

## The Effects of Constant Touch on Consumer Behavior: The Case of Iranian Mobile Phone Users

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Received 11 March 2013

Revised 2 October 2013

Accepted 12 December 2013

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**Abstract:** *The main objective of this paper is to argue how the mobile phones have transformed the Iranian lifestyle and how the arrival of mobiles has been a catalyst for revolting behavior, and has launched a new consumer behavior and has changed our relationships. The paper explains how the people's behavior has developed a whole new social code in Iran. It is argued that the social value of being able to make a phone call at any time will also be extremely large. The paper discusses the contradiction of individualist behavior and using mobile phones more publicly, that is to say, it used to be that you had to make an effort to overhear other people's conversations. The paper investigates several questions relating to changing lifestyles such as whether men spend more time on the phone than women in Iran after the arrival of Mobile phones, whether mobile phones are just the preserve of a certain age group, whether class and wealth play a major part in mobile phone ownership, and whether the expansion of the mobile culture will be influenced with the removal of phone boxes. The paper points out that the Mobile expands the space for individualism by asserting itself against old hierarchies: people allow having more than a private mobile phone; nobody controls all forms of long-distance communication, and the phone is not the property of state organizations. In the age of mobile phones, it is the individuals, and not the society that play the major role.*

**Keywords:** *Consumer behavior, mobile subscribers, social code, life style, individualist space, time-space distanciation.*

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### Introduction: Mobile Phone Sociological Perspective

The main aim of this paper is to give a sociological analysis on the expansion of mobile phone in the Iranian society. Mobile phones have been absent from sociological analysis. They have not received much attention from sociology and the media sciences in order investigate their impact on various fields of social life. Thus, we have no integrated theory concerning the specific functions and consequences of mobile phone communication. This lack of intellectual enthusiasm and scientific research which is less than research efforts on the World Wide Web has recently been addressed by making a web site for online mobile phone sociological research. (Geser, 2003). As Geser correctly mentioned late modern theorists such as Manuel Castells, and Anthony Giddens on their theoretical perspective only give the Internet and the marriage of PC and Telecommunication the status of a mega-innovation that really counts, while mobile communication facilities are almost totally neglected. Such views ignore the basic facts that in comparison with PC have and Net technologies, mobile phones are used nowadays by broader strata of the population all over the world, and that for many users, they have stronger impacts on social life, life style and consumer behavior. In an Irish study where young respondents were asked what kind of technological device they would prefer when stranded on an isolated island, 52% voted for the mobile phone and only 18% for the TV. (Hession 2001 cited in Geser 2003). This is not the case in the Iranian society and I think it is neither in the western world. Nevertheless, it should be considered that people are making a space for mobile phone in social life for entertainment and leisure. They spend much larger sums of money on monthly phone bills than on Internet provider or land phone services. Thus, undoubtedly fundamental transformation in individuals' perception of self and the world by the inexpensive mass-produced mobile communications need more scholarly attention. (Townsend 2000).

