

MOBILE MARKETING: ACCEPTANCE OF THE SMS ADS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT. *This paper examines the acceptance of SMS marketing on the basis of the role of users' consent which plays a vital role in its success. This study is of qualitative nature, and is conducted in the context of Pakistan. Data for the study was gathered using twenty semi-structured interviews from two groups each of ten members. The first group (G1) comprised of University level students, while the other group comprised of members from general public. Convenient sampling as a non-probability sampling was used. This study is cross-sectional because the interviews were conducted at one point of time. For analysis purpose, NVivo 10 was used with the help of which the transcribed interviews were assessed. The results of the study show that the marketers should not bombard the subscribers with SMS ads without their consent and permission. Other than consent, the frequency and the timing at which these advertising messages are sent to the users should not be random, and be controlled. The content which is sent by the Mobile Network Operator (MNO) should also be evaluated and controlled, and the SMS advertisements should be checked for the spam.*

Keywords: Mobile Advertising, Mobile Marketing, SMS Marketing, SMS Ads, Consumer Behavior, Pakistan

1. **Introduction.** As the world has become a global village with products and services being available across the globe, the competition among the businesses had increased tremendously. In order to compete both locally and internationally, it is important for any business to give extra attention to the innovative, unique and eye-catching marketing tools. The main purpose of marketing is to grasp the maximum attention on the ads. For this purpose the marketers use new and innovative ways of advertisements to promote the products and services. Televisions, radios, magazines, billboards, pamphlets, internet, e-mails, social networking and many others mediums have been used by the marketers to communicate information about the products and services. Over the decade marketing via the mobile phones especially via the short messaging service (SMS) has been adopted as the latest medium of communication.

It has been due to ease and reach of the SMS that has made it so popular around the world amongst all the mobile users especially the younger generation, who prefer SMS over the voice calls in order to stay in touch with their social contacts (Rheingold, 2003). Alphanumeric text messages can be transmitted via SMS with a maximum of 160

characters per SMS, with time depending upon the ease or complexity of the keypad or touch layout (Kim, Park & Oh, 2008). It has been the richness of content in SMS, the cost of SMS, the quickness of its delivery and the masses it can reach that has promoted the use of SMS marketing over the other mediums of communication. The good thing about SMS marketing is that the marketers can get directly in touch with the target market customers and have their attention. The other good thing about SMS marketing is that any mobile-service subscriber can send and receive the text messages in real-time, and one does not have to connect to the internet as in case of e-mails.

The widespread of mobile technologies and the advancements in it in terms of 3G and 4G networks around the world has enhanced the role of mobile marketing even more (Rohm et al., 2012). Untethered mobile marketing has been adopted as a platform by many multinational and branded companies in the different parts of the world. Apart from SMS service, the other major usage of the mobiles that is more popular in the developed countries is the access to internet on their handsets. It has been predicted by the experts that by 2015, 90% of the world would be connected via some kind of mobile handset.

According to Dickson (2012), 5.9 trillion messages were sent in the year 2011, and by the year 2016 the number of sent messages is expected to increase to 9.4 trillion messages. According to another press release by Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB, 2012), \$5.3 billion were spent on mobile advertising in 2011 out of which \$536 million were spent on advertising through messages across the globe. Although, the developing countries are in the race to adopt such technologies they still lag in providing these services at the earliest. Thus, in the context of Pakistan which is an Asian developing country, we would emphasize on SMS service only. According to the latest report of Dawn News (2012) there are over 119 million mobile phone subscribers in Pakistan.

In the last few years the SMS advertisements are used as a famous mean of marketing. This study would be based on the question that whether this method of marketing is really effective for the business, and does the consent of users have any impact on the acceptance of the SMS ads? The study would try to find out the effectiveness of SMS marketing, its impact on the sales of the company, the customers view point about the SMS marketing, and the potential of SMS to be used as marketing tool in future.

