had to share an account online as a strategic response to two constraints: lack of access to the device and the gender-proscriptive norm. Some of the underprivileged women are not encouraged to open a social media account in their name, and they often do not have exclusive access to the phone set without the supervision of a male member. Having an account in her son’s name is often a strategy women use to avoid prospective virtual harassment. Mobile phones “contribute to the re-inscription of local particularity and cultural difference as dimensions of a larger political economy” (Bell, 2006:55). In the lives of those female users, the renewed importance of “absent presence” (Kleinman, 2004) appears significant. “Mobile phone itself becomes a true mobile home” and it “attenuates social inertia” as the mobile device helps individuals engage in (re)producing social discourses while staying in physical isolation (Fortunati, 2002:520).

5.6 Mobile is Life: Society is Technology Made Invisible

The lack of a mobile phone could potentially be tantamount to “triple death.” Users of digital devices enjoy performing multiple tasks and nurturing multiple identities at the same time, thus leading a double or triple life in the way of realising the promised benefits of technology. Those who fail to ensure access or quality access to a phone suffer from the triple pain:

- a. Knowing that without a mobile phone one is forced to miss the pleasure;
- b. Of not being able to stay online with an uninterrupted access to the internet;
- c. Lacking a decent device deprives individuals of enhanced functionalities in terms of time and space.

Without having regular access to a mobile phone, some people might have to remain unfed the whole day. A 20-year-old homemaker in Netrokona shared a terrifying story:

At times, there are altercations at home. Can’t say this way, so [I] send a message to him [my husband] via the elder son. Later, when the quarrel is over, he gets home. That’s the problem. If the husband or wife doesn’t have a phone, I can’t say that today there is no rice [to cook a meal] at home.

She added more reflections on similar experiences:

Sometimes, there is no rice at home [to cook]. At that time, can't even say that; I have to stay unfed the whole day. If I had the phone, I could tell that, and [he] would send rice. As I didn't have a phone, I had to wait until he came back home to tell him that there was no rice to cook.

The lack of a communication device, specifically mobile phones, forces people to lose the ability to make vital communication. Because of the lack of a device, they fail to exchange crucial, sometimes life-saving information on a timely basis. Mobile phones are unable to feed hungry people, but the device helps the hungry people shout out and get the message across. The hunger for food is vital; no less important is the ability to timely communicate information on the emergency, such as the unavailability of food.

With the aid of technology, users create new demands. “The attempt is to enlarge the surface of space and the duration of time using communicative technologies” (Fortunati, 2002: 517). Regardless of users’ physical location, they can communicate and make possible vital interactions overcoming the traditional barriers of space and time. “Space and time have thus become the new frontiers of increased social productivity” (Fortunati, 2002: 514). Yet those who fail to have access to a feature phone are left with little to no option but to endure the pain of not being able to afford the supposedly universally affordable device. Life without a phone might be unimaginable to many in today’s world, but the pain caused by the inability to have one for those unfortunate, unprivileged people in Bangladesh and elsewhere often remains unspoken and unheard. It is not because they have no words to say but because the society in which they live often assumes the story of near-universal access to a mobile phone is too important to pay particular attention to the small number of “have-nots.” The stories of development devour the agonies and anger of the disadvantaged.

“[T]echnology is congealed social relations” and “technology comprises new social arrangements” (cited in Woolgar, 2005:33). Latour (1990) famously observed that “technology is society made durable.” The findings of this study show that society is technology-made invisible. The ability to communicate at will is evident in the widespread use of mobile phones, but the ability to own a phone and to secure regular access to a functioning device with enough credit to make a call is neither secure nor universal. The glorious stories of mobile users around the world create too loud noise to make the agonies noticeable and sometimes recognisable.

