

## Diffusion of Political Communication through Text Messages on Mobile Phones

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### ABSTRACT

*This survey study specifically aims at the role of political text messages in effecting the phenomena of political socialization among mobile phone users. Adoption of this new technique of political usage of mobile phones was assessed parallel to the adoption patterns set by E. M. Rogers. Findings of the study suggested that educated mobile users not only liked but also responded back to the sender of political text messages and were instigated to participate in the political process as well, contrary to their previous apathetic behavior. More importantly the pace of adoption of this method was much higher than the usual adoption patterns.*

**Keywords:** Political text messages, Diffusion of information, Political participation

### INTRODUCTION

Diffusion of any innovation depends a lot on the pace of communication process. Before industrialization diffusion and adoption seems to be at snail's pace as compared to the current era of modern and efficient communication tools. Rogers characterizes Diffusion, as the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels overtime among the members of a social system (Rogers, 1995).

Diffusion of innovations is are expected to have a greater pace in current era of information technology when modern equipments like compact forms of computers and mobile phones armed with internet services and cable TVs are available to a majority of people.

By introducing a number of innovations, developed countries have upgraded their lives with a better diffusion and adoption rate whereas thinking about up gradation of life may be considered as a useless activity in developing countries of third world, as the basic needs of life are not available to the people. Scarcity of food, water and energy accompanying with reduced economic activities has tempered even the normal day to day life of people.

Bad governance seems to be responsible for all such conditions and hardly any change appears there in the agenda of political parties since emergence of the country. Moreover these agendas are propagated only at the eve of elections and ignored afterward.

Although it seems that common man fantasize the change in governing system, but on the day of election, most of the educated and opinion oriented persons do not go out to vote and show no concern with existing system. Uneducated and poor voter cast their votes, but either it is due to some vested interest or they follow their ethnic group, birathri (caste) or feudal lord (Moghees, 2000). Participation of people in the political system, other than the Election Day is almost negligible.

While thinking about political communication effects, it has been noted by the most of researchers that it can bring about cognitive changes, opinion formation and better perception of political system (Petty and Cacciopo, 1986 & zaler, 1992).

Recent corporate takeover have increased the problems of media managers. News values are mostly shaped by executives and resultantly serious political journalism has been minimized. (McLead& Kosicki, 1994).

In such conditions, the innovative idea for political communication and participation through text message by mobile phones is used by a few political parties like PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf), a comparatively new party, claiming to operate on Pan Pakistan bases with no ethnic, sectarian and feudal touch in the party.

Initially they invited the citizens to be a member of the party just by using the message system of mobile phones afterwards the day-to-day activities were communicated to members through SMS and their consent, viewpoint and feedback was also invited.

The mobile telecommunications sector has been growing at a high pace with the passage of time in Pakistan. Approximately 90 percent of Pakistanis live within areas of cell phone coverage and more than half of the population of the country has access to a cell phone.

According to PTA the total number of cellular subscribers has reached 129 million from a very timid figure of two million just within seven years. It reflects the enormous yearly growth of mobile phone subscription. It is important to note that during the initial years of mobile phone usage, the prices of handsets and the charges of service providers both were on the higher side. Even then the affordability factor did not create any hurdle in adoption of this technology. There seems to be a comparatively lesser growth rate after the year 2008, but now the introduction of cheaper call and SMS packages invited people for more and more espousal. Pakistan has the highest mobile expansion rate in the South Asian region. (PTA, 2013)

If we compare companies providing the mobile phone services, irrespective of the fact that since how long the company is providing the services, people got influenced by the marketing campaigns of these organizations and mostly purchased even more than one connections at the same time.