The Section 1 of this paper provides the background of the SMS technology and SMS marketing. It is followed by the literature review in Section 2, and methodology in Section 3. Results from the empirical findings are provided in Section 5. The 6th Section is about the discussion, and the last section, Section 7 concludes the study under the heading Conclusion.

2. Literature Review: The technology involved in SMS allows the marketers to send ads in a single message to a number of people who can review it, store it and even forward it to others (Wei et al., 2010). All the communication technologies like radio, television and the internet evolved after going through a commercialization process via which the financial support by the third-party advertisers was provided to these media platforms. Technologically, SMS advertising uses the concept of one-to-many level communication, with the same ad message broadcasted to many users, and also point-to-point interactive communication involving the transmission of message between two users. This has resulted in the convergence of SMS technology with the other mediums such as e-mail and instant messaging (Wei et al., 2010).

Mobile interaction has given the Asian community a voice which was difficult to hear before its advent (Handley, 2006). The adoption of mobile technology in Asia is classified to be the successor of internet, in a way the internet revolutionized the Asian market prior to the widespread use of mobile. It was a precipitated shift in the Asian society coupled with power it has given to the people by allowing them to express themselves by taking the challenge against the customs of the society. Thus, just like the internet, the acceptability of the mobile technology in the Asian countries has given it an access to communicate with the rest of the world. The important thing being discussed by Handley (2006) in his study is the understanding of the target audience for marketing a brand, product or service to them, rather than emphasizing on the medium, the product or the locality used for transmitting the marketing message.

Mobile phone technology is a more private medium of communication and interaction as opposed to the radio, television and internet which are meant for the mass communication. Mobile users and subscribers have strong sense of ownership as per the usage cost they bear for utilizing the services of it. According to Wei et al. (2010) the critical aspects which should be considered in terms of assessing the attitudes and response of the mobile phone users

towards SMS marketing are: prior consent, privacy and tangible benefits. In the aforementioned criticalities, the tangible benefits from the advertiser and marketers should outweigh the other two aspects of prior consent and privacy, and then only the users are likely to accept the SMS ads. These SMS ads are forwarded by the mobile users to their family and friends if they are contented with the matters of consent and privacy.

In their study, Wei et al. (2010) has concluded that mobile users embrace locations based SMS ads with discounts or coupons more happily than the routine SMS ads. Thus the success of marketers is held in finding the right target market for the right product or service at the right time and place, which could be achieved by the advertisers by generating the users' data from the mobile service providers. The success of SMS advertising has been focused on the implications such as: integration of mobile medium into the marketing mix, avoiding spam messages, and planning one-on-one marketing campaigns which could provide the mobile users with consent-based and benefits-filled interaction, information, and entertainment.

From the perspective of marketing, the advancements in mobile technologies are considered to be the rapidly growing platform of communication for marketers. The reason behind this is the widespread use of a variety of mobile handsets around the world. In their study, Rohm et al. (2012) have found that an individuals' attitude towards mobile marketing in three large regions of US, China and Western Europe, is directly affected by the "perceived usefulness, consumer innovativeness, and personal attachment" and is negatively affected by "risk avoidance". SMS is one of the platforms within the mobile marketing, which is defined as the delivering of personalized information to the stakeholders concerning the products and services, in order to generate value for both the organization and the customer (Dickinger et al, 2004).

SMS has gained the popularity amongst all the age groups due to the ease of its usage for interpersonal contact (Dickinger et al, 2004). The elements of success for SMS that are identified by Xu et al. (2003) are: the effectiveness in terms of the cost and the interoperability of the networks, excessive adoption of the mobile phones, and the competitively low prices for the messaging services. Carroll et al. (2007) in their study have highlighted the concerns of the consumers in terms of their perception of the mobile advertisements and their acceptability. This is because no organization would want to lose their current or potential customers due to unsolicited messages, as the customers are prudent about their rights to the privacy. They have suggested that mobile advertising should be deployed in a cautious manner keeping in view the consumers perception and acceptance. This trust and permission from the consumers' side is considered to be the biggest challenge for the marketers.