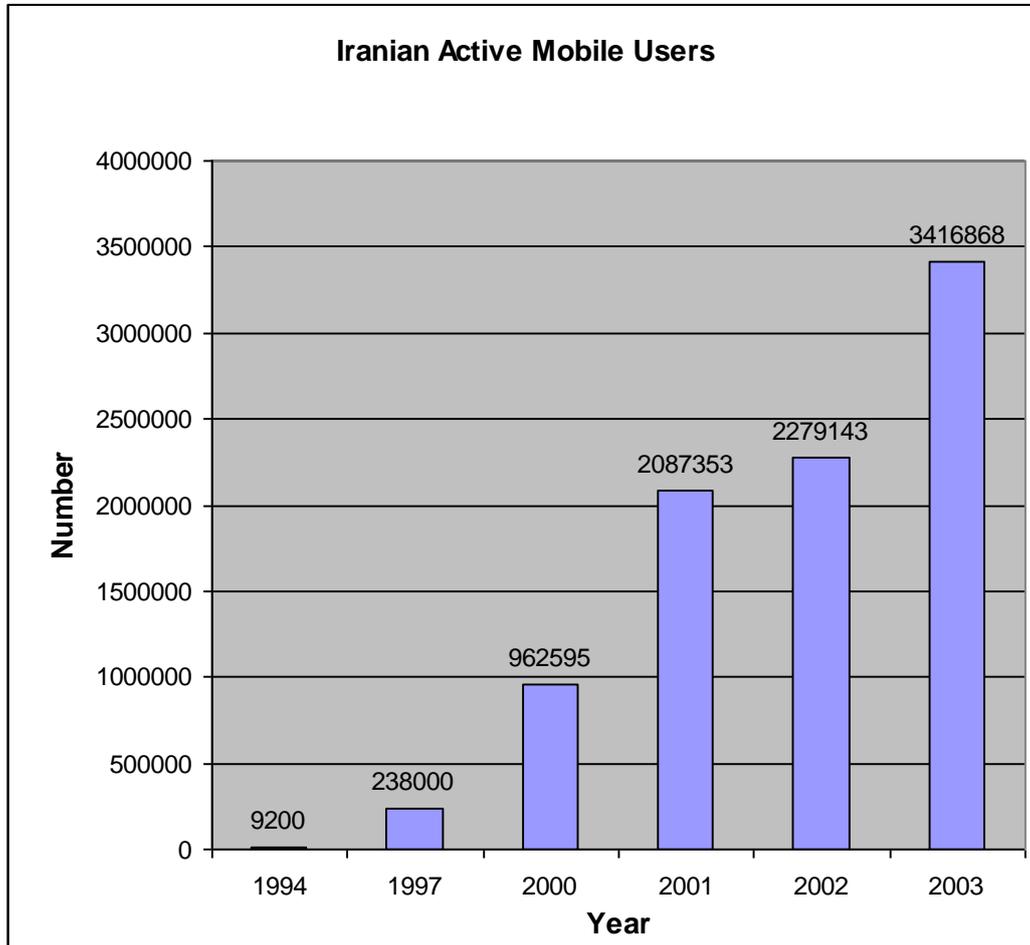
### Iranian Mobile Phone Users

This year the number of mobile subscribers around the world is likely to reach 1.4 billion, and for the first time greater than the number of land lines. We have been using the phone more and more since the advent of the mobile. In 1994 The Iranian Telecommunication Ministry launched the first mobile phone a decade after Ernie Wise made Britain's first cell phone call. Now, less than a decade, in 20th January 2004 (30 Dey 1382), 3,416,868 people in Iran have a mobile and many try to have one by pre-purchasing its license and becoming a subscriber. (Iran

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Ministry of Telecommunication, 2004) We have been using the phone more and more since the advent of the mobile. Comparing to the European countries, it seems these figures are not comparable, as in 2000, for instance, the percentage of the UK population owning mobiles passed the 50% mark for the first time. However, if we look at the case carefully, it can be argued that the number of mobile users in Iran shows a revolution in terms of changing patterns of behavior and relationships.



There are huge demands to the SIM cards providing access to the lines because the country has just near three million and half lines for a population of nearly 70 million. The cards are expensive but at \$530 (£300) each they are half the cost of those available on the open market. The open market created by the state monopoly over the Telecommunication sector has brought a profitable business for mobile dealers. At present, Iran has just one, greatly overloaded, mobile phone network. Even in Tehran, it can be difficult to make a call because of network overloading. It forced the government to open the door to private sector and foreign firms in order to meet the demands. Iran aims to boost the number of mobile phone users from 2 million at present to 10 million by 2005.

### Mobile Phone and Time-Space Distanciation

One of the essential mechanisms for social typology is ‘time-space distanciation’. This is a concept, which captures the ability of people in a society to control allocative and authoritative resources in time and space for use in power relations. Expanding allocative time-space distanciation involves (among other things) the development of the forces of production; expanding authoritative time-space distanciation involves developing the means of surveillance. Increases in such distanciation are human achievements: they increase the capacities of certain agents to act. Where there is unequal distribution of access, then in general those with the greatest access to the resources in question will have an interest in preventing a decline in time-space distanciation with respect to those resources. In non-capitalist countries, those who hold political power have an interest in a reduction in time-space distanciation with respect to allocative resources, i.e. reducing the realm of private ownership while increasing the planning capacities of the state, nationalisation, under-controlling economic institutions, expansion of state-centred control over authoritative resources, to erode the allocative resources capacities to increase time-space