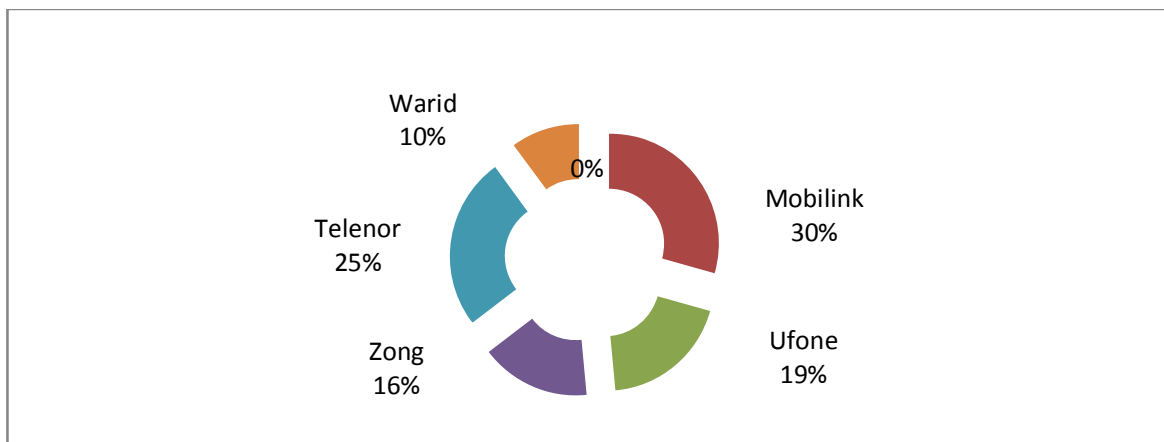


Fig 1. Percentage share of mobile service providers in Pakistan

According to the PTA, Mobilink continues to lead the market with 36.7 million subscribers, followed by Telenor with 31.6 million, Ufone with 23.8 million, Zong with 20.2 million and Warid Telecom with 12.5 million. All telecom companies are working to broaden their networks in the Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Northern Areas, which were largely ignored until at present. Five of the seven Agencies of the tribal areas have mobile coverage. (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority statistics, 2013)

There was 35 % Growth in use of “Short message services” (SMS) during the year 2011. A total of 237.6 billion SMS were generated by the industry in 2011 whereas 175.4 billion SMS were generated in 2012. These statistics show that there was 35% increase in growth. Telecom industry earned Rs12.4 billion during 2011 through its SMS base. This amount includes revenues from person to person (P2P) SMS, multimedia messaging services (MMS), applications to persons (A2P) and persons to applications (P2A).

PTA termed growth in SMS because of two factors, i.e. exponential growth in mobile subscribers and falling SMS prices and SMS ‘bundle’ offers. SMS rates have dropped by 50% during the past five years. Price of SMS ‘bundled package offers’ has gone down to as low as Re1 to Rs1.50 per 100 SMS per day. A single mobile phone consumer, according to the “PTA” report, generated an average of 175 P2P text messages in a month during 2011 against 142 SMS per subscriber per month during 2010.

Now if we come to the usage of mobile phone for political purposes, parliamentary elections of 2008 in Pakistan were the first event when mobile phones were used as a tool for campaigning. But adoption of this technology was so minimal that it was not even noticeable.

Real use of mobile phones for political purposes can be viewed in 2012-13 for pre-election activities. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the first political party to adopt new technologies. They launched their website, interacted the people through social media and most importantly they launched a short service messages (SMS) campaign (Riaz S, 2010)

According to the claims of PTI, it has included 300000 members on this SMS service in one month. Imran Khan, Chairman of PTI, claimed that over 700,000 new members have joined PTI during only 3 months via SMS campaign.

In addition to SMS activity all the major parties also used recorded calls also, in order to cover the illiterate population who were unable to read SMS. But instead all over the country this service was being in use only in limited areas.

It will be important to analyze and evaluate that up to what extent of communication and is it effective as well in changing the political ideology of people.

It will be important to analyze and evaluate that if the communication is effective in manipulating people’s ideology of politics and political sense, then to what extent it is successful.

## **RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

E. M. Rogers developed five categories of adopters after analyzing more than 5000 studies on, diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1962). According to him these categories consist of innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards. If adoption pattern of all these categories is plotted on the graph, it gives “S shaped” pattern. For most of the innovations in past, the process of adoption took a very long time for its completion. But due to advent of new technologies, the pace of communication has enhanced so it is expected that the adoption of political usage of mobile phones will be in a greater pace.

In this study the adoption pattern of mobile usage for political socialization has been endeavored, in accordance with Rogers’s categorization of adopters.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Trade (1903) in his book “The Laws of Imitation” discussed the diffusion concepts, which are under observation even today. Although he didn’t use the same titles for these concepts but these are very much similar to the today’s diffusion ideas.

Opinion leadership in the process of diffusion, the role of interpersonal communication, Socio-economic status and the “S Shape” curve were identified by him. So the existing diffusion studies might be rooted back into Gabriel Trade’s work

Wissler (1923) studied the cultural change due to adoption of Cultures from other nations. For example, he analyzed that Indians in the plain areas adopted horses in their culture and as a result they found the way to warfare with neighbors instead of their previous state of peaceful living.