Content relevance, timeliness and the frequency with which the advertising messages are delivered to the consumers, needs to be given focused attention (Carroll et al., 2007). The phenomena of "viral marketing", which is also referred to as "buzz", has gained popularity with the increasing use of SMS as it can spread the good or bad image or news about any product or service (Dobele et al., 2005). Viral marketing is the dissemination of information or the spread via the word-of-mouth from one consumer to another prospective consumer. In the case of SMS marketing, viral marketing refers to the forwarding of messages to other people within the social circle by promoting the information about any brand, product or service. The advantages of viral marketing as identified in the study of Dobele et al. (2005) are that the forwarded messages are less expensive, forwarded voluntarily by the end-user, and lastly the person forwarding the message knows the interests of his/her social circle.

Keropyan and Gil-Lafuente (2012) in their paper has talked about how companies use mobile technology for their customer relationship management (CRM) in order to deliver the right marketing message to the right person as per their values through managed marketing strategies. The conclusions they have derived from their study are that for ensuring the CRM, different organizations have adopted different kinds of loyalty programs, mobile (m-) coupons redemption, and brand awareness via mobile platform according to the particular age groups targeted. Studies have been conducted on the perception and acceptance of the mobile (m-) advertisements by the consumers on the basis of cultural differences that prevail across the borders (Liu et al., 2012; Muk, 2007). Muk (2007) did a study on the adoption of SMS advertising on the basis of cultural influences that hold in the context of American and Taiwanese society.

In extension, Liu et al. (2012), in their study have worked on the determinants of perceptions held by consumers in Japan and Austria towards the mobile advertising, and have found that Japanese consumers are not much inclined towards mobile advertising as does the Austrian consumers. Three antecedents of perceived value of mobile advertising identified by Liu et al. (2012) are: infotainment, irritation and credibility. The perceived value of

advertising was identified by them to be most dominating factor of consumers' attitude towards advertising that are being affect by the prevailing cross-cultural differences.

Kaplan (2012) has proposed the concept of "Four I's see more than two", in which four aspects of reaching the mobile phones users through social media has been constructed. These 'Four I's' are: integration, individualization, involvement and initiation. Integration is that companies should integrate their social activities into the life of a user in such a way that they don't feel nuisance about the firm. Individualization focuses on providing the opportunities to cater the specific preferential needs and interests of the users. Involvement refers to indulging the user in a conversational style whereas initiation emphasizes on triggering the user generated content and word of mouth that ultimately leads to the integration of tasks.

Shankar and Balasubramanian (2009) have proposed that the companies should rethink about their marketing strategies for mobile advertisements. Companies push themselves into the whirls of failure by simply adopting the same marketing strategy for mobile phones which they have used for internet marketing. The target audience should be provided with an opt-in function where they could register for the SMS ads as per their consent, rather than pushing the content on to their mobile screens. Emphasis should be placed on the assessment of the behavior prevailing in the target market regarding the SMS ads medium, in order to better equip themselves regarding what would work and what not. Considerations should also be placed on the elements such as the social networking, location-based ads, and controlling the frequency with which the audience is bombarded with SMS marketing (Okazaki and Taylor, 2008; Kim et al., 2008).

As far as telecom industry in Pakistan is concerned, it is a well flourished industry, which had shown a remarkable progress in last few years. This is because of a strong competition between different telecommunication service offering firms, this strong competition compel them to offer cheaper rates, which made it affordable to almost every social class in Pakistan. This increase in the customer base brings higher returns and positive changes for the company. The number of subscribers increased from 68000 to 95000000, from the year 1996 to 2009 (PTA). The five year cellular growth time in Pakistan, from 2003 to 2008, broke all the world records. The cellular companies in Pakistan showed 100% growth rate for many years (PTA, 2011).

3. Methodology: In order to examine the adoptability of SMS advertising amongst the mobile users in Pakistan and whether the pre-sought permission from the users can drive the acceptance of SMS ads, this study has incorporated qualitative approach. A semi-structured interview method was employed to collect the empirical data from the respondents for which an interview guide was developed on the basis of the findings, theories and models identified in the literature review.

