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# SMS: A New Way of Communication and Promotion

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### Abstract

Short Message Service (SMS) seems to be a more attractive way for communication between young people. Some companies think that SMS could also be important way for advertising their products and services. The purpose of this study is to investigate the attitudes of undergraduate university students regarding the use of SMS for advertising and marketing purposes in Greece. Data was collected through open and semi-structured interviews of 40 university students. The results showed to the researcher that students use SMS for their everyday communication but they are sceptical about the use of SMS as an advertising tool even though they believe that is a promising way of advertising.

## 1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of mobile telephony has created new challenges for communication and marketing. Mobile channels today give companies the opportunity to personalize messages in order to attract more consumers. The use of SMS (Short Messaging Service), especially by young people, provides marketers with new opportunities. The aim of the present research is the investigation of the reasons why young people use SMS along with the frequency of this use. Today's youth is often referred to as the "SMS generation." They are the first generation to have grown up with mobile communication, and they already own their personal mobile phone device. It is obvious from the title: "SMS Generation" that they use mobile phones extensively. In addition to phone calls, they primarily take advantage of text messaging (Klimsa, et al, 2006:1). This paper also tries to record the opinion of younger people on the effectiveness of advertising through SMS. Finally this study examines the attitude of young users towards SMS advertising.

## 2. Mobile Phones and SMS

The mobile phone "is the means by which electronically mediated conversation is being made accessible to more people than ever before. Over half of the world's telephone subscribers now have mobile voice connections" (Spurgeon, 2005:52). The mobile phone is recognized by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) as one of the fastest growing communication technologies ever, outstripping even the internet in many places and responsible for remarkable increases in teledensity in many regions of the world (ITU 2002). Mobile phones "have been gaining in popularity and encroaching into the realms of PDAs and laptop computers" (Michael and Salter, 2012:4).

There is an increase in the use of mobile phones in developed countries. According to Brown (2006) some people view the mobile phone as an indispensable lifeline to friends, family and colleagues; other regard it as a mixed blessing or a necessary evil. Wherever people lie on this spectrum, they all share the belief that their mobile phone belongs to them, not to the service carrier and certainly not to advertisers (Brown, 2006). A mobile phone

usually has a single user and this attribute makes mobile phones suitable for high-precision targeting if they are used as a communication channel in marketing campaigns (Bosilj et al, 2009: 635).

The Short Message Service allows mobile phone users to send short text messages between mobile phones. SMS or text messages were first introduced in 1992 (Rettie et al 2005). They are usually sent by mobile phones, but can also be computer-generated. Recipients can generally store a limited number of messages; unlike e-mail, messages usually do not have a subject line that can be read without opening the message (Dickinger, and Haghirian, 2004). SMS messages are less intrusive than phone calls as recipients can read the message at their leisure and choose whether to respond or not.

Short Messaging Service (SMS) "is a digital cellular network feature. It allows users to send short text and numeric messages to and from digital cell phones using cell phones and e-mail addresses based on public SMS messaging gateways over the Internet" (Yanos et al 2004:12). SMS can be silent and discreet. This becomes important when a silent environment is required. Today, SMS applications include stock quotes, sports scores, and news that can be delivered to mobile phones at scheduled intervals.

The greatest advantages from the use of SMS by mobile telephone consumers are its speed, interactivity and low cost. As Rettie (2001) mentions, SMS include its intrusiveness, ubiquity, computer generation, and ease of personalization. However, in content terms, SMS is currently extremely limited. On most phones, messages are text-only and cannot be more than 160 characters and usually recipients can only store a few messages, and cannot file them for reference.

