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Perceived Effect of Global System of Mobile Communication on Older Adults in South Western Nigeria

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Abstract

GSM introduction into Nigeria facilitated communication, shortened distance barrier, and provided instant response to matters of concern. Their stereotype beliefs and phobia became worrisome because of an assumed “Satanic” GSM in the South Western part of Nigeria. This “Satanic Telephone” generated vitriolic controversies among different groups of people, particularly the older people. This study was therefore designed to investigate the perceived effect of GSM on the older adults. The study adopted survey design. The sample for the study consisted of 400 older adults selected from academic, market men /women, self –employed and civil servants. They were selected through stratified sampling technique based on education, gender, ethnicity and nature of their jobs. The result showed that 68% of the older adults believed that GSM had introduced new dimension into the morality of the youths. Socially, 76% agreed that GSM discouraged face-to-face conversation among the older adults. Also 61% believed that older adults, who use GSM heavily, develop weaker social relationship. 50% believed the “Satanic” GSM, 22% believed averagely while 19% did not believe. On the psycho-social effect, 48% of the older adults said it created fear in them, 22% averagely and 30% agreed that they did not develop any fear.

Key Words: “Satanic” GSM phone, Vmobile, Glomobile, Communication, Radio Frequency (RF), Radio Frequency and Electromagnetic Force (RFEMF) and Hyper sensitivity,

Introduction

The introduction of GSM is a new technology that has been perceived differently in different cultures. It serves different purposes depending upon, the technological standard and educational status of the user. This means of communication has raised many questions in Europe, America, and the Asia. For example around 2001, the use of the new communication devices started to generate concern about its health risks. There were several stereotypes beliefs, biases and misconceptions about GSM that generated ripples all over the World. This led to series of conferences and studies on cell phones and GSM.

There was a documentary report in Nigeria in 2005 on the Nigerian Television Authority Network (NTA) captioned “Satanic Phone”. Satanic phone is a term coined by a commentator from Ghana on BBC programme, which will be discussed later in this report. It involves the metaphysical use of GSM by crooks or fraudsters (otherwise called “Yahoo boys”) to defraud innocent Nigerians especially older adults. Their action is associated with some mysterious and manipulative power. The message of the phone can cause anyone that answers the call to be unconscious or have part of the body maimed/removed. This uproar on the new communication device leads the scientifically minded citizens to investigate the authenticity of the claims of the satanic usage of the communication device. The issue took a new dimension and an alarming rate in year 2007. It then became desirable that this paradox generated regarding the crude experiences of paralysis, unconsciousness, loss of body parts and manipulations be accorded a qualitative and quantitative investigation. As a result of the above, a survey was put on the Obafemi Awolowo University Website to find out what Nigerians think about the satanic phones. (See <http://www.oauife.edu.ng/intraweb/forum>)

Introduction of GSM into Nigeria

GSM was introduced into Nigeria during the first term of President Obasanjo’s civilian administration. The pivotal date of GSM history in the country has been said to be August, 2001 (mobileafrica.net 2005) while the first consumer outreach programme was in March 2001. This effort was made possible by the duo of MTN and Econet. However history was made when Globacom Limited came to the scene and rolled out the pre- paid service in 2003, which completely changed the course of GSM history in Nigeria. Statistics has it that there was increase in the number of subscribers from 1.2 million to 2.17 million, while the number of base stations grew

from 500- 800 (mobile Africa. net). In 2007 according to Vmobile News, over 7 million lines were rolled out. Based on this development, Nigerian seized to be a country with lowest tele-density. Telephone which was formerly a status symbol or fashion changed, instead it became a powerful tool for business transaction, security, education, entertainment for the youth, social interaction and communication savior for the older people. According to mobile African net (2008), over 3.4 million of subscribers were older people. In the year 2008, there are over 20 million Nigerian subscribers of which the older people constitute one sixth. According to a survey report about the significance of GSM to Nigerians:

“Transaction which otherwise took a whole week to conclude now get sorted out over the phone within minutes. People no longer have to make avoidable trips from one part of the city to other. In fact with GSM phones, one can actively keep tract of proceeding” (Vmobile News P.35).