For the purpose of sampling, convenient sampling method was employed which is a non-probability sampling method. Convenient sampling was used due to the limitations of time and the quick availability of the sample. A total of 20 respondents were selected from Attock city in Pakistan. These 20 respondents were from two different groups out of which the first group (G1) consisting of 10 respondents represented the students from a university. These students were either studying at the undergraduate level or at the graduate level. Their age group varied from 18 to 26 years. The other group (G2) also consisting of 10 respondents was the group of normal mobile users/subscribers (businessmen, academicians, managers, and sales personnel). Face to face interviews were conducted with these respondents. Each interview was of 18-20 minutes. In this study, the emphasis has been placed only on the SMS ads sent by MNO firms because so far in Pakistan it is mostly the network service providers who send SMS ads to their subscribers.

Prior to the interviews, the consent of the respondents was sought by sending them a formal letter describing the nature of the research, and then as per their willingness the date and time was decided. On their consent they were provided the interview guide beforehand so that they can prepare for the interview. In accordance with the ethics of the research, the identity of the respondents would not be disclosed and would be kept anonymous. Field notes were taken during the interview, which were later transcribed and then analyzed according to the developed literature review. For the purpose of analysis of the data, the transcribed interviews were fed into the NVivo 10 software to provide the model for the study, text search query, word frequency query, and other assessments.

Among the 20 respondents, 60% (n=12) of the respondents were male, while the other half, 40% (n=8) were females. As there are 5 MNO organizations operating in Pakistan, the sample selection was done in such a way that

in each group there is equal representation of each MNO. For this reason 2 respondents of each MNO firm in each group were selected for the interviews. This was done in order to eliminate the biasness and assign equal weight-age to each MNO firm. The age group of the G1 respondents ranged from 18 – 26, with the majority of the respondents in the age between 22 and 23, 60% (n=6). The age group of G2 members varied from 20 – 45 years. 90% of the participants have been using mobile phone from last 2 years.

4. Empirical Results

4.1. Results of group G1 Interviews. The transcribed interviews from group G1 members, who were students of a university, portrayed that all of the subscribers irrespective of the MNO they were registered to, received SMS ads. The subscribers of Mobilink receive the highest number of SMS ads on average (25 SMS/week), followed by Warid subscribers who receive 22 SMS/week on average. Ufone subscribers on the average received 20 SMS/week; Telenor and Zong subscribers received less than 15 SMS/week on average. Table 1 and Figure 1 in the end of the study provide this comparison.

None of the subscribers interviewed were asked for their consent or permission by the MNO prior to sending them SMS ads. It has been identified over and over in the literature review by various researchers that seeking the mobile users' consent prior to bombarding them with SMS ads plays a very vital role. It is this consent which determines their attitude and reflection towards the product or service, and it might lead to failure and reverse reaction. Some of the respondents said that they did call the help-line or have visited the MNO service/center or franchise in order to block the excessive transmission of SMS ads to their mobile phones.

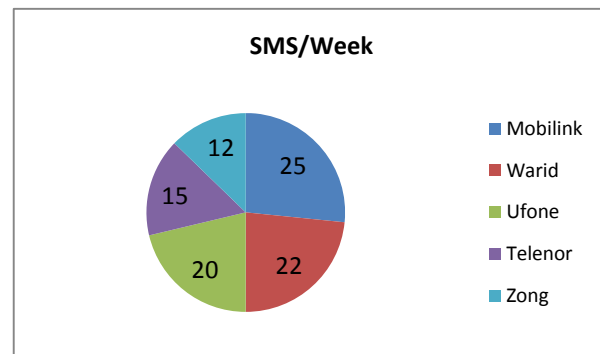
The reply to SMS ads from the student subscribers was very low. Only three of the respondents had replied to an SMS ad, while the other seven had never replied to an SMS ad. On concern it was identified that these SMS ads were mostly not of interest to them. Sometimes, the subscribers would get the same SMS ad over and over again for days and weeks which make them irritated. Even though when the subscribers tried to opt out of these SMS ads, they still received these SMS ads.