In 2004 there were approximately 16 billion SMS messages sent globally each month. The majority of that were sent in Western Europe and Asia. In North America, most major cellular phone providers offer either one-way or two-way SMS services to their subscribers (Yanos, 2004). "With one-way services, a user can only receive messages, while with two-way services the user can both receive and send messages with a cellular phone" (Yanos et al 2004:12). According to information forwarded by the Mobile Data Association (MDA) of Great Britain, the grand total of text messages sent through the 4 GSM carriers in the country in 2002 added up to 16.8 billion. The yearly result was confirmed by the December numbers that totalled about 1.6 billion SMS messages, showing a growth of 100 million compared to the previous month. The numbers of December show a daily average of 52 million messages, compared to the 42 million in December 2001 and to the 24 million in December 2000. 70% of the subscribers aged 25-34 has sent and received text messages in the previous month as Michael and Salter (2012) mention. The percentage in the age of 18-24 was 85%. In 2009, an average of 4.1 billion messages were sent in the United States every day (CTIA, 2009).

### 3. Mobile Marketing and SMS Advertising

Mobile marketing is apparently becoming more and more popular nowadays. Dickinger et al. (2004:2) define mobile marketing as "using interactive wireless media to provide customers with time and location-sensitive, personalized information that promotes goods, services and ideas, thereby generating value for all stakeholders." Another term for mobile marketing is mobile commerce (m-commerce) which can be generally defined "as a set of business activities conducted over mobile and wireless networks using applications on handheld devices. M-commerce not only includes e-commerce applications, but also many new and innovative applications that are only possible on the mobile and wireless networks" (Rashid et al, 2005).

Kavassalis (2003) proposed two essential characteristics for mobile marketing. First, mobile marketing should be understood as a complement to other marketing channels (television, press, web sites, flyers, etc) as invitations to participate in a mobile marketing campaign are often broadcasted on other channels. Second, the central principle of mobile marketing is prospect-initiated communication followed by the possibility of a two-way exchange.

Another important issue about mobile marketing is ubiquity. Ubiquity is a primary advantage of the mobile medium. It refers to the ability of users to receive information and perform transactions wherever they are and whenever they want (Clarke, 2001).

SMS is proving an effective new tool in marketing communications, used either on its own or integrated interactively with television, print and poster advertising. SMS is the "triumph of the consumer - every generation needs a technology that it can adopt as its own to communicate with - and the text generation took up SMS" (Tanakinjal, 2006:1). Short message service (SMS) allows marketers to interact directly with target consumers at specific times and locations via their mobile phones. Using a modified technology acceptance model, this study examines factors that influence consumers' acceptance of SMS advertising (Muk and Chung, 2015:1). A new advertising medium, mobile application advertising is to some extent different from traditional mobile advertising and Internet advertising (Xu and Li, 2014:3). At the same time, SMS seems to be a very attractive way of advertising and a new approach that is gaining a lot of fun. As more and more people are getting familiar with mobile phones, the companies invest in this new way of advertising. They use SMS in order to advertise their products and services. SMS advertising is for users that seek timely information at the right place. SMS "advertising is the most primitive and widely used version of mobile marketing, yet the relevant literature still lacks consensus on how SMS ads influence consumer attitudes, and how this influence is generated" (Varnali, 2014:339). SMS advertising is "appended to the bottom of the content message to be sent to the user. The

available space for each advert is therefore dependent on how much space is left after subtracting the characters used in the main content body of the message” (Lovitskii, 2009: 290).

According to Van der Walldt, Rebello and Brown (2009:445) “studies have highlighted a vast number of advantages of SMS advertising and includes that this medium allows for real-time communication with consumers anytime and anywhere”. SMS advertising pioneers “initially used it as a form of passive advertising and were surprised by consumer responses” (Rettie, 2004:3). MMS messages can incorporate pictures in order to give to the consumers more details about the product. SMSs or even MMSs could include simple, branded slogans to special offers and promotions. Research suggests that there is a branding effect (Lawson, 2002a) but, like other direct marketing, SMS advertising is thought to be most effective when it invites a response and includes an incentive.

SMS advertising is now a substantial source of revenue for many operators, particularly because it has been incorporated in the “instant messaging culture” among teenagers and young professionals (Sadeh, 2002). Tsang, Ho, and Liang (2004) have suggested that “both Internet and mobile advertising are emerging media used to deliver digital texts, images, and voices with interactive, immediate, personalized and responsive capabilities”. SMS advertising is the only channel relevant for recipients when on the move and is a great benefit for targeting young consumers who often have active lifestyles and are not exposed to the more traditional advertising channels. Mobile advertising is a form of advertising delivered on a mobile phone or other mobile devices (Aalto, Göthlin, Korhonen, and Ojala, 2004).