The lack of ability to communicate contributes to the diminishing of the sense of self-worth. “Goffman (1968) stresses that one’s concept of self is dependent on interactions with

others so that, deprived of these interactions, and deprived also of one's name, appearance and possessions, one's sense of self is removed" (Woolgar, 2005:33). Removing the sense of self is tantamount to death. "The interactions are constituent of self"; "[--] the self which is being degraded is the last refuge, there is nothing beneath this singular presented self." (Woolgar, 2005:33). An individual self makes vital connections to realise the sense of a social self. Mobile phones constitute vital connections that make possible the transformation of an individual self into a social self. Lacking a mobile phone could thus be equivalent to missing the sense of self or the vitality of life. It is a state of being when the social existence of life ceases to exist.

The little machine allows users to go out and explore the world without having to step out of their homes. With the aid of the device, the public space is made accessible, however limited might that be. Due to the use of mobile phones, the anticipated "situation of stalemate in fundamental relations" (Fortunati, 2002) has not yet happened in the lives of the unfortunate underclass. Yet, they are desperate to relish the desire, the ability to taste the feeling of that inconvenience. The far-fetched imaginary world of representing the world (instead of presenting it) fails to penetrate into the world of those youth. It is because they frequently lack access to a mobile phone; they frequently suffer from the lack of decent access to the internet.

Mobile phones expanded people's geographies and helped them "reclaim public spaces" (Pain et al., 2005:815). The device facilitated the nascent yet trans-bound sociation, unlike "bounded solidarity" (Ling, 2008); the mobile users do not always act like "tele-cocoons" (Kobayashi & Boase, 2015). But I call them some sort of "domestic alien." Domestic alien mobile users stay at home in person, but their passion, obsession, and profession often make them belong to a whole different category of subjects, and they prefer to dive into the virtual world. The world they prefer to live in is not the world they happen to be in. The world they inhabit fails to allow them to move to that desired world either. *The constant battle between what they happen to inhabit and where they aspire to be makes them domestic aliens in their own familial world.* The all too familiar world they strive to (but cannot) escape without the use of technology.

The device that comes to life with the social actuation of human bodies turns out to be key in materialising the vitality of a social being. Mobile phones act like social machines (Wong & Ling, 2011). Digital devices facilitate making "mesh connections," which are still central; nowadays, for those underprivileged youth, it's vital. Mobile is life! Mobile phones engender invisible yet unavoidable connections. "[It] fills the empty moments of everyday life" (Oksman & Turtiaine, 2004:327).

5.7 Mobile Phone and Gender

Ample studies have examined digital divides in general and especially the gender divide, regarding access to and use of mobile phones (David & Philips, 2023; Singh, 2017). However, there is still a need for more research to understand, specifically, the effects of mobile phone use on gender relations, gender roles, and the negotiation of the gendered power hierarchy within the family, particularly in Bangladesh.

Contrary to the widely held belief that mobile technology empowers women and lifts them to a higher status, female users in Bangladeshi families, particularly from the lower educated and disadvantaged sections, strategise to bypass the seemingly invincible barriers of patriarchy and gain access to mobile technology within the bounds of their families' gender relations.

The ideas of “good girls” and practices of owning mobile phones appear to be ill-disposed! The insertion of mobile phones in the domestic sphere comes with a jolt, unnerving the pulse of the moral guardians. One concern is that the girls “elope”; they leave home with unknown boys without the consent of the family. Honesty, modesty, and docility tend to converge in an embodied form in the imaginative figure of “a good girl” (cf. Young, 1980). Women’s use of mobile phones is a good case in hand to examine how this process unfolds and, more importantly, what happens when the cherished norms fall apart and start to lose currency. Alternatively, we identified the seven new dictums of mobile modesty that come into play, e.g., no solo picture (better no picture) of a woman posted online; pre-approval of husband needed to open a social media account; and male partner knows wife’s password, wife does not. The shadows of the male partners typify women on social media.