Ryan & Gross (1943) set the basic paradigm for the diffusion by investigating the diffusion of hybrid corn seed among farmers. They found that there was a specific pattern of this adoption moreover role of media was limited in the adoption process. Rather it was the interpersonal communication which mainly caused the diffusion of information.

Dutchman & Danielson (1960) both being communication Scholars and with journalistic background studied the diffusion of news events.

They found that diffusion of news followed the same S Curve, but it was a prompt process and took shorter time as compare to the other modes of diffusion.

Danielson (1956) Investigated in his study regarding the news of re-election by President Eisenhower that main source of spreading the news was direct exposure to the media. Radio was found to be the major source of information (TV being not available at that time). Although voting decision of the respondents was not evaluated but it was established that media played its role in rapid dissemination of political information.

Hill & Bojean (1964) investigated the diffusion of President Kennedy’s assassination news. They found that more than half of the respondents got the news by the interpersonal communication. Whereas 25% got by direct exposure to TV and 15% from Radio.

Allem & Colefox (1968) studied the diffusion of news regarding President Johnson’s decision about not holding the office again. They found that 75% of people learned from TV directly. Reason for this was probably the Sunday evening and people were enjoying TV at home which resulted in direct exposure to mass media.

De-Fluer (1988) made some general considerations regarding news diffusion.

- I. Television has become the most important sources for news dissemination, followed by Radio. Whereas newspaper has been used for greater details of these news spreaded by TV and Radio.
- II. Although news spread by the “word of mouth” proved to be a potential mode for propagation of information as well, but “two-step flow” doesn’t describe the patterns of this interpersonal diffusion.
- III. News with high “news values” travels at faster pace among people.

Studler, (1999) studied one of the most important phenomena regarding the Campaigns of tobacco control which are also burning issue for the researchers of sociology. There had been campaigns for this cause but success rate of these vary throughout the world. The article by Garrison, (2000) reviewed the on-line data collection by the newsmen of different news papers in USA. During five years study period from 1994 to 1998, it was analyzed that on-line data collection was adopted in steps before reaching a proficient technique. Most of the journalists used Alta Vista and Yahoo as the basic resource for searching.

Commercial organizations providing government data and archival database were also used widely.

Kim, Chitins, Vasanti & Singhal (2007) analyzed the diffusion of E-chopal concept in rural areas of India. As these E-chopals were set up in premises of the opinion leader of that particular village so this study also examined the two-step flow of communication as well. This idea of E-chopal was initiated by a tobacco company in order to provide latest crop prices to the farmers. The study concluded that the diffusion of this innovation had a great pace but decision making regarding instructions was slow, particularly in those areas where opinion leader was a middle man in crop selling process as well.

Roger E.M. (2003) not only set the paradigm for diffusion research but credit of a large number of these studies goes to him as well. Roger analyzed thousands of researches of other scientists to develop the adopter categories and pattern of adoption.

Some major works analyzed by Rogers includes:

- i. Hybrid seed corn (1950)
- ii. Acceptance of New techniques in mathematics (1965)
- iii. Water purification in Egypt (1989)
- iv. Diffusion of kindergarten education worldwide (2000)
- v. Acceptance of invention of refrigerator.
- vi. Contribution of computers and lap tops in human life
- vii. Diffusion of mobile phone technology. etc

Gijsbrs & Tudler, (2011) did a value able addition in diffusion of innovation studies by exploring finding out missing linkages between agricultural innovations and their awareness. This study focused on four medium sized Asian countries including Pakistan, Srilanka, Indonesia and Vietnam. It was found that the dissemination of information between public sector organizations and farmers was very poor. Although people wanted to know about the new agricultural techniques like green houses, super market revolutions and biotechnological innovations but the magnitude of response to this interest was very low.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Following are the research questioned, raised, to find out the impression caused by the political use of mobile phone technology:

1. What is the adoption rate of political communication through mobile phones?
2. Will the political participation of citizens be increased due to political communication through mobile phones?
3. What are the obstacles in political communication through text messaging on mobile phone?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study aimed to investigate the response of citizens towards the political campaigning through mobile phones. The population of the study comprised of the residents of Faisalabad city, regardless of the age, gender, socio-economic status and level of education. The city of Faisalabad was selected for this study as it is the 3<sup>rd</sup> most populous city of Pakistan. It is located among a variety of rural areas and on the other hand being an industrialized city it also possesses the properties of an urban area. Simple random sampling technique (with replacement) was used and a sample of 500 respondents was selected. Survey questionnaire was used as a tool for data collection. Questions regarding the ownership of mobile set and

deficiency of education as an obstacle to read the SMS were included as screener. The respondents giving negative answers of these two questions were replaced by other eligible respondents.