Most of the subscribers added that they mostly delete such SMS ads even without opening it and looking into it that what has been sent to them. When probed the reason for this was the frequency and the timing with which these subscribers were sent these messages by the MNO. None of these subscribers have ever forwarded these SMS ads to their friends and family. The reason provided for this was that they have hardly ever got an attractive offer in these ads which could be either utilized by one or forwarded to others. Apart from this as these SMS ads are from a particular MNO, one does not can take a burden to identify that which of their friends and family uses the same MNO.

MNO	SMS/Week
Mobilink	25
Warid	22
Ufone	20
Telenor	15
Zong	12

Table 1 &

Figure



1: SMS/week sent by different MNOs

The satisfaction of the subscribers from their MNOs' presented different results for each MNO. The highest level of satisfaction from the services was reported by the subscribers of Telenor and Warid, and were not willing to switch to another MNO. The subscribers of Mobilink and Zong were not extremely satisfied from the services provided by

their MNO but they were not willing to switch to another MNO as well. The satisfaction level amongst the Ufone subscribers' was low and they were prone to switch the MNO if the issues persisted.

Mix opinions were gathered when inquired about the brand awareness created by these SMS ads in terms of informing their subscribers about the new packages and discounts offered by the MNO. 60% (n=6) of the respondents said that these SMS ads did bring into their knowledge the launch of new services, offers, packages (voice calls, SMS, internet), events and discounts. While the other 40% negated it by saying that it is mostly the known information which is being sent to them, or the SMS ads are about the offers or packages they are already using. Around 40% (n=4) respondents have used the information in the SMS ads and have availed the opportunity in terms of either opting for that package or discount. Rest of the 60% (n=6) have never used any of the offers made to them or services promoted to them in the form of SMS ad. For the 20% who availed the SMS ads, have used the information in SMS ads either to buy SMS packages, voice minutes packages or internet bundles.

Except for two respondents, the rest of the all respondents wanted to receive SMS ads in the future but under certain conditions. These conditions were that the subscribers permission at first place should be obtained and the content sent to them in SMS ads should be related the services offered by MNO. The interesting element discussed by one of the respondents was that futuristic SMS ads would be accepted only if they are customized as per the needs of the subscriber. The inquiry regarding the suggestion of the particular MNO subscribers by the mobile user to their friends and family, 90% (n=9) of the respondents said they would except for one respondent.

4.2. Results of group G2 interviews. The transcribed interviews from group G2 member revealed that just like the G1 members, all of the subscribers in G2 also received SMS ads from their subscribed MNOs'. In G2, the subscribers of Ufone received the highest number of SMS ads on average (24 SMS/week), followed by Warid subscribers who receive 20 SMS/week on average. Telenor subscribers on the average received 17 SMS/week; Mobilink subscribers received 15 SMS/week and Zong subscribers received 11 SMS/week on average. In the end of the study, Table 2 and Figure 2 provide this comparison.

Similar to the results from G1 members, none of the subscribers interviewed in group G2 were asked for their consent by the MNO before sending them SMS ads. The concern over consent and seeking the permission of subscribers did make a difference for the whole group especially the academicians and the managers. The argument presented by them was that there is no time or frequency fixed for these SMS ads, and often you get to receive them at unwanted time and place, which irritates the subscriber and makes him lose the attention.