The introduction of GSM has indeed revolutionized the life of Nigerians; it has helped to reduce the seemingly high unemployment rate among the youth by engaging a substantial number in GSM trade or services. Some of the Network providers like MTN, Vmobile now Zain, Glomobile and Multi-link have under took programmes that provided opportunities for our youths to start small scale commercial GSM telephoning. Others have also entered opportunities for specialized technical services in telecommunications system usually with the support of these service providers. It is in the midst of these positive impacts that the introduction of GSM generated some controversies. It caused retrenchment in some area of economy like in the postal sector, reduction in the number of people traveling on daily basis and reduction of face-to-face communication, which is so cherished by the old people in Africa. This explains part of the reasons why this group of people was skeptical about adopting GSM. How they have been coping as the system gathers greater momentum with time is a matter that demands further investigation.

However, GSM was a big relief to families and relations of the older people as it helped to reduce the stress and trauma involved in traveling long distance to see them. Since GSM also have considerable advantages, which include safety, reasonably moderate modern communication costs, overcoming space and time challenges, older people were forced to subscribe to it. With the introduction of electronic banking (E- banking) the use of

GSM assumed an additional dimension of considerable convenience for the older adults. However the reported cases of satanic GSM by the youths have generated more concerns among the older people who initially were not enthusiastic in its adoption as a mean of communication. Their resistance in part bordered on cultural belief and value that emphasized face-to-face communication. Although there is no convincing scientific evidence to support the undesirable effect of GSM, there is still the need to investigate it. The present study also came as a result of the concerns regarding the negative feelings and mystery generated by the BBC documentary programme that featured mysterious usage of GSM in Nigeria. This study is therefore designed to investigate the effect the news had on the older adults, the way they perceived GSM and how they reacted to the news of the “satanic GSM”.

Global System of Mobile Communication and Older People

GSM has tremendous impact on older people. It has the potential to reduce the barriers to quality communication. It can also be used to communicate cheaply over distance. According to Hurmmert (1994) communication is essential for the well being of older people. Revenson (1990) also believes that as we grow old communication opportunities may become reduced. Research evidences from advanced countries indicated that communication skills decline with age (Ryan, Mender and Trovato, 1994, Coup land, Giles and Hurmmert 1998), but the situation has not been empirically studied in Nigeria. Here, it is among the older adults that communication becomes important. Our cultures cherish face-to-face communication and it is even more pronounced among the older people. It is an age long cultural belief among Nigerians that face- to -face conversation is cherished than any other means. No wonder the initial skepticism about using GSM in the country. Though Nigerian people cherish face-to-face communication, the challenges posed by absence of an efficient telephoning system cannot be easily ignored. Hence they are to make choice between developing a positive attitude to GSM or stay on with the problems of traveling long distances for every transaction, keeping poor economy, suffering the bad state of Nigerian roads, passing through the stress and trauma of long journeys coupled with insecurity on our highways, or even failing to communicate when a phone could have done the job. This challenge and the mindset of the older adults therefore have to be viewed against the backdrop of what they pass through and how they see the GSM to affect their livelihood and psychological interactions.

The Controversy about GSM

As with all new technologies, concerns were raised about the effect of the GSM phones on the public. Some studies have claimed that there are undesirable effects on the people. In a mobile phone survey in Slovenia in 2003, the data gathered showed that the median subscription to mobile phone was over 16 million people. The increasing popularity of mobile phone has raised concern for many because of believe that it poses health risks.