An experimental survey conducted by Ericsson indicates that 60% of consumers liked receiving mobile advertising, while Quios finds that the level of recognition of mobile advertising was surprisingly high: 79% of participants recalled 60% of the advertising (Barnes, 2002).

Although SMS advertising has a great advantage over more traditional mediums of advertising, it is often stressed that the medium should not be used in isolation. SMS advertising should be complementary with the traditional mediums of advertising (Kavassalis et al., 2003: 56; Scharl et al., 2005: 168). Mobile phone “users exhibited more attention, interest, desire and more favorable attitudes towards the brand, as well as greater intention to purchase the product when exposed to MMS compared to SMS advertisements”. (Lin et al, 2013:16)

#### 4. Related Work

Leung (2007) conducted a study focusing on the motivations and pattern related to the use of SMS text messaging among college students. It examines potential factors, such as the gratifications sought, the limitations or shortcomings of SMS, and one personality variable, unwillingness-to-communicate in interpersonal communication, a variable that could influence the level of use. The sample consisted of 532 students, of whom 353 were users of SMS (66.4%) and 179 were non-users (33.6%) and took part in 2003 in Hong Kong university

students. The results showed that convenience and low cost, entertainment, coordination, and fashion were strong instrumental motives for SMS use while affection and escape were intrinsic factors. As compared to non-users, student users of SMS tended to be male with a high household income were more socially anxious or felt less valued in face-to-face communication.

Tillema et al (2010) publish a study that was conducted in the Netherlands. The study aimed at gaining greater insight into (i) the interaction between face-to-face (F2F) and electronic contacts, (ii) the influence of information content and relational distance on the communication mode/service choice and (iii) the influence of relational and geographical distance, in addition to other factors, on the frequency of F2F and electronic contacts with relatives and friends. The sample was 742 people. The results showed that the frequency of F2F contacts is positively correlated with that for electronic communication, pointing at a complementary effect. With respect to information content and relational distance, the research showed that on the basis of descriptive analyses, that synchronous modes/services (F2F and telephone conversations) are used more for urgent matters and that asynchronous modes (in particular email) become more influential as the relational distance increases.

Another study conducted by Priporas and Mylona (2008) investigated the use of SMS in young consumers and their responses to SMS as a potential communication vehicle by the companies. The research was qualitative in nature. The results revealed that SMS, had a positive acceptance by young consumers as a communication tool since it is an integral part of their life and seems to be an effective tool by enterprises in reaching consumers.

A study conducted by Zhang and Mao (2008:787) is about the acceptance of SMS advertising, an increasingly popular mobile marketing practice, among young Chinese consumers. A modified technology acceptance model (TAM) was developed to test the intention to use SMS advertising; that is, to read the advertising message and take action as suggested by the message. Results showed that the two key determinants of TAM, the perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of SMS advertising messages, predicted the intention to use them. In addition, trust in SMS advertising and subjective norms also contributed to the intention to use.

In a large university in Western Australia in 2009 another study was conducted. The purpose of the study was to examine young consumers’ motives for using SMS, their SMS usage frequency, and their attitudes towards SMS advertising. The findings showed that convenience and economical reasons influence SMS usage frequency. Social involvement influenced attitudes towards SMS advertising. Managerial implications and limitations are also presented (Phau and Teah, 2009).

A similar study was conducted in 2007 in USA and Korea (Muk, 2007). The study examined the differences between American young consumers and their Korean counterparts’ interests in accepting SMS advertising via their mobile phones. The appeal of using the mobile phone as an advertising

medium is its accessibility because it could pinpoint the locations of mobile phone users. The results of the study provided preliminary evidence that consumers' attitudes and beliefs had significant positive relationships with intentions to opt in to the new medium. The study identified the potential of a new research domain in advertising, presents a conceptual framework for its examination and suggested the importance of constructs under study.