## **FINDINGS**

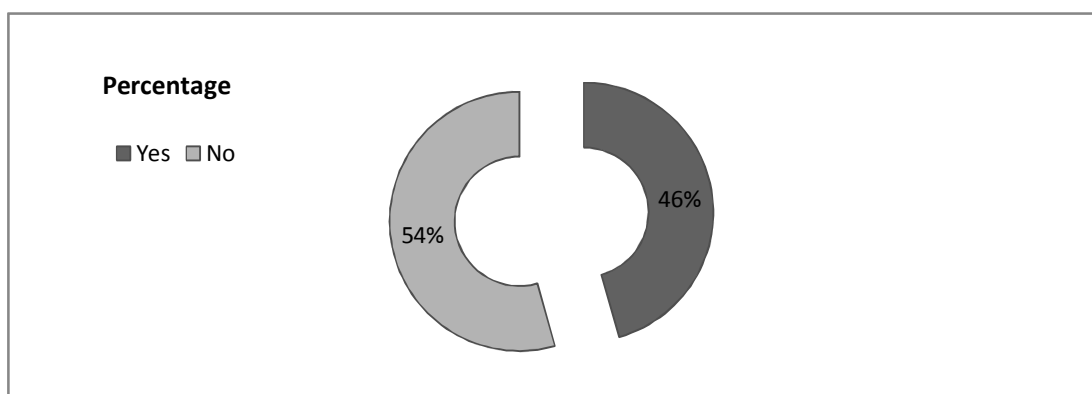
Ownership of mobile phone was the basic requirement for a respondent to be included in the study. There were 13 people who did not own a mobile phone so after their exclusion 546 respondents out of 559 were continued for the remaining questionnaire.

In addition to that the utility of the text messages was possible only if the receiver could be able to read it. Out of 712 people, there were 212 respondents who could not read out the SMS. So they were replaced with the eligible participants to make the sample strength of 500 for the rest of the study.

It was inquired from the respondents, either they find it easy to attend the SMS from the political parties or they consider these as unwanted intrusion into their busy life. In response to this query, it was found that majority of the respondents (82%) did not take it as a problematic task to attend the political messages; rather they enjoyed it and felt honored to get personalized attention. However a little minority (18%) of people were of the opinion that this type of messaging was wasting their time and diverting their attention during important tasks.

Next obvious question was regarding the participation of respondents in this communication process through mobile phones. It was nice to know that 66% of the research subjects were at ease to participate in this political communication by responding to the SMS. They committed that they seldom took part in political activities physically, prior to this type of participation through mobile phone. On the other hand 34% of the respondents although attended the political messages but did not bother to respond these.

Another important dimension of this study was to assess the instigation for socialization by forwarding these messages to friends. If someone forwarded the SMS of a political party to a



friend, it was a success on the part of that political party because at least that sender gave a sense of affiliation and loyalty to that party by owning its point of view.

Fig 2. Socializing through political information N=500

It was found that 46% of the research subjects forwarded these political messages to one or more friends. Remaining 54% either did not forward the messages due to lack of time or they took it as a liability to own this type of political content.

Ultimate objective of political parties for this activity of political communication through mobile phones was to motivate the people for physical participation in political activities specially casting their vote.

Respondents were asked by the researchers about their physical participation in the political activities. It was found that 72% of them took part in political process physically, although it was limited to the election days only. They committed that political SMS were also one of the factors for this participation among other factors like social pressure and TV talk shows etc.