Technology alone is insufficient to turn the ride. Instead of drastically changing the course, using mobile phones contributes more to reproducing, amplifying, and strengthening the dominant nature of control mechanisms and pre-existing inequalities. Technology in its use refines, in some cases digitalises, the operating mechanisms of male dominance, patriarchy, and the subjugation of women. In most cases, the subconscious subservience plays out vividly with the advent and normalisation of the most popular communication device—the mobile phone—in our contemporary world. Those who already have a good understanding of their male partners tend to use the phone to maintain a mutually beneficial use of the device. In the extraordinary cases when women actually persevere and demonstrate the vitality of using the phone, they eventually emerge stronger and more empowered. But it typically requires “a bumpy ride,” spells of productive unease, and creative negotiations mainly with the male partner. We further analyse the data to find that a successful voyage to reaching the desired *mobile matching* requires the following three successive steps: a. Spells of productive unease, b. fruitful negotiations, and c. perseverance and enduring trust.

5.8 When the Tide Turns (the same people act differently)

It is not always the case that male owners of mobile phones dictate the terms of using the phone. They sometimes play a subsidiary role when female users come to the fore. Playing a significant role in deciding how to use the phone does not also mean that female users successfully overcome the dominance of the male members of the family. There is often room for negotiations, manoeuvring to the benefit of female users. Almost in all cases that we encountered, the male members had to approve of or tacitly support the female members playing proactive roles in setting the terms of the use of the phone.

The male partner of an illiterate female in Netrokona does not have any interest in using the phone. He often does not know where he keeps things. The woman reportedly enjoys the full trust of her husband. This is an exceptional case: The male partner, who is a driver, does not use the mobile phone; instead, his wife uses it. Her husband is reportedly supportive of that (Mymensingh 149).

A woman enjoys the opportunity to watch feminist videos on the phone (Sylhet 221). Her male partner works as a migrant worker in Dubai. She chats with him every day on the phone; they prefer to make video calls. She loves watching video clips available on TikTok on the life of married couples. She clarifies that wives usually take care of their male partners while they get sick, but she watches videos showing that a husband does his part while their female partners get sick. She said:

When a husband surprises his wife, especially when she is sick, by offering a little bit of help in doing the household chores, the wife feels pretty pleased.

Another female user of mobile phones has become a kind of resource person in her family and her neighbourhood (Mymensingh 145). She loves to help others if they do not know how to unblock an unwanted contact, remove someone from black list, and so on. She helps illiterate users remember the contact numbers of their loved ones by saving a contact number with an image, such as the image of a doll.

A 25-year-old woman in Netrokona claimed to have no misunderstanding with her spouse regarding phone use (Mymensingh 146). They use a phone jointly at home. They went together to the market to buy a phone for her. Her mother-in-law is also reportedly helpful. Another 24-year-old homemaker woman in Satkhira enjoyed the freedom to make fun calls to her relatives by pretending to be an unknown person (Khulna 123). Her husband was not happy with her way of using the phone, and they sometimes had heated exchanges of words at home mainly because of her habit of extensively using the phone.

5.9 Technology Alone is not Enough to Turn the Tide

Instead of drastically changing the mode of relationships, the use of mobile phones contributes more to reproducing, amplifying, and strengthening the existing gender relationships, hierarchies, and norms, such as male dominance, patriarchy, and inferiorisation or subjugation of women. Instead of initiating novel sets of relationships, the use of mobile phones tends to integrate into existing norms of relationships (Wallis, 2011). In most cases, this subconscious subordination plays out vividly with the advent as well as the normalisation of the most popular communication device in our contemporary world.

Three key arguments of the paper are the following:

First, naturalisation of male dominance, willful, habituated submission of women, enactment of docile-obedient-shorminda (shy) (Netrokona 05, 07; Sylhet 222).

Second, those who already have a good understanding tend to use the phone to maintain that mutually beneficial use of the device. (Sylhet 220 – sand and stone business; Sylhet 221 Dubai resident – watch feminist video), Khulna 130.

A 26-year-old woman in Sunamganj claimed to use about 30 GB of mobile data each month on her phone. Her husband lives in Dubai; they regularly chat online. She spends about the whole day on the phone as her kids play games on the device, and she regularly watches video clips on YouTube. Her husband likes to video chat with them regularly. Her family members are happy with her use of the device; her father-in-law testified that she completes her household chores quickly and then plays with the phone. She reportedly made it a habit to talk over the phone in front of others so that no one could raise any questions or doubt anything else.