Carroll et al (2007) conducted a study in New Zealand. They used depth interviews with a small sample of senior-level creatives working in a cross-section of New York agency settings in order to explore the ways in which they negotiate and resolve their senses of personal and professional identity. They found that ad agencies are a site of conflict and insecurity for these creatives, yet also of potential fulfillment.

Zabadi, Shura, and Elsayed (2012) on the other hand, investigated in their study in Jordan antecedents of consumer attitudes towards SMS advertising via mobile devices and variables influencing it. It was found that consumers' perceptions of the entertainment value, informativeness and credibility of SMS advertisements are positively correlated to consumers' overall attitudes towards SMS advertisements. The study further found consumers' perceptions of the irritation aspect of SMS advertisements is negatively correlated with consumers' attitudes towards SMS advertisements.

## 5. Methodology

The presented study uses qualitative methods for conducting its research. Qualitative research is deemed to be much more fluid and flexible than quantitative research in that it emphasizes discovering novel or unanticipated findings and the possibility of altering research plans in response to such serendipitous occurrence (Bryman, 1984:78). As Denzin et al (1994) claim, qualitative researchers extolled the humanistic virtues of their subjective interpretive approach to the study of human group life. Qualitative research involves bibliographic research, personal experience, interviews, focus groups, case studies and observations.

The study was conducted on undergraduate students, (aged 18-24) as members of generation Y. Generation Y is familiar with new technologies and with changes to communication processes. An example of changes being driven by this generation includes the introduction of new communication methods such as text messaging and blogging, whereas, for them, e-mail is now considered to be outdated. An important step in communicating with the younger generation has been the move from "passive" or "pushing" communication to "active" or "pulling" communication. Generation Y needs to be actively involved in receiving information or they quickly lose interest (Gomam- Kinsey, 2006).

Data were collected through face to face, in-depth interviews with a non-probability purposive sample of 40 undergraduate marketing students. The in-depth interview is used when a researcher wishes to explore a subject in detail. It might be audio or video-taped and it is usually taken by

knowledgeable, very experienced or skilled individuals, as it aims to obtain a very detailed picture about the researched area of interest (Mylona and Papadaki, 2007:132). In-depth interviews are useful when you want detailed information about a person's thoughts and behaviours or want to explore new issues in depth. The primary advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys (Boyce and Naele, 2006).

For the discussion part of the interview, an open-ended questionnaire was designed to explore the usage of SMS as an advertising tool but also as a way for communicating with friends. This focused on the attitude of young consumers towards the use of SMS in receiving messages by companies for advertising or for information purposes. The interviews took place in December 2012 and each session lasted for approximately 20 minutes. The interviews were recorded. During discussions a professional tape recorder was used in order to record the discussion, on approval of the interviewee-student but the researchers also took notes.

After all the interviews were completed, the discussions were transcribed. The analysis was carried out by using an interpretation method to allow researchers to acquire a more complete and in-depth understanding of the data. At the beginning of the analysis, a close, phrase-by-phrase examination of the data, took place. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) the so-called "line-by-line analysis" although it is the most time-consuming form of coding, it is often the most generative. It is considered a very important and useful method, especially, at the beginning of a study, so as to generate the categories to be developed.

## 6. Demographic Profile of the Students

The students' gender distribution indicates that 30 of the respondents in this study were females (75%) and the rest were males (25%). The ages of the sample varied between 18-21 years old and only 20% were between 25-27 years old. All students had a mobile phone and the majority of them claimed that they had owned a mobile phone for a period of 4-6 years. The 35% of the students claimed that they had owned the mobile phone for more than 6 years. 60% of the participants claimed that they owned two mobile phones; one contract-based and one card-based. 15% claimed that they had a contract-based mobile phone and 25% a card-based one.

## 7. SMS and Communication

Most of the students claimed that they use their mobile phone for communication with their friends, for sending SMS and MMS. Very few of them claimed that they use mobile phones for downloading songs, playing games or surfing the internet. Most of the participants claimed that they send and receive about 1-5 SMS daily (55% of the participants to the interviews). Only 5% of the students that participated in the

research claimed that they do not send or receive any SMS at all. Students considered SMS to be a very useful communication service since it is very practical (65%), inexpensive – low cost service (60%), flexible (50%). Two of them claimed:

“...SMS is a very practical way of communicating. The only drawback is that is an impersonal way of communication” (Student 9);

“I like sending SMS. I can do it any time, during the lectures, in the theatre, sometimes during exams” (Student 37).