distanciation. In contrast, at the beginning of a period of economic growth, the bourgeoisie tend to force the state to expand its control over the economy. This reductionism allows the bourgeoisie an increase in their capacities. Capitalists use their power, rooted in the inequalities of access to allocative resource, to prevent declines in allocative time-space distanciation by trying to reduce authoritative time-space distanciation. Essentially, the impulse towards expansion of time-space distanciation comes from different forms of conflict and competition in different societies. In class societies (capitalism) this is impelled primarily by conflicts over allocative resources in the form of economic competition between capitalist firms; in class-divided societies it is rooted in conflicts over authoritative resource forms of military and territorial competition. The leading edge of time-space distanciation thus varies, depending upon which kind of resource is the 'basis of power' in the society, and, accordingly, which dimension of distanciation will be most implicated in social conflicts. (Giddens, 1981, p 50, Giddens, 1979, p 94).

The coming of the mobile enabled the reduction of 'time-space distanciation' substantially, and then the ability of certain people to control resources. The age of mobile phone has made an end to unequal distribution of access to resources. It increases the realm of private ownership while decreasing the planning capacities of the state. Phone less communities which could be classified as class divided society according to Giddens, (1981), particularly rural ones, enable to bypass their sclerotic, poorly maintained, exclusive, low-technology, and landline-based systems. If this trend continues, the number of mobile phone subscribers will exceed the number of fixed phones. It is a compression of time-space in the society. It can be argues that it is the emergence of characteristic of late modernity that new technology assist the class- divided society to have short cut to a knowledge society.

The Iranian Ministry of Telecommunication has planned to begin a pay-as-you-go mobile system. (Iran Ministry of Telecommunication, 2004) It might bring mobiles within reach of hundreds of millions of people who would never, for financial or bureaucratic reasons, have got a fixed-line phone. Thus, it is obvious that the mobile phones would transform much extensively Iranian life style in future. It has already launched a new consumer behavior which has changed our relationships. The mobile expands the space for individualism by asserting itself against old hierarchies: people allow having more than a private mobile phone; nobody controls all forms of long-distance communication, and the phone is not the property of state organizations. The arrival of mobiles was a catalyst for revolting behavior. "It was the individual, not society that spoke loudly: 'I'm on the traffic jam'... the short history of mobile phones in Iranian is intimately tied to social transformations and competition. In the age of mobile phones, it is the individual, not society that speaks loudly.

### **The Conspicuous Mobile Phone Users**

The number of mobile users per population is not the same as the developed world. But, as I have mentioned everybody in the public scene and private gathering can easily realize the domination of the mobile. Using the phrase "conspicuous consumption" from Thorstein Veblen in *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1975 [1899]), the reason why mobile users are conspicuous consumers is because they ostentatiously display using mobile phones in an attempt to achieve social status. Thus, although the number of mobile users in the streets of Tehran is less than London or Tokyo, as about every 20 person in Iran owns a mobile phone, it often seems that there are more mobile users in Tehran than the developed cities. The reason is that the users demonstrate their mobile and conversation in the public place more ostentatiously than cities of developed world. In addition, people avoid using old models of mobile phones, as old mobiles are often compared to bricks. Instead, using small pocket phones with more options are more common, while in comparison with the land line we cannot see people that use old model, as it looks 'patina', a characteristics of pre-fashion societies. (Corrigan, 1997, p 7-9)

The amazing phenomenon is that the mobile users have developed a whole new social code. The new generation, for example, can take calls in the middle of a crowded restaurant. It is no longer conceived as a potential nuisance. Contrary to this, it is as if people enjoy listening to each other's conversations in the middle of a crowd. It indicates that the social value of being able to make a phone call at anytime and anywhere is extremely large. You can see easily in the streets of Tehran, in the bus stop, every day that many people talk loudly into a mobile phone pressed to their ear. Without consciously eavesdropping, you can hear what they say: about friends and family's birthday or anything else. They sometimes speak with a particular volume and pitch: far more loudly than if they speak to someone next to them, not quite as loud as if they address a public meeting. They have none of the self-consciousness people usually feel when they are by themselves among strangers, because they are not by themselves.