MNO	SMS/Week
Ufone	24
Warid	20
Telenor	17
Mobilink	15
Zong	11

Table 2

&

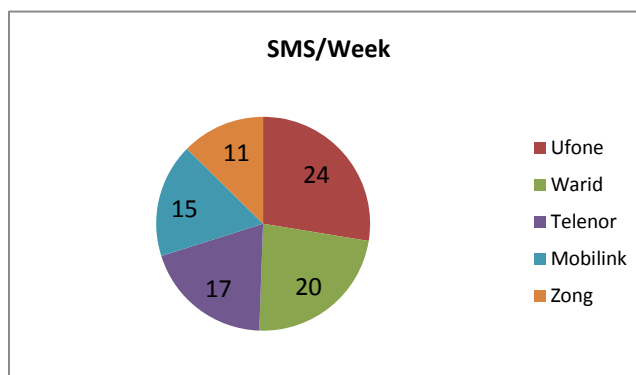


Figure 2: SMS/week sent by different MNOs

None of the group G2 members ever replied to SMS ads. This trend is also similar to that prevails amongst the student subscribers. As these ads were not sought by the subscribers, thus they did not ignite any interest in them to either review it or utilize the information in it. The irritating element identified by the G2 group similar to the G1 group was the bombardment of the same SMS ad over and over again. In reference to this, the other point highlighted by G2 members was that they were not provided with any option with which they can unsubscribe

themselves from the SMS ads list.

Of the interest was a point made by one of the respondent by mentioning that the numbers from which SMS ads are received have become so known that any message with that specific number is directly deleted without opening them. Again the reason for this was the impermissible SMS ads sent to them. When inquired about the forwarding of such messages to their friends and family, none of them had ever done so. It was due to unattractiveness of these messages which did not develop the interest in the subscriber at first place, so how come it could be forwarded to others.

The satisfaction of different MNO subscribers showed different results for each MNO. The highest levels of satisfaction in group G2 prevailed for the subscribers of Mobilink, and were not willing to switch. The subscribers of Telenor, Warid and Ufone were satisfied to some extent from their MNO but they were not willing to switch to another MNO as well. The low satisfaction level prevailed for Zong subscribers' which made them eager to switch to another MNO.

In case of G2 respondents, the SMS ads did not create much of the brand awareness because such ads were not expected by them at first place. Even if these SMS ads were about the MNO firm, still they did not create much eagerness in the subscribers to review them. Majority of the respondents were of the opinion that the new offers and packages are not of their interest because they are mostly for the young generation with cheap SMS packages and internet offers. Their business needs are not targeted in these ads, and thus they are of little importance to them. Only 20% (n=2) respondents have used the information in the SMS ads and have availed the opportunity in terms of either opting for that package or discount. The remaining 80% (n=8) have never used any of the promotional services in SMS ads.

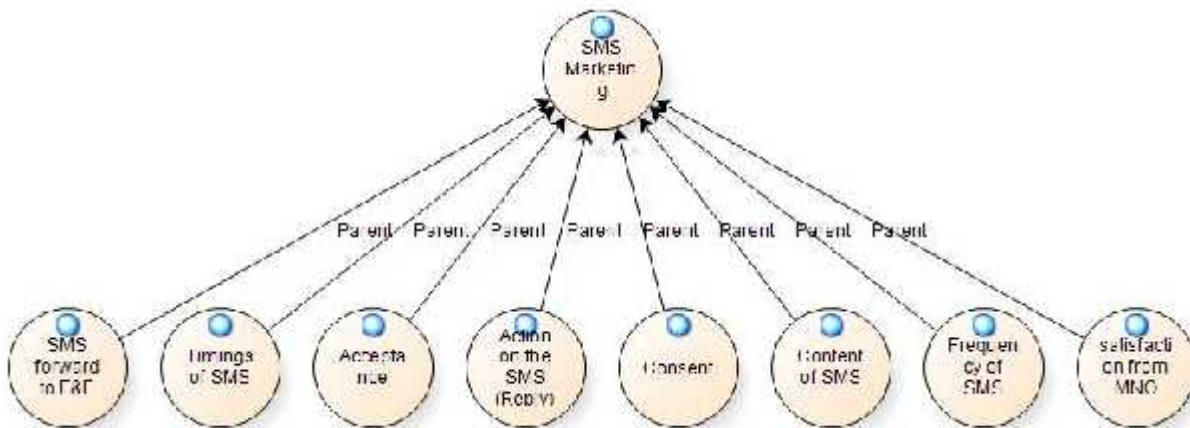
The group G2 respondents were not interested in receiving any kind of SMS ads in future. Of least if they had to receive SMS ads then it should be with a controlled frequency and time-frame, and as per the permission of the subscriber and tailored according to their preferences. Irrespective of the SMS ads, all the respondents of group G2 were willing to suggest their MNO to the members of their social circle.

