

## Emerging Issues In Mobile Phone Service Providers' Promotional Messages In Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Scholars have noted that the emergence of the mobile hype around wireless access protocol (WAP) followed by the launch of third-generation (3G) network/Universal Mobile Telecommunications System (UTMS) has created debate over the role of the mobile medium in promoting goods and service especially as a topic of consideration magnitude that echoes across different academic disciplines. Based on this observation, this paper using a multi-method approach of observation, trend analyses and qualitative textual analyses, argues along two potential issues; language barrier and illiteracy among the semi-urban and rural mobile phone users as main obstacles towards effective utilization of short message service (SMS) for the promotion of goods and services in a developing nation, Nigeria as a case. The paper presents implications of the trends and policy recommendations for the concerned stakeholders in the Telecommunications sector of the country and advertisers, who consider it imperative to explore SMS feature of mobile communication for promotional and advertising purposes. Specifically, the writer establishes the imperatives of having adequate analysis of demographic variables of mobile phone users before sending SMS to them, and seeking their consent probably through voice call.

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### Introduction

Mobile phone or handset as a dominant means of communicating in the telecommunication sector started in the earlier 20th century in developed continents before moving to the developing ones in 21st century. Africa nations, most importantly Nigeria experienced her first mobile phone communication in the mid of 2001 when the then President Olusegun Obasanjo approved various independent telecommunications industries as mobile phone service providers. Since then, people of different age categories, status and class have been considering the possession of one or two handsets as necessity in terms of social relationship building and maintenance, and exploring economic benefits of the medium. Vodafone (2005) observes that the shorter payback period on investment compared to fixed line, complementary with lower levels of skills than needed for computers or the Internet, potentially lower social/income entry barriers than the internet, due to lower up-front expenditure, business model innovations: pre-pay which helps overcome credit barriers, greater ability to overcome geographic hurdles are parts of the potentials of owning an handsets or considering factors by the governments of various countries in investing in the telecommunication sector. However, mobile phone coverage in Nigeria is currently at 64 per cent of the population, while the tele-density is 81.9 per cent. The tele-density means the number of telephone connections for every hundred individuals within an

area. The teledensity increased by 2,500 per cent between 2003 and 2013, while the subscriber base increased by over 3,000 within the same period (The Guardian, 2013). In fact, mobile devices have become so essential that 2013 is set to be the year where the number of mobile Internet devices will even outnumber humans (CISCO, 2013) cited in Upstream (2013:5). The increase in the coverage and teledensity could be traced to various explanatory factors. These include the economic situation within the sector that allows individuals to own handset at relative cost, social and cultural factors such as the need to build and maintain relationships as a result of geographical distance, and the distribution of mobile phones to individuals, especially women at semi-urban and rural areas as a way of empowering them. Put it succinctly, Qiang (2009) says the growth has been driven primarily by wireless technologies and the liberalization of telecommunications markets, which allowed for faster and cheaper rollout of mobile networks. Examining the trends to which people are embracing mobile phone for personal and 'industrial' purposes, Upstream (2013:5) writes that:

Of the world's six billion mobile phones, more than three quarters are located in the developing world. Despite the high level of phone usage in developing markets, growth is set to rocket – particularly in the smartphone markets. Analyst firm Ovum expects that there will be 1.6 billion new mobile connections across the world by 2017 – with Africa identified as the fastest growing region.

Additionally, according to the GSMA, sub-Saharan Africa is expected to add 175 million new mobile users just in the coming three years. These predictions make the emerging markets all the more appealing for mobile players of all shapes and sizes, including operators, handset manufacturers and mobile content and service providers.

Following these trends, one can argue that private business owners, most importantly large scale businesses would always consider the adoption of the device and its specific features for the dissemination of relevant messages of their brands to the targeted customers. In its recent study on emerging market mobile phone attitude, Upstream (2013) found that over a third (3 per cent) of Nigerian consumers are prepared to spend over \$200 on their mobile, while just 3 per cent of Nigerian consumers are prepared to spend over \$450. These findings clearly establish varied reasons behind the use of short messages service (SMS) aspect of the device for promotional purposes. Upstream also found that 80% of mobile phone users in Nigeria would like to consume business related contents, 78% for social, 74% for education and 56% for health. The service providers and advertisers in all the sectors of the Nigeria's economy have seen the trends as opportunity for attracting customers of different categories to their existing and emerging brands for the improved turnover. As the service providers and advertisers took the advantage of the emerging market of mobile phone usage among the developing nations, most especially. There are issues they left unexamined before exploring SMS as means of disseminating promotional messages; language barrier and high level of illiteracy among semi-urban and rural based users, particularly the elderly ones who lack basic techniques of operating mobile phone but also considered as recipients of various promotional text messages need to be examined. The examination of these issues constitutes the focus of this paper.