It used to be that you had to make an effort to overhear other people's conversations. Sometimes bad telephone lines allow us to listen to other conversations. We thought we had discovered other peoples' lives. We had to turn our head to look into their lighted living rooms, glance into their strange lives. Now some of us have to make an

effort not to. The Iranian customer's behavior seems stranger in terms of inviting others into their personal worlds. The aspects of personal characters of mobile users would be open to others, that is to say their accent, thoughts about living, what to do in leisure time, etc. every minute of mobile use becomes active. For example, busy people who don't have time for rows or mutual restatements of love before they leave for work now have them on the bus instead. The mobile has become the supermarket checkout queue of private life, where everyone gets to clock everyone else's trolley, to see who is on no-fat yoghurt and who's on family-size oven chips. Interviews with mobile users found that they call their relatives more than before.

It is common in Iran that women put the phones in their bag or purse when they go to a ceremony and tell somebody to call them just to show they have a mobile. It is just lying to ourselves that we are waiting just in case somebody calls, when we know nobody will. (For example, I once witnessed a young man on his mobile phone talking to a friend on a car when all of a sudden, as he was talking, his phone started to ring continuously and the shade of his face turned to bright red he realized the game was up.)

We have observed the scenes when people stand in old-fashioned silence, then suddenly you see they jump and scramble in their pocket, as if a ferret inside their trousers has bitten them. But you can just hear the haul out the mobile, or a text message on their mobile, and then they laugh because a joke has been sent.

The function of the mobile is widely accepted ranging from avoiding the obscure uncertainty of waiting for someone to canceling a meeting with a short notice. It seems that the fluctuation of our life in those pre-mobile days vanished. But it brings us a new fear. For instance, people on a plane sometimes worry about the consequences of a passenger not switching their mobile phone off.

As Jon Agar, in his book *Constant Touch: A Global History of the Mobile Phone*, argues, the effects of mobile phones was not spread around the world like a virus because of technology. Rather they arrived when society was ready for them: a time of individualism asserting itself against old hierarchies - paternalism in the developing world, communism in the former Soviet bloc, and the emerging of globalization and removing from discourse the argument of skepticism to globalization.

### **Texting, Language and Social Code**

The impact of changing context in text messages is also worth mentioning. Texting of mobile phone has become particularly popular with individuals and in cultures which tend to be reserved with other people. For instance, in 2001 BBC world service reported that senior Islamic figures in Singapore have ruled that Muslim men cannot divorce their wives by sending text messages over their mobile phones. The decision ends weeks of debate over the issue after a court in Dubai ruled that a mobile-phone text message was acceptable as a written declaration of divorce. Muslim men are allowed to divorce their wives simply by saying the word "talaq" (divorce) - I divorce you - three times. However, it is not clear that despite of the acceptance of function of new technology by traditional institution would lead to an essential change in the text, that is to say, the secularization of ethic and Islamic jurisprudence. High ranking clergies (*ualam*) are not opposed on the usage of new technology. However, unlike the technology of 1960s and 1970s which affected the life style with a lag, the advent of mobiles has had immediate impact on personal behavior and life.

Nevertheless, they are youngsters who value texting as a means to communicate without having to voice feelings and thoughts. The demands of brevity can also encourage text messages and emailers to be candid, frank, informal, and even cheeky. (Plant 2000, p 56). However, it can be said that Iranian adult mobile users send frank text messages without the risk of embarrassment. As a consequence, SMS is highly functional for widening the social sphere by an ever-changing multitude of very peripheral relationships, mostly based on single accidental contacts, which may be a potential resource pool that can be tapped in the future. In some cases, it may also substitute closer relationships by providing an ever accessible reservoir of superficial contacts which demand very little psychological effort and involvement. (Geser, 2003)

Recently in Iran, text messages (SMS) begin to give service to mobile users. People use this service in different ways. In the first week of January 2004 (Dey 19 to Dey 25) mobile users sent more than 10 million texts. (Iran Ministry of telecommunication, 2004) But we should be concerned with the way the service affects the language. It is soon we investigate it in Iran but it seems a sort of hidden language is appearing. What texting is really doing to the language? None of the dictionaries I have looked at has caught up with the verb "to text" as in Persian we use the English version but there is none in English either. Texting is a tightly circumscribed short message service (SMS) range-bound to 160 characters, including spaces. Abbreviation is the essence of texting.