5. Discussion. The study shows that all the interviewed mobile subscribers received SMS ads irrespective of the MNO they were registered to, and this shows that MNOs' do bombard their subscribers with SMS ads. The MNO firms do not seek any consent from their subscribers before sending them these SMS ads. The results of the study concerning the importance of the subscribers' consent validates the conjecture of the previous findings in the literature review that it is the consent of the subscribers which makes a user consider the SMS ad and ultimately make a transaction based on the information provided in that message (Wei et al., 2010; Carroll et al., 2007). The important point about which the subscribers have raised their concerns was the issue with the timings and the frequency of these SMS ads. There are no fixed timings at which these SMS ads are sent to the target market, and there is no controlled limit with which these SMS ads are being sent.

Application of different tools from the NVivo on the collected data shows that as per the results of *word frequency query*, the word SMS was used the most in the study followed by the words like: ads (advertisements) and subscribers. The *text search query* tool of the NVivo using the words SMS ads shows the linkages and branches of the associations with what the respondents have mentioned in their response to the particular questions raised. These associations are about the views, opinions, interests, consent, acceptance, actions taken and the forwarding of these SMS ads to family and friends.

The proposed model which was developed using the information processing in the NVivo shows that SMS marketing which is a parent node is associated with the following child nodes which are: consent, timings, frequency, content, acceptance, action taken, satisfaction from the MNO and the forwarding of these SMS ads to the family and friends. The earlier four nodes define the activities presented in the later four nodes that is the consent of subscribers, and the frequency, timings and the content of the SMS ad drives the acceptance, action taken, satisfaction and the forwarding of the SMS ads.