### **Impact Of Mobile Phone In Nigeria**

Apart from the fact that mobile phone enables individual to initiate communication or conversation within the context of building and maintaining social relationship or capital, the economic impacts could not be overlooked among its users and the nations in general. Its economic impacts however differ among the countries. The difference was as a result of various factors, which range from absence of adequate Information and Communication Technologies infrastructure to the lack of enabling law. In country, where there are good ICTs facilities in the remote and urban areas, tendency is there that people would be able to make use of varied features associated with mobile phone for their economic

advantages than a nation where the citizenry found it difficult to access basic ICTs facilities. On the other hand, when there is absence of law that would assist people to source loan from financial institutions towards robust investment in telecommunications, especially among the small scale businesses, such country and her citizenry would not have huge economic advantage from mobile phone usage like their counterparts, where there is enabling environment for small scale business owners to thrive in the sector.

Its impact has been far-reaching, directly through large capital investments and the emergence of large conglomerates, more widely through a positive influence on business practices, overall perception of African business investments and as a transformative technology platform for other industries (Zibi, 2009). African mobile network capital expenditure reached around USD 12.5 billion in 2008, and investment in communications has reached around 5-6% of total investment spending on the continent. In addition, the mobile sector has had a notable contribution to employment, directly, and indirectly through the establishment of extensive networks of dealers, sub-dealers and sub-contractors (Zibi, 2009:5). Upstream (2013) describes various impacts of the mobile phone being experienced by the Africans as powerful, especially in improving massive access to health, business, financial and other social services.

In Nigeria, the emergence of mobile phone has helped in advancing various causes in the areas of health, business, financial and other social services to the generality of the citizenry. The device has assisted medical practitioners and concerned authorities in the nation's health sector to spread health-related issues messages through SMS to the citizenry, expanding business conversations, allowing citizenry to have banking transactions without necessarily being at the banking hall (mobile money services) and at the same time helpful in curbing varied social vices such as armed robbery. This could be adduced from the employment of the device by the security agents while trailing crime perpetrators (especially armed robbers). Suffice to note here that the focus of the present paper remains the assessment of usability of the SMS features of mobile phone for promotional purposes by the service providers and firms of different categories without considering customers' reactivity as soon as they received messages requiring their swift responses.

### **Mobile Phone As A New Medium Of Promoting Goods And Services**

With the introduction and use of mobile phones, to a certain extent, communication has been

abstracted from the constraints of physical space – people can be reached anytime, anyplace (Truch and Hulme, 2004). Thus, people cannot do without communicating with families, friends and relatives wherever they might be. It has been observed earlier that in Nigeria, Global System of Mobile Telecommunications evolved in 2001 as a result of President Olusegun Obasanjo commitment of investing in telecommunications and allowing private service providers to flourish in all ramifications.

Having analysed Nigeria's telecom market and see the potential customers who are ready to expend their money on varied services that could be derived from the features associated with mobile phone of different categories or models, the earlier network providers – Econet, Vmobile, MTN, later on Glo and Etisalat started exploring 'early adopters of the device' for different profit-oriented purposes. Most importantly, the promotion of their (network providers) services and other firms that deem it fit to contact their targeted customers through short message services (SMS). Citing Prensky (2004), Shongwe (2010) explains that a short messaging service is a text message that can be sent to a recipient. SMSs are popular because they provide a simple and cheap way of communication. MMS allows text, colourful images, video and voice clips and animations to be sent with a text message. While referring to (Clarke and Strong, 2000; Eldridge and Grinter; 2001; Döring, 2002), Rettie (2013) adds that SMS messages are quick, cheap, convenient and discrete, less formal and more private than email, and used socially for networking, co-ordination, and managing relationships. Expanding the discourse, Upstream (2013:17) writes that:

SMS marketing is identified as the most welcomed format across emerging markets, with 51 per cent wanting to receive promotional messages in this way. An additional 26 per cent would like to receive SMS promotions as long as the message is relevant to their location, while 19 per cent would like to receive SMS marketing messages when they receive 'top-up' credit confirmations. 47% of Nigerian consumers are most likely to trust promotions sent from a mobile operator 79% of Nigerian consumers are happy for brands to send promotional messages to their phone once a week.