**Table (1): Iranian Mobile Users behavior within September and November 2003**

Numbers of conversations	785,615,586
Time of conversations (minute)	1,077,150,561
Average time of a conversation (minute)	1.37
Number of mobile to mobile conversation	531,971,665
Number of mobile to land phone	166,179,023
Number of mobile to international land phone	4,294,072
Number of text messages	83,177,826
Text messages per users	24

Source: Iran Ministry of Telecommunication

Sociologically, texting consolidates sub- communities. Each subgroup will have its own identifying styles and codes. Over here, the vanguard texting subgroup is the young and minimally educated. Texting irresistibly attract to youth people. They embraced text mails characterized by group-specific linguistic habits and codes. The extreme shortness makes it legitimate to use quote conventionalized forms of writing: so that even shy people (or people from cultures which prohibit very subjective expressions) feel free to communicate because they do not have to expose themselves in a highly personalized way.

They use differently from the use of adults. Making a hidden language is a demarcation from adult world by young people. (Rautiainen 2000). Text-based message (SMS) is another escape route of mobile realm. By doing this, the users leave it to receivers whether and when to respond, and especially giving them time to design their response carefully, so that it mirrors their authentic and longer-term attitudes, rather than the impact of unpredictable momentaneous factors. (Geser, 2003). As he denotes, “text messages (SMS) are far less intrusive than phone calls, because recipients are given the freedom as to whether (and when) they want to respond. Consequently, there is a very low threshold for sending such messages, like merely trying out whether recipients take notice of them, answer them or even “escalate” the relationship by calling back orally. “A noncommittal question such as “How are you doing?” or “Did you think that the music was good on Saturday?” marks the contact; gives sign of interest and also tests the other’s sincerity. The informants indicated that it is important to ask a question during this initiation phase since it is a display of interest and identification. The next turn in the cycle is some form of access display that is either an opening for further interaction or a closing of the potential.” (Ling/Yttri 1999).

More than that: it is very certain that the SMS will be received by the individual to which is sent, without somebody else taking notice. This privacy contrasts with cell phone calls, which can drop into completely unpredictable environments where unwelcome third parties may be present. Likewise, it contrasts with all other forms of writing (e.g. letters), which can easily be intercepted by intermediaries (Ling/Yttri 1999).

Sharing the costs of message exchanges by the two senders is another attractive feature of text-message. Thus, SMS allows for an equilibrated “economic exchange” which is highly preferred by partners not (yet) involved in an informal social relationship. By contrast, phone calls produce more “social exchanges” which are typical for already established relationships where exchange disequilibria are intentionally produced for reinforcing mutual interdependence (Blau 1964, 88ff.).

As a consequence, SMS is highly functional for widening the social sphere by an ever-changing multitude of very peripheral relationships, mostly based on single accidental contacts, which may be a potential resource pool that can be tapped in the future. In some cases, it may also substitute closer relationships by providing an ever accessible reservoir of superficial contacts which demand very little psychological effort and involvement.

### **Mobile Phone, Uncertainty and Trust**

We spend a lot of time with our mobiles. In a sense, they become our confidants. They know the names and numbers of our closest friends and associates. They know the numbers last dialed. They carry secrets, and like all confidants, they can betray secrets. The advent of the mobile makes room for a whole new set of suspicions. Why did (s) he switch her/his phone off? Checking your mobile display constantly while talking to somebody is the modern equivalent of looking over somebody's shoulder at a party while talking to them, making it obvious that you are hoping to see somebody more interesting. Nevertheless, research shows that having a mobile makes them feel safe from anything that can happen such as a car break down, alone on a dark road in the night, if you need an emergency services, etc.