The next question was about the number of characters that the students use; 65% of the participants in the interviews claimed that they expand the limit of 160 characters in each SMS. Most of the time, students use abbreviations, as students that said that they expand the limit of 160 characters claimed also that:

“...space is important when you write an SMS - you need to save space” (Student 31).

When the participants were asked for the reasons why they send SMS, most of them claimed that they do this for asking for information or for answering to a question that they have received. Almost half of the participants claimed that they send SMS for wishes in Christmas, Easter or during name-days as they claimed that:

“is a quick, low cost way of communication, and I can send SMS to a group of people” (Student 7). Two other students stated:

“The main reason that I use SMS is for asking for information or answering to a message that I have received. Sometimes I express my feelings through by sending an SMS” (Student 23);

“I mainly use SMS for wishes during Christmas and Easter. I do not have to call all these people. Sometimes I use SMS for asking something. Very few times I use SMS for invitation or for expressing my feelings” (Student 15).

As the students claimed the main reason that they prefer SMS as a way of communication is not only the low cost but the speed that the SMS can reach each destination and the flexibility of that way of communication. Some students stated:

“I prefer to talk on the phone. Sometimes though is very expensive to do that - so I have to use SMS in order to communicate with my friends. I know that is an impersonal way of communication though” (Student 19);

“Even if my friends do not pick up the phone they will see the SMS. Flexibility and immediacy are two of the greatest advantages of this way of communication” (Student 32);

“SMS is practical as communication, however, it is impersonal since you can't express your feelings but a

cheap and flexible way of communication” (Student 28).

Almost 40% of the participants in the interviews claimed that SMS cannot promote dialogue and interpersonal relations. A girl that took part in the interviews said:

“I cannot communicate with my boyfriend through SMS. When we start communicating through SMS we always ended up to talk on the phone. So now we do not use it at all” (Student 12).

Another student claimed that sometimes is annoying to receive a lot of SMS even though is a practical way of communication.

## 8. SMS and Advertising

All of the participants in the interviews claimed that they have received SMS from an advertising company. Reasons for receiving SMS from an advertising company is: being informed for new products or services, special offers, events that the companies organise and advertising a product.

“Many times I have been informed by mobile telephone company X for the new services that they offer” (Student 3);

“Big companies inform with an SMS about the sales period and special offers” (Student 7).

Another important reason that the companies often send SMS is to inform the consumers where they can find a new product. As a student claimed:

“They send me an SMS in order to inform that there is a new Vodafone shop near my place and this week has some special offers” (Student 21).

In the US companies such as ‘Coca Cola’ and ‘Procter and Gamble’ use SMSs in order to communicate with their consumers. According to Pool (2003), a manager of Coca Cola in USA, claims that “We’re seeing it (text messaging) as an important enabler for communication with teens and young adults”.

75% of the participants claimed that SMS can be a very promising way of advertising. A student offered the following perspective:

“I believe that SMS is a very promising way of advertising. Advertisers will be able to send personal advertisements to the users of mobile phones” (Student 6).

One the other hand, another student commented:

“I do not think that this way of advertising could be as successful as television radio or print advertising” (Student 33) or even “advertising on the WWW” (Student 8).

40% of the students claimed that SMS is not a positive way for promotion or products. 55% of the students see SMS as a positive way of promoting products. Here are some

views:

“I think that the more traditional ways of promoting products could be more effective than SMS” (Student 14);

“Why not? SMS could be a very promising way for promoting products and could work complementary to the existing ways of promoting products” (Student 27).

70% of the students have taken part to competitions like Eurovision by sending SMS.

“Every year I send SMS in order to vote for Eurovision” (Student 39);

“I have send SMS in order to participate to Milko competition. I did not win anything” (Student 18);

“I never participate to competitions through phone or SMS. I do not think that I can win” (Student 40).