Commenting on the acceptability of SMS as means of promoting goods and services and its success among other services render by network providers in European countries, Karjaluoto, Leppaniemi, Sall and Sinisalo (2009) observe that the burst of the telecommunications bubble in 2000 eventually led telecommunications companies and information technology firms to change their way of thinking, from a technology-driven viewpoint to a

more user-oriented perspective. According to these scholars, only ring tone downloading, logo services, and short message services (SMS) can be considered as successful mobile services. The reasons underlying the success of these services fundamentally lie with the strong market demand and easy-to-use technology. Adding further, the scholars note that by using mobile medium companies can attract new customers by organizing SMS (short message services)-based competitions and lotteries. The mobile medium can also be used as a relationship building tool as companies can send information and discount coupons to existing customers' mobile devices or collect marketing research data. Contributing to the discourse, 4INFO (2008) observes that the remarkable promise of this form of advertising is its ability to reach a highly receptive and responsive audience through the use of targeted, unobtrusive, and actionable advertisements.

#### **Language Barrier And Illiteracy Among Rural And Semi-Urban Users: The Real Issues**

Appropriate language usage remains one of the factors, which gives room for effective communication on the part of the sender and receiver, when the right channel has been chosen. Harold Lasswell as specifically spelt out who says what and through what channel or medium with appropriate language adoption to whom and to what effects. Situating his observation within the context of mobile phone promotional communication, in which the senders are the network providers and other advertisers, who considered mobile phone as a suitable channel through which their targeted audience or customers could be reached, one can observe that these promoters (advertisers) did not always capture the overall goals of the promotional messages sent to most mobile phone users, especially those who live at the semi-urban and core rural areas in Nigeria. Language barrier and illiteracy among these people remain underlying factors for the goals-failure. Invariably, the sent promotional messages did not achieve desired results of winning the targeted customers' hearts towards the goods and services being promoted. Many people in these aspects of Nigerian society embrace mobile phone as means of communication based on their intent to have sense of belonging and identifying with others. Thus, social identity creation constitutes part of their social capital and maintenance, which is typical of people in the urban areas.

While commenting on specific features of mobile phone and their application by the people of various categories, Dodson (2012) notes that the widespread use of phones does not guarantee that illiterate and low-literate users are able to access

many features of their phones. While SMS-based applications assume a basic level of literacy, these skills are often absent in communities where orality prevails, multiple dialects are spoken concurrently, and literacy levels are low. As a result of diversities inherent in consumers' opinion, beliefs, needs, attitudes, motives, habits, customs and the like, there is the need to identify the consumers first and as well proffer solutions according to their individual differences (Awolowo and Akinteye, 2004:152). With these scholars' observations, suffice to note that advertisers and network providers need to consider the language deficiency of most users at the semi-urban and rural areas if their stated strategic goals of promoting certain products and services are to be achieved. The combination of illiteracy and indigenous languages has clearly established dramatic effects on the use of SMS messaging (Vodafone, 2005).

### **Analysis Of Some Promotional Messages Of The Service Providers: Targeting The Right Audience?**

#### **Text 1**

*Personal message for 08062544816 follows...Dear customer! Please send OK to 7070! Your 080626544816 has been rewarded with access to MTN's N2, 000,000 draw! Subscribe for N100/day.*

#### **Text 2**

*Call USA, France, China, India, Canada, Australia landline UK landline, Hong Kong, Italy landline & Singapore for as low as N7.59/min. simply text IDB to 131 to get started.*

#### **Text 3**

*Y'ello! Keep your callers dancing to the hot new single by Banky W "Jasi" on MTN callertunez! Text 20 to 4100 to get it now sms costs N50/tune (MTN N)*

#### **Text 4**

*Dear customer, we offer a free 7-day trial of the "Health & Nutrition" service. To receive it, text 8 to 33555, sms is free! Offer ends 11:59pm 19th Nov'13(MTN N)*

#### **Text 5**

*Recharge N600 TODAY, dial \*344\*300# three times and get N1800 credit to call any network, browse your favourite sites and send sms valid for 7days (Etisalat)*

#### **Text 6**

*Do you have a brilliant business idea? Then enter the EasyBusiness Millionaires Hunt & Stand a*

*chance to win N2m, free training & smartphones. Text YES (Etisalat)*

#### **Text 7**

*Welcome to Islamic service ONE SIM PACKAGE. Enjoy 5 free days of Douaa service kindly confirm by sending 1 to 786 (Airtel)*

#### **Text 8**

*Almonds are good for your eyes as they help to slowdown the progress of age related eye disease and also helps (sic) prevent Cataracts (Glo)*

#### **Text 9**

*Dear Subscriber, do you know Glo airtime is available in the UK? Glo international Top Up is available through over 20,000 paypoint outlets in the UK. Ask your love ones in the UK to send you Glo airtime today. Glo unlimited.*