## Mobile, Lifestyle and Future

The arrival of the mobile phone has transformed Iranian lifestyles so much that men now spend more time on the phone than women. However, we have no accurate data from the Ministry of Telecommunication, so our observations show this. Mobile phones are still the preserve of the youths but older generations in their forties and fifties now try to have a mobile phone. It seems that men are actually spending more time on the phone. The explanation might lie in the fact that men love to play with techno toys while women may be more conscious of the bills they are running up. Class and wealth seems do not play a major part in mobile phone ownership. I have seen an unskilled worker use a mobile. Interviews indicate that your phone became more important than your trainers.

What the Finnish academic Timo Kopomaa called the "culture of interruption" created by the mobile is resented far more by older generations. Older age brackets are more likely to be censorious about "inappropriate" phone use than teenagers. To the traditionalist, the mobile fosters rude behavior: it has eroded the art of making an arrangement and sticking to it; and breaking off a conversation to answer a ringing phone is the modern equivalent of looking over people's shoulders at cocktail parties. However, even among the apparently uncouth, mobile-obsessed young, there is an unspoken etiquette. Researchers have found that customers are far less likely to put their phone on the table in an establishment with tablecloths. Ubiquitous as it may be, but the mobile divides generations; parents just don't understand. What more proof could you need to know that this is not a gadget, but a fashion accessory?

The era of the telephone kiosk is drawing to a close. It is small sign of social breakdown that indicate a failed public space. The curious thing about predicting trends in mobile phones is that, in an important sense, the future is already here but we have not yet come to terms with it. This is not surprising. No other consumer product in history has changed so rapidly or gained popularity as fast as the mobile phone. Ten years ago when the phone was an expensive, luggable brick, flaunted by flamboyant car owners, no one predicted the explosive growth that took annual sales.

Mobiles, unlike any other device, have been gobbling up other products so fast that we haven't been able to adjust our lifestyles to them. Take the wristwatch. You don't need it any more: the screen of your mobile – which is with you 24 hours a day - will tell you the time, warn you of meetings and wake you up in the morning. But people still wear watches because they can't shed something that has been, in Marshall McLuhan's words, an extension of themselves.

You can now buy mobiles that include a radio, an MP3 (digital music) player, a diary, a calendar, a camera, an embryonic video camera, a calculator, a note pad, a word processor, a spreadsheet, a modem, a voice recorder, a web browser, an emailer, a text messaging device, a games arcade, a thermometer, a contacts book and a barcode reader, not to mention satellite tracking devices that can calculate where you are to within a few meters. That amounts to 20 different products you could have bought separately but which are now packaged together in one device. The mobile is the first interactive device that people carry with them everywhere. Your phone knows who you are and where you are. Technology, including miniaturization, is still progressing at an awesome pace. But the shape of the phone in the future will depend not on technology but on what consumers want.

We are now in the midst of the second generation (2G) phase and this Christmas we will be bombarded with "smart" multimedia phones that can take and transmit photos and polyphonic ring tones. Coming shortly is 3G technology enabling you to see the person you are speaking to live on the screen or watch Premier League goals soon after they are scored. (The three Gs stand for girls, gaming and gambling, according to wags in the industry who know how hi-tech is usually led by base consumer demand.)

It is a small step to turn your phone into a television or a video camera (2G phones can already take video clips). No one wants to buy a radio, a camera or a miniature TV if it means carrying an extra bit of equipment around all the time. But if they come as built-in extras on a lightweight phone, that is different. Radio will enjoy a second renaissance (the first was the in-car radio) as a result of the mobile phone.

Mobiles are getting better at linking with the internet after the disaster of the first generation WAP (wireless application protocol) phones. Soon you will be able to access most web addresses or web cameras in the world (you can already look at webcams on your phone to check out traffic jams). You will be able to check your children's nursery through a secure web camera while you are at work to see if they are all right, take in a live lecture at a remote university, answer the door or switch off the lights at home from anywhere in the world - as long as the device has a unique web address.

Finally, there are many unanswered questions about mobile phones among Iranian mobile users, for instance, does the Iranian customer have choice of a mobile phone that makes the fashion and design of new mobile phones? Is it really the conspiracy of the capitalist system and producers to persuade people to change their phone or it is the right of consumer elite that force you to do so?

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