In a survey conducted among 17,000 Swedish people who used mobile phone, 13% reported at least one symptom such as headaches, heat rashes sensation and fatigue (Seith Stinner Eikmann2005). While in Norway the reported cases of headaches increase per the number of calls per day. The more mobile phone is used, the more the reported cases of heat sensations with those who use GSM heavily (Lancet 2000). Another research was conducted at the University of Helsinki in 2003. What necessitated the investigation was the result of the provocative and inconclusive scientific studies on the danger of mobile phones. It was to investigate the possible health effects of mobile phones. There were ten projects conducted between 1998 and 2003. The following were the results that are relevant to this study:

- mobile phone appears to influence brain electrical activity in both children and adult,
- biological studies showed that High frequency modulation electromagnetic fields (GSM 900 MHz and GSM 1800 MHz) induced stress responses in the cell,
- in addition there were changes in the blood brain barrier. (Reiri2003, Moulder, 2005).

Also according to Lancet (2005) among the thermally vulnerable areas of the body are the eyes and the testes. According to this source, because of the low blood supply, it may reduce sperm counts. It was also said that pre adolescent children are more vulnerable to any adverse health effect than adults. This is due to absorption of microwaves around the head due to head resource and the ease with which the wave can penetrate the thinner cranium of infants. There had been counter arguments against some of these findings. Some observed that mobile phones in itself does not have adverse effect, that perhaps there are other factors like age, sex, job and other psychosocial factors that are responsible. It is therefore glaring that further research studies are needed in this area. It is also the consensus opinion of those who share this opinion that mobile phones and its base stations produce radio frequency

(RF). Scientists' belief that the (RFEMF) i.e. Radio Frequency and Electromagnetic Force affects the nerve cells of mammalian brain. In order to demonstrate this, an experiment was carried out using rat that has brain development similar to human teenage brain. The experiment revealed that the radio waves emitted affected the brain cells of the rat.

Another conference was called to find out the perception of Scientists on the risks attributable to EMF. Questionnaires were developed and sent out to participants. The result of the data analyzed revealed that the radio wave emitted from GSM does not constitute many problems but that it is job affiliate that constitutes risk. According to Gillette (2001) another research was carried out by Professor Rosi Adey , a clinical neurophysiologist at Loma Linda School of Medicine in California. It was revealed that these communication devices pose undesirable risk. Other risk associated with their usage is hypersensitivity. According to Levallois (2002) the syndromes associated with it include, itching, burning sting and rashes. According to this author, hypersensitivity was defined as a phenomenon where individual experience adverse health effect while using any device that conducts electro magnetic forces (EMFS). Literature has it that most of the reported cases of hypersensitivity were mainly in Europe, North America and California.

Sufford, Person and Bran (2003) showed that the daily use of GSM poses danger to the users. In Sweden, the Swedish Government revealed that there is close dependent relationship between its usage and Cancer (Gillette 2001,Harvil 2005 and Shepherd 2005). In another study on the risks attributable to GSM, McMahan, Pritschi and Eicher (2002) found out that females are at higher risks attributable to EMFS.

Satanic GSM Scare in Nigeria

In Nigeria unlike other countries of the world, the introduction of Global System of Mobile Communication, which was a departure from the old system of communication, has affected the live of Nigerians greatly. This is because it is portable and mobile; you can phone any where at any time of the day. It has both positive and negative effects. The risk attributable to the use of GSM in Nigeria is different from those of Europe, Asia and America. In Nigeria, concern for GSM has been the reported cases of GSM killer calls (Agbu 2004) and the more recent "satanic" use of GSM by the youths. In a study carried out by Agbu (2004) titled from Koro to GSM killer calls, she discussed the psychological impact on the people. This is to buttress the fact that the phenomenon is an age long event. However, the issue has taken a