Another woman in Khulna got a mobile phone from her husband, as she usually stays alone at home. He also opened a social media account for her. They have developed a habit of clearing any confusion that might arise in their daily life. If she receives calls from unknown people, her husband used to get upset. But later, they have made it a routine activity to clear the air by clarifying that she does not know the callers. Then, her husband understands and does not think otherwise. Her husband also usually seeks her opinion before buying anything or making important decisions in their life. When we asked her whether she needed permission from her husband to use the phone, she replied, “Nope.” Nowadays, they both use a joint social media account. They have managed to maintain a friendly, cooperative relationship within the family, and that plays a significant role in maintaining the enabling environment for her to use mobile fairly independently.

Three of her habits helped her maintain the image of a good girl. She completes her work quickly, takes care of her kids well, and uses the supposedly private device almost publicly. Instead of taking the liberty of sharing the burden, she has done the hard work of developing efficiency in performing all of the traditionally obligatory duties of “a good girl.” She has appropriated technology to that end. On top of that, she has demonstrated the critical skills of earning the confidence of the elder family members, especially her mother-in-law, with whom wives often have difficulties to deal with (Doron, 2012).

Another woman in Sunamganj uses the phone to regularly communicate with her husband and her husband uses the phone to stay updated about the kids. He is reportedly happy to have a chance to talk to the kids over the phone. Unlike some of the findings of the previous studies, men also prefer “human connection” not just to experience to have access to the internet (Fallows, 2008). She uses her husband’s ID to use social media. They manage the potential inconveniences by finding technical solutions, such as setting a high-volume ringtone on the phone so that she does not miss his call. She reportedly did not find mobile phones creating additional hassles in their life.

The use of mobile phones in their family has been fairly conducive, mainly because of the history of practising a culture of sharing and clearing the air when needed. Technology did create unforeseen hassles, but the technology itself also helped them overcome those. One example is that her husband, in the early stages of their married life, might check her phone, but he stopped doing that at some point. She remarked: “Earlier, he thought I might not continue the conjugal life with him, but since having a baby, he stopped thinking along those lines.” The phone worked as a testing ground for the couple; the digital device itself allowed them to cement the trust and cultivate a durable relationship.

Third, in unusual cases, when women persevere, they eventually emerge stronger, and more empowered. But it typically requires a bumpy ride, spells of productive unease, and creative negotiations, mainly with the male partner. The keys to this mobile matching are the following three dynamics: spells of productive unease, fruitful negotiations, and perseverance and enduring trust.

5.9.1 Productive Unease

A 23-year-old woman in Netrokona uses her phone to run an online beauty parlour business in Netrokona (Netrokona 138). On the phone, she watched numerous videos related to “parlour works.” Her husband, however, finds it difficult to accept that she interacts with unknown people and posts her contact and address online so that her potential clients can see and ask for her service. She often had heated conversations with her husband mainly because

of “the unwanted” use of the phone. She spent Tk. 13,000 from her hard-earned savings to buy a pre-owned Samsung phone set. One day, her husband had a fight with her and broke the much-needed, dearly missed phone set. Her husband prevented her from opening an online account in her name; instead, she had virtually no option other than using the male partner’s account to run the online business. In her husband’s words, he deliberately forced his wife to use his account to communicate with clients so that “if there is any trouble, I can use my ID to system [manage] that. So that there is a control on the matter.” She was not allowed to register a SIM card in her name. She ran the business from home. In her words, “My only dream is [to run] the parlour. [I] have worked at home for 6 years, and I have started the parlour in just two months.” Her husband explained:

At last, I bought her a phone. ... Both of us use two separate phones. She uses her own ID, and I use mine. I didn't do it out of anger, meaning my wife wants to say that she generally needs a phone as she does parlour-related work.”

I do not tell her anything; [I] let her fulfil the wishes. I want her to fulfil the hobby.

As my wife insisted, there is no point in stopping her. She runs that; no point for me to complain. What's the point of suspecting her? If I suspect, it will cause more harm.