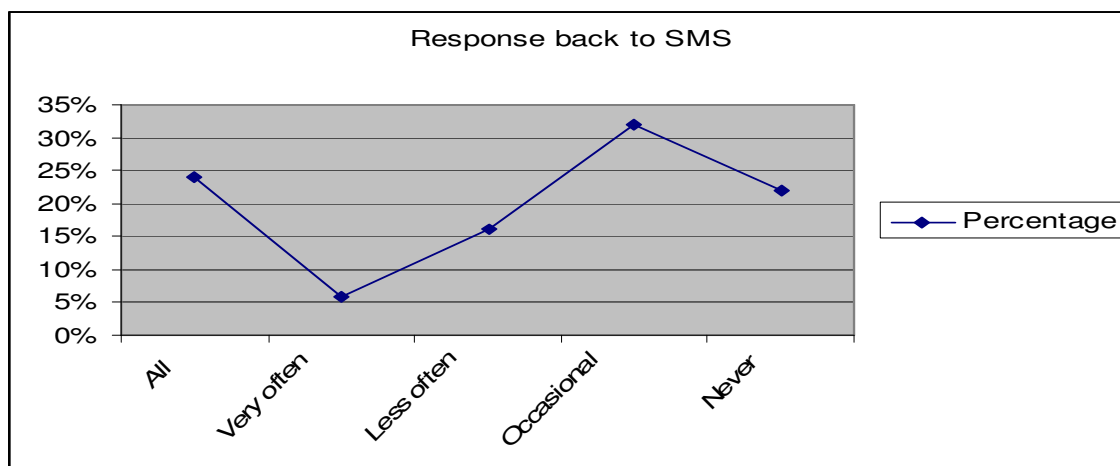


Fig 3. Frequency of responding back to political messaging.

Adoption of political communication through SMS was evaluated by the responses given back by the user to sender. Graphical presentation of the collected data in this regard seems to follow the Rogers’s adoption pattern but span of time consumed by every category is on lower side as

compared to the usual adoption of different innovations analyzed by E M Roger.

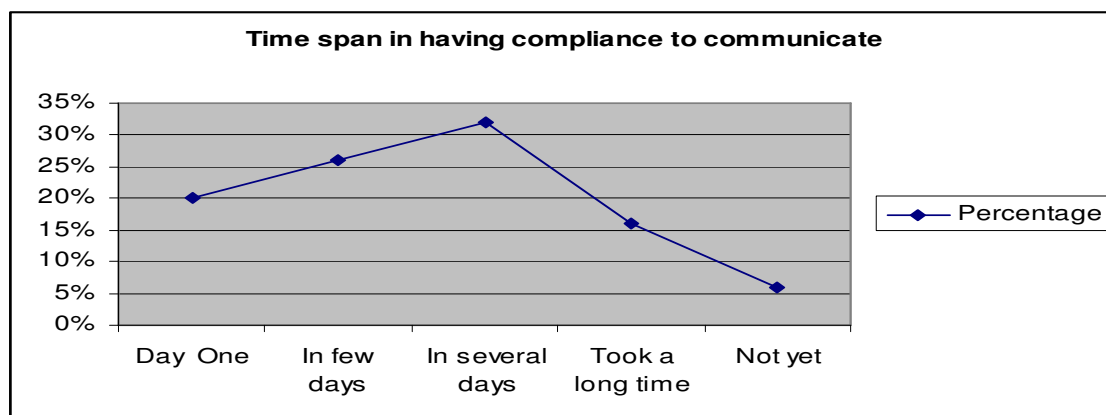


Fig 4. Time span in having compliance to communicate

Above line graph shows the pattern of the time span consumed to be at ease with the new way of political communication. If we categories above values ass per Roger’s categories, developed for adoption, we find that 20% of the respondents may be labeled as “innovators” and 26% as early adopters, whereas 32% and 16% are early majority and late majority

respectively. 6% laggards are also there who still are reluctant to adopt this new type of communication.

## **CONCLUSION**

1. Adopters of this innovative idea were categorized into five types and it was found that adoption rate kept on increasing with the passage of time. Although these adoption percentages did not match the E M Roger's categories but the pace of adoption was much higher. Possible reason for this high pace might be the facilitated way and easy access to communication.
2. It has been found that by responding to the text messages and forwarding these to the friends created a sense of responsibility and feeling of ownership of a political party.
3. Education proved to be a big barrier in adoption of this communication technique. A number of illiterate people could not participate in this communication process due to this barrier.
4. Availability of mobile phones was not a cause of concern because of the low cost and easy handling of this technology.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

1. Respondents might become more familiar and even loyal to the political party if the communication be more persistent and diversified for example chunks of political knowledge might be added into this activity.
2. For a huge uneducated population, instead of text message only, call centers may be developed to call and communicate with such respondents in their local language.



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