The above text messages are collected from the subscribers of the studied major network services providers living in the rural and semi-urban areas in Abuja, FCT, Nigeria. The selected messages specifically focus on various services for the customers of the providers. Text 1 is sent to a subscriber by the MTN informing him to partake in a national gambling or lottery. From the text, it is clearly established that the network providers systematically introduced the user's number as a way of retaining his attention before sending the subsequent message, which eventually revealed the 'benefits' that would accrue from participating in the game. Winning ₦2 million! In an interview with the user, he noted that his network provider did not know that he is not the type that involves in gambling. For them to send such message to me they have actually missed one of their targets of the lottery, he emphasized. The subscribers who received text message 2, 3, and 5 were of the view that their networks had been found using various means of luring them in performing some operations on their mobile phones as bonus services, but the providers have failed to sustain in most cases their so-called bonus services. One of them noted that, it has been the tradition of the service providers to continue deducting someone's credit at the expiration of the service as stated while sending the bonus services' message in the first instance to the subscribers.

Message 9 is also based on the conviction that the provider is offering credit transfer service to its local customers. The receiver of the message opined that the provider should have sent the message to the appropriate customer(s), since she did not have relatives in the countries mentioned as beneficiaries. Text messages 6, 7 and 8 were sent to the subscribers based on the providers' social responsibility policy to

the society but through gambling. These messages clearly showed that the providers are promoting causes ranging from the spirit of entrepreneurship among the citizenry to health enlightenment, but through gambling which is not good to some customers. One of the receivers of the messages pointed out that, contents of the messages are good, but as soon as the free service ended subsequent charges would be deducted without notifying the subscribers.

The above is an annotated of what the subscribers of selected messages said about the SMS they usually received from their services providers. This is briefly reviewed apropos the rationale of the paper, which is, investigating the perception of the subscribers of major network providers in Nigeria on indiscriminate (unsolicited) promotional text messages received on daily basis. In the subsequent section, the specific cases from the semi-urban and rural areas where the subscribers of analysed messages reside are presented. Specifically, the section pinpoints language and illiteracy as main factors that impede understanding of the messages, most importantly for those who live in the core rural areas.

#### **Semi-Urban Case**

The writer observations of the trend of reading text messages of various kinds among the semi-urban users (mobile phone owners who live in the areas that are not develop to urban centres) showed that reading and understanding of the messages did not totally constituted bottleneck in all ramifications but the always mouthed snag of the messages remain unnecessary disturbances, which associated with the messages. One of the customers of the major network providers described the message as promotional message dip. One mobile phone user observed at Lugbe, a suburb of the Abuja, which possesses semi-urban features, was seen soliloquizing having received more than ten promotional messages within five minutes from his two lines (MTN and Glo) for the day. The user has reading competence but lacking basic knowledge of understanding the messages in-depth. According to him, it was practically impossible to believe that messages promoting romantic relationship are meant for people of his age and category. With this, it shows that network providers did not adequately considered silent demographic factors associated with the users living at semi-urban centres especially those that closed to the kind of the city examined.

#### **Rural Case**

The disparity between the receivers of promotional messages from the studied service

providers in the semi-urban and rural centres lies in the actual reading and understanding of explicit and implicit meaning of the messages. One of the users observed at Dobi, a rural community in FCT was seen informing her grandchild to read messages sent to her mobile phone. The child who is a secondary school student read the message to the aged-woman. Since the message was not the one she expected from her child living in Lagos, the woman found the message disgusting because she has been expecting a message regarding credit card number her child promised on that day. Another woman observed in the same community was seen cursing her network providers for incessant messages she received often on her line, which she did not know how to access and read. These scenarios point out the fact that the service providers have missed their targets at the semi-urban and rural areas due to wrong language usage and the same time not considering the prevalent illiteracy in the areas.

#### **Policy Recommendations**

In views of the trends discussed above, the major network providers in Nigeria need to renew their promotional message strategies in order to capture the specific demographic variables of the people living at the rural and semi-urban centres. This has become necessary considering the way Nigerians at these locations are embracing mobile communication. The observations with the scholars' positions have shown that dwellers of the areas cannot do without using mobile phone, because by all means they want to have sense of belonging and maintaining social identity in all aspects of their life. Thus, the network providers need to do the following:

1. Applied research with qualitative and quantitative designs needs to be conducted at core semi-urban and rural areas in Nigeria. This can be done through commissioning or by the research and development department in conjunction with marketing department. This will give room for the understanding of behavioural patterns of the users at these areas.

2. Since most users at these centres cannot read and understand messages due to their orality inclination. There is need for the creation of 'phone-message' platform. Instead of sending messages using the language they don't understand, service providers can record messages as voice messages by placing a call to the users in his or her language based on the existing demographic data earlier collected during line registration.

3. The promotional messages that will be sent to a mobile phone user per day should be determined in terms of frequency, time and analysed demographic details. This can be achieved if there is

limitation to the number of advertisers that would be allowed for the service and consideration of users' privacy.

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