He now understands I am not going down the wrong path; now he devotes his everything to me! I usually trust my husband. He is [also] dog-mad about me [madly in love with me].

5.9.2 Fruitful Negotiation

Users sometimes return to feature phones and stop using smartphones to avoid unnecessary problems. The male partner of the 25-year-old lady who completed grade 5 in Chatak (Sylhet 216) elaborated:

“If I use a touch phone (smartphone) and tell my wife not to use a phone, then she will be very upset. So, both of us, together, stopped using a mobile phone [a smartphone]. Then she told me to buy a button phone [feature phone], as I stay outside almost all day. And we had a fight because of the mobile. I don’t wanna say anything else about it.”

“Both of us decided to stop using the phone. While having the fight, she said, ‘Okay, if my use of my mobile is the problem, then I will not use it anymore.’ Saying this, she broke her phone. At that time, I thought [we] should cool down quickly. Or else something bad might happen. Then I went for a walk far from home. When [I] returned home at night, she told me that she would no longer use a mobile phone. I also said I won’t use it, too.” Since then, they

have only used a feature phone, and reportedly, they do not have any issues like this anymore. “Peace comes before everything else,” the woman concluded (Sylhet 216).

The husband of a homemaker woman in Satkhira snatched the mobile phone many times (Khulna 130), but when her husband checked the number, at times talked to them to be sure that the caller was no stranger or an unknown male, then the suspicion withered away. The key here is the subservient step taken by the female user to let the husband check the number almost instantly and, when possible, let him talk to the caller. This proactive action helped the male partner regain confidence in his wife that she was not crossing the prescribed normative boundaries. The practice, however, reaffirms the authoritative power of the male member. Whether this act of domestic surveillance curtails the freedom of the female partner remains out of the question, mainly because the acceptance and normalisation of this domestic surveillance allows her the freedom to own a phone, go online, and enjoy the virtual world of her choice. She reportedly does not at all need to seek permission to use the phone. Instead, she has earned the reputation of a mobile expert. Her husband also recommends people take the phone set to his wife to fix any technical issues.

5.9.3 Enduring Trust

“My husband trusts me a lot; [he] doesn’t check anything,” insisted the 21-year-old woman living in Medni, Netrokona (Netrokona 150). Her male partner underscored, “[I] trust her a lot. ... She won’t go [anywhere]; she won’t go, leaving me [alone].” Her husband is reportedly more interested in playing with her new smartphone, which he gave his wife as a gift. The male partner opined, “In our culture, mobile is a necessity; both of us need the mobile, a housewife needs it, the husband also needs it.” Her husband sometimes tells her to finish the household chores and then play with the phone. She often uses the phone to watch videos online and learn to cook delicious dishes for the family.

Another married woman in Noapara, Netrokona – who completed grade six – does not need permission from anyone to use the phone (Netrokona 148). She receives a monthly bKash payment for her child with special needs via the mobile phone. She and her husband watch *Waj* (popular Islamic lectures) and enjoy *Ghazal* (popular Islamic songs). The male partner frankly said, “Both of us use the phone in our free mind [without prejudices].” The man further explained: “People are sceptical of a few things from the beginning. And there are other things people are not sceptical of if they are free-minded, [they are] not sceptical of each other, even if they live far away from [the partner]. The phone also does not make any difference.”

What we call *mobile matching*—when couples discover ways of conveniently managing the inconveniences of using mobile phones—speaks a lot to the dynamics involved in conjugal

matching. Technology thus percolates intimately with the broader dynamics of lived life. Life and technology at that point appear to be co-constituents of each other. The technology of the self and the “*techne*” (or the art) of living seem intertwined and destined to enact spells of lively *co-modulations*. Finally, the authors present concrete dynamics that need further investigation.