The Proposed Model

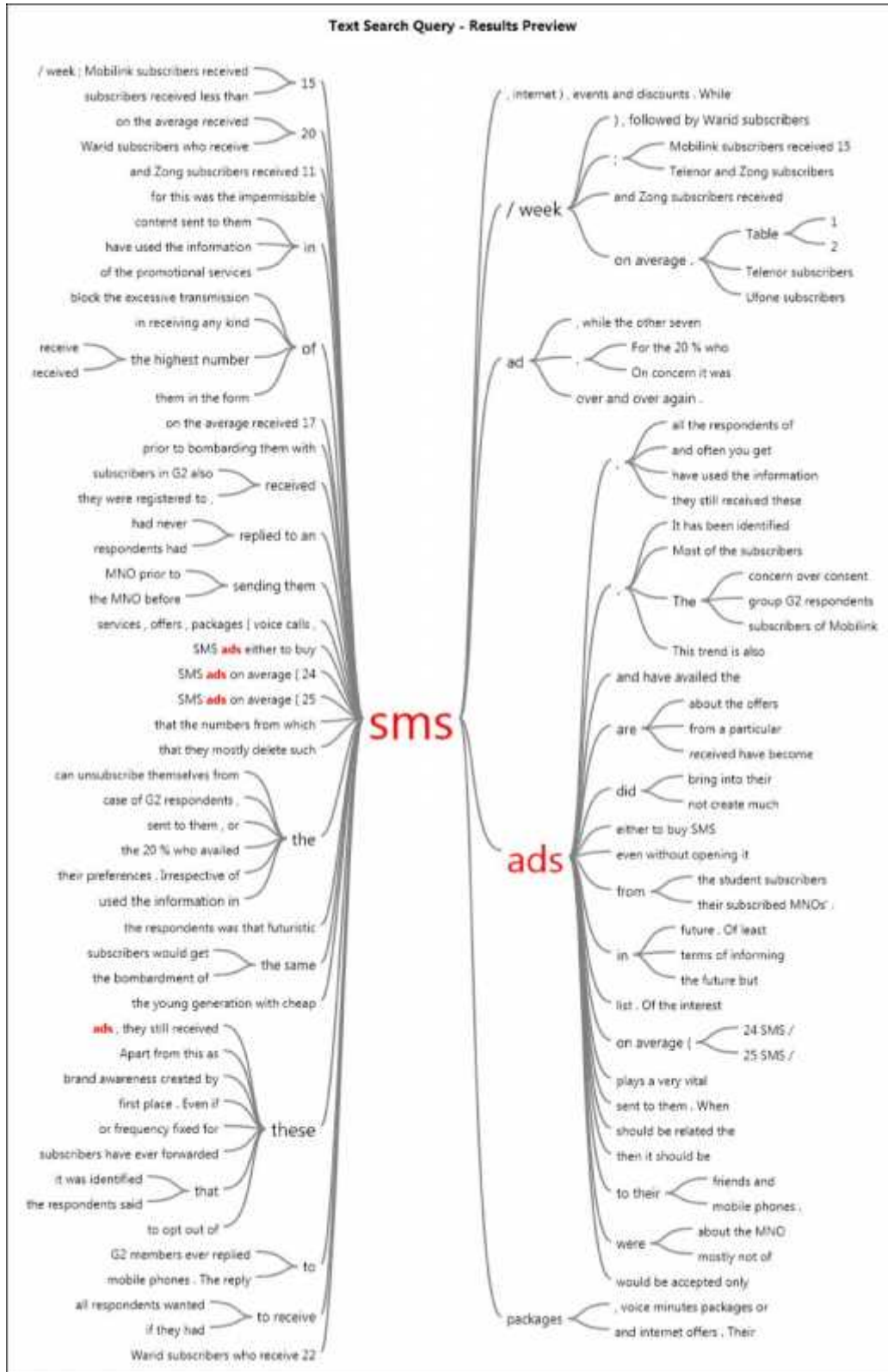


- 6. Conclusion.** Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) in order to advertise or promote their services, packages and offers bombard their subscribers with high frequency push messages without the consent of the subscribers which makes them reluctant to SMS ads. The other striking concern for all the subscribers irrespective of the MNO they are registered with was of the consent and permission for SMS ads to be pushed onto to the users' mobile phones. Marketers and advertisers try to implement the similar marketing strategies for mobile marketing which they adopted for internet marketing. Other than consent, the frequency with which these SMS ads are sent to the subscribers and the timing at which they are sent have made the subscribers skeptical and irritated about it. It is a true statement that *excess of everything is bad*. Although by adopting such marketing strategies the MNO firms are trying to promote their new products, services, launches, packages, bundle offers etc., but all this should be done in a controlled manner with prior consent of the subscribers, and monitored frequency, timing and content. Random bombardment of SMS ads to the mobile phones of the users can turn out to be a failure for the MNOs rather than gaining them brand awareness, loyalty and market share.

The study suggests that prior to sending SMS ads to any subscriber; his/her permission should be sought. This prior consent gives the company an ethical authority to send SMS ads to subscribers at their will. An optimal level of control mechanism should be developed with the help of which the SMS ads to a particular target market of potential customers could be sent. Reliable and valid information should be sent to the subscribers in the SMS ads, obsolete and incompatible information and updates should be avoided.

Word Frequency Query Results: ad ads also amongst another asked availed average awareness brand comparison concern conditions consent create different discount discounts either element even ever except family figure first followed forwarded frequency friends future g1 g2 get group highest identified information inquired interest internet interviewed interviews irrespective known level low made make messages mno mnos' mobile mobilink mostly much n needs never new none number offers one packages permission place provided reason receive received replied respondents results review satisfaction sent services similar sms subscriber switch telenor terms time subscribers ufone used warid week willing zong

Text Search Query Result



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