more worrisome and new dimension in the recent years. Formerly, it was a case of reported disappearance of male testis or female breast and reported cases of phone calls that have caused impotencies. The new dimension to this satanic phone saga has been that, perpetrated by the unemployed youths usually called “Yahoo boys”. These youths specialize in defrauding innocent citizens using GSM and Internet. The boys usually target the older adults who happen to have relatives in distant places. They work out a scheme of making calls through GSM and extort huge sum of money from their victims. The attempt to capture them has remained an unaccomplished task because of the ingenuity they put into planning their nefarious acts. The boys use GSM phones to defraud innocent adults on the pretence that they have information from their distant relations, often times correct names of the relatives are mentioned. But of course the battle to capture them and the perpetrators of the mysterious GSM is one that must be won in Nigeria. Another ugly dimension has been the recent practice of kidnappings in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. When there was clamp down on them by the security operatives they invented another modern method using phones, because of high rate of poverty among the people, part of what they do is to drop handsets on the ground when you pick it, the person turns into an inhuman object at the scene. Other dimension involves receiving strange call by unknown caller when the strange call is responded to, several things may occur which include the loss of any part of the body, but the most commonly reported cases are male testis, female breasts or eyes. In fact in one of the towns in the southwestern part, the law enforcement agents had napped a man when luck ran against him after an alarm was raised when a boy picked a handset and turned into a yam. Although this account may not be believed by scientific minded scholars but reports in the national and local radio showed that it is more than a rumor. The man was arrested, during a search in his house, the corpse of the boy was found in one of his bedrooms wardrobe. This matter was widely aired in one of the popular radio stations in that part of country. It was an embarrassment of considerable proportions because it put the integrity of the country at stake, bearing in mind that similar case had been reported in the past in Agbu (2004). It is a new dimension that is completely different from Koro to GSM killer calls. The perceived idea of the new satanic use of the GSM invites concern for empirical and scientific investigation since this is not the first case; the difference is that this is more alarming and rampant. The present study sets the stage in that direction. This study is therefore designed to investigate the way older people perceived GSM and the way it impact their lives.

Research Objectives

The following research objectives are stated for the study:

- examine the opinion of older people about GSM
- investigate the nature of their phobia
- find out the views of the older people about the so-called satanic phone call phenomenon and
- Examine the effect if any GSM have on their psychosocial well-being.

Methodology

The sample for the study consisted of four hundred older adults selected from different works of life. The selection was based on sex, nature of job, education, social stratum and ethnicity.

The instrument used to collect data from the sample was a structured questionnaire designed in parts. The first section was designed to collect information on the demographic data of the sample. Section II focused on the pattern of usage, while section III was concerned with the older adults' perception about GSM. Section IV sought opinion of the older people about the satanic phone phenomenon. While the last section asked for information on its psychosocial effects. This section was rated on a five-points rating scale. The Instrument was validated by expert from the Departments of Psychology, Tests and Management and Educational Technology using content and constructs validity.

The data collected was analyzed using simple percentage.

Finding and Discussion

Below are the findings of the study.

From the data analyzed it was observed that 89% of the respondents believed that the introduction of GSM into Nigeria has increased social interaction among the youths than among the older adults. Positively it has reduced insecurity of lives and properties (30% agreed very much, 48% agreed and 6% averagely). The nature of believe among the different older adults sampled was found to be pointing to the same direction as indicated in table II (i.e. that GSM benefited the youth than the older people and that it constituted a social menace). On the positive effects of GSM, questions were asked to find out what their opinion were about GSM, find the results below (Table 1). 69% of the samples were of the opinion that GSM had introduced

a new positive dimension to the morality of Nigerian, 10% agreed averagely, while 10% completely disagreed. It was also revealed that the use of GSM encouraged more time alone thus discouraging quality face-to-face conversation, which the older adults in Nigeria cherished. Seventy six percent shared this opinion while 9% disagreed. Other result showed that 61% believe that a person who uses GSM heavily developed weaker social relationship. (See items 5 table 1).

On perceived phobia about GSM, the result of the data collected from the survey revealed that 32% of the sample believed very much in the satanic use of GSM, 17% believed, while 22% agreed averagely and 19% did not believe the reported cases of satanic GSM that were aired on Nigeria Television Authority Network. There were other fears that the use of GSM created in the country. It included reported cases of the disappearance of male genital organs and loss of consciousness after having received GSM calls. 46% of the sampled survey believed that the reported cases of disappearance of male genital organ was a reality, 25% averagely believed while 19% said it was not a reality. The result of the data collected also revealed that 49% of the sample were of the opinion the GSM has created fear in them. While 12% of the respondents averagely agreed that they fear as a result of satanic GSM phone calls. Only 30% did not develop any phobias. The issue of fear developed as a result of GSM phone calls became more worrisome in that even the elites and the uneducated were affected. During this period, it was a low sale for the mobile phone industries. What the people did was to turn off their handset from any incoming call.