In the final question, students were asked if they are annoyed by receiving SMS which advertise products or services. 70% of the students claimed that they were annoyed. They stated:

“I feel an intrusion to my personal life when I receive SMS from advertising companies” (Student 16);

“I prefer to receive SMS only from my friends. I think that I use mobile communication to communicate with friends - not for any other reasons” (Student 1).

30% of the participants said that they are not annoyed when they receive SMS from advertising companies.

“I do not mind. Sometimes is very useful as I can be informed about new products and services” (Student 36).

## 9. Concluding Remarks

What comes out from all the above is that students are very familiar with the use of mobile phones. They use SMS as one of the main ways of communication as they believe that this could lead to a quick exchange of information. In some cases though, students are critical about this new way of communication. They believe that dialogue is not promoted. More importantly, the question is whether exchanging of SMS's is in tandem with understanding of the message. As Habermas (Myerson, 2001:42), claims: “dialogue could lead to the development of understanding”. The sender in the case of SMS communication cannot always deduce if the receiver understood the message as they do not have the ability of developing a dialogue.

Participants think that SMS is an easy way of sending mass messages in groups in order to send wishes during Christmas or Easter holidays. As Mylona (2005) states: a SMS, for example, a Christmas greeting, can be sent to a group of people simultaneously. It is a type of communication that can be appropriately addressed even to people that we are not very close with. Most of the participants claimed that SMS is a new

way of communications. As Priporas and Mylona (2008) claimed in their research, SMS had a positive acceptance by young consumers as a communication tool. In some cases though, students are critical about the new way of communication.

Most of the participants in our research receive SMS from companies that they want to advertise their product. The participants expressed the view that this way of advertising might be annoying as they get a lot of SMS in inappropriate time. It must be noted that Dickinger et al. (2004) observed that “the mobile phone cannot distinguish between spam and genuine communication automatically”. This means that the user might receive spam messages and he/she does not have the ability to distinguish spam from not spam messages. He has to open all the messages, read them and delete the ones that he is not interested in.

Some of the participants in our research think that most traditional ways of advertising could be more effective than sending SMS to the consumers and could be used as an additional way of advertising. As Kavassalis (2003) mentions, advertising through SMS could be addressed to young people and could be used as a complementary way of advertising. Of course, some of the participants seem to be quite satisfied with this method of advertising as it enables them to be immediately informed about new product and services. Sometimes the SMS's they receive are focused to their needs and preferences. As Xu and Li claim (2014:13), “mobile phone is becoming an increasingly important gadget in our daily life. At the same time that various mobile applications are developed, some companies have sensed the potential marketing importance of mobile application advertising”. Moreover, as Li and Du (2012:3) claim, the purpose of providing targeted advertisements is to increase the effectiveness of advertising by ensuring the right person receives the right message at the right time.

Cost seems to be another important issue for advertising and communication, leading companies and users to easily adopt it for sending and receiving information. Companies and users could also send massive SMS through internet at an even lower cost. As Rettie and Brum (2001) claim: companies are beginning to recognize the potential of SMS (Short Message Service) text messages, as a low cost, high impact communication medium, that can be received by almost all mobile phone users.

SMS is a very promising way of advertising and communication. Most of the researches, e.g. (Muk, 2007) and (Phau and Teah, 2009), including ours, have shown that SMS could be a new area for research and a very promising way of communication. As Chowdhury, et al claim (2006:39), mobile advertising activities provide many new opportunities and challenges for marketers. This way is mostly used by the young users of mobile phones. In the area of advertising, SMS could act as an additional tool to other existing ways of promotion. “Technological advancements have provided various new mediums for advertising to consumers and have further allowed for organisations to better reach consumers with regards to the frequency and impact of advertising” (Du

Plessis, Bothma, Jordaan and Van Heerden, 2003: 339). The study showed though that students believe that this new way of advertising is irritating and annoying – the same result came out from Zabadi, Shura, and Elsayed (2012) study. Of course, users in Greece are rather hesitant to adopt the new advertising way, although they feel positive about SMS communication.

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