Mobile phones, one of the numerous types of technological devices, appear to be vital in life, sometimes equivalent to “life.” Specifically, the disadvantaged youth – who see the world unfolding in dynamic ways before their eyes with the use of technology – feel the pain of not having access to a phone in one of the harshest possible ways. Undereducated youth with limited or occasional access to the internet on mobile phones invent ways of overcoming existing barriers, specifically linguistic and technical barriers. They help themselves by creating an informal support system in the virtual world. The ties of friends, families, and peers are nurtured and re-negotiated regularly with the help of the portable digital device. Mobile phones express who their users are; they decorate the phone and integrate it into the valleys of the body. Not having access to a functioning phone almost ceases them of their ability to live. The users of mobile phones invent a new world with new rules and opportunities in life. They see the new world wide open but often fail to take advantage of it due to the existing inequalities. Social relations of mobile users frequently take place in an intangible space. The device is their world; they also let the world recognise that they exist and are capable of making waves in their own ways, such as by creating and posting video clips on TikTok, Likee or other social media platforms. The all too familiar world finds the ever-evolving humans glued to their phones. At times, it is strange, yet they keep the world intrigued with new avenues of re-inventing life and re-fashioning the human machines.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Instead of focusing *only* on how the intrusion of technology (re)defines the lives of the un(der)educated youth in Bangladesh, this report also illustrates how the technology itself—in this case, the mobile phone – is (re)defined by its use, primarily, in the rural, remote areas of Bangladesh. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the users of this new technology, in their mundane acts, reconfigure the modes of sociability and what it entails in terms of rethinking the policy concerns by taking into consideration the generally neglected but important potentials of the lay public. Not only do the lay users of mobile phones make innovative use of the technology, but they also redefine the very nature of technology. While for the disadvantaged youth, securing access to a phone set is crucial, previous studies showed that for affluent teens, it is not the device, per se, but the ecosystem that they embody is vital in making good use of a mobile digital device (Mozumder, 2019). The extensive use of mobile devices, this study shows, significantly reorients cultural norms and resets social codes of relating with each other. There has been a widening gap between the tech-savvy virtual virtuoso, particularly young users of digital devices, and the traditional, digitally non-literate and older generation. While the former group considers themselves to be digital natives, the latter finds the other group as “domestic aliens.” The lack of communication, or the understanding gap, between the digital natives and digital aliens, generates the much-discussed apprehension about the use of technology among teens, young adults, and children.

CHAPTER 7

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to limited resources, this study covered only the main administrative divisions of the country. This report could not claim to be representative of all of the diverse experiences of mobile phone users in the country. More studies would be needed to come up with generalisable findings. This research could not document all of the multitudes of experiences of the many different groups of mobile users, e.g., those who attended religious schooling such as madrasah and the experiences of mobile users in indigenous communities, namely those living in the hilly areas of Chattogram and Sylhet, who typically suffer from the lack of access to a quality mobile connection or the internet.

CHAPTER 8

AREAS OF PROSPECTIVE RESEARCH

By way of conclusion, this report identifies three main areas of prospective research:

1. **Perceptions regarding non-adults' independent use of mobile devices:** How do parents and the greater society view children's or young adults' independent use of digital devices? What do they think of their innovative digital endeavours? Specific attention needs to be paid to addressing the reported gap between the young users' understanding of the reasonable use of mobile devices and those of the parents or the elders (Mozumder, 2019). It is imperative to go beyond the perspective of policing the young users; children or no one for that matter else should be treated guilty until proven.
2. **Implications for engineers in designing user-friendly, need-based devices:** What do the quotidian techniques of the un(der)educated users of mobile phones mean to the programmers of digital devices? How do the engineers of mobile devices respond, specifically in terms of developing appropriate software, platforms, and interfaces to cater to the needs of disadvantaged users? What innovative steps do they take to invent the devices that cater to the needs of disadvantaged users, specifically their idiosyncratic use of existing language?
3. **Evolving bounds of privacy:** How do the young users of mobile phones set the parameters of privacy? What do they actually mean by privacy? Do they encounter/practice any (in)voluntary breach of privacy? What are the consequences of such incidences? What is the nature of the emerging practices of the users, especially of the underclass, of pre-empting the potential breaches of privacy, if they care? Is there a tendency to ignore or to remain indifferent (at times normalise this practice) to the concerns of confidentiality?

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