This reported cases of satanic phone calls in Nigeria was nationally discussed on the Network News, while the Nigerian Police Force had began investigation to unravel the mystery in order to clamp down on the perpetrators.

Although the issue of satanic use of GSM have generated some ripples and have instilled fears in the older adults both within the academics, religious circles and in all sectors of the society. Since this saga is peculiar to this country and may seem to be a fairy tale to those who have not witness it, and there is yet no scientific solution to this ripple, it does not mean that we should wave off the widely reported cases of satanic phone. From what Bartholomew said as reported by Agbu (2004) it would be mistaken to just dismiss the bizarre of the GSM scare.

Scientists and computer experts have agreed that there is nothing like satanic GSM rather it is a form of programmes like the various computer virus. While other schools of thought are of the opinion that Nigerians are only being numerophobic (Agbu 2004). I strongly believe that the saga is more than the explanation given by scholars. Human kidnapping and “419” is an age long saga in the country so also the old reported cases of GSM killer (Agbu 2004) but the new phenomena is what is of concern because of its alarming dimension and its usage in human kidnapping and money making rituals. In Africa, there are certain crude mysteries that are real and beyond modern science, one of such is the negative use of GSM because the people could not explain it scientifically the term Satanic GSM was given . Since we cannot wave off this issue of negative use of GSM in Nigeria, effort is going on to unravel the secret behind the so-called “satanic GSM phone” in Nigeria, which is more than being numerophobic or what Mackey in Agbu (2004) called the madness of the crowd and extraordinary popular delusions.

Conclusion

The following conclusion can be drawn from the findings of the study. Although GSM is cheaper and an invaluable tools for communication but the fear generated as a result of the widely reported cases of satanic and criminal usage of GSM made the older adults hold reservations about GSM. The fear surrounding the so called satanic usage of GSM generated considerable fear among the older adults in Nigeria at a point in time. This reality gave rise to the older adults to hold strong negative feelings about this modern communication device. It was also established that much of the stigma the old adults had, has to do with GSM interfering with their traditional practice of face-to-face communication that was highly preferred by the Nigerian culture. Older adults were scared of death and other hazards associated with the reported cases of GSM calls. Not withstanding, the negative impact generated caused a strong opposition to GSM usage.

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Table 1: Older Peoples' Perception of GSM

	Agree very much	Agree	Averagely agree	Disagree	Disagree very much
(1) GSM has introduced a new positive dimension to the morality of Nigerians.	135 (33.75)	138 (34.50)	39 (9.75)	24 (6.0)	24 (6.0)
(2) GSM has increased social interaction among youths than among the older people.	201 (50.20)	147 (36.75)	6 (1.50)	6 (1.50)	6 (1.50)
(3) GSM has helped to reduce insecurity of lives and properties	120 (30.0)	192 (48.0)	27 (6.25)	15 (3.75)	12 (3.0)
	120 (30.0)	166 (41.50)	51 (12.75)	24 (6.0)	39 (9.75)
(4) GSM discourages quality face to face conversation	90 (22.50)	153 (38.25)	36 (9.0)	52 (13.0)	12 (3.00)
(5) People who use GSM heavily develop weaker social relationship.	102 (25.50)	189 (47.25)	36 (9.00)	21 (5.25)	27 (6.75)
(6) The use of GSM in public places has constituted a social menace.	105 (26.25)	183 (45.75)	27 (6.25)	18 (4.50)	67 (16.75)
(7)The use of GSM calls and text messages affect our day to day social lives.					

Table II: People’s Phobia about GSM

	Agree very much	Agree	Average ly agree	Disagree	Disagree very much
8. I believe the news of the satanic GSM .	129 (32.25)	69 (17.25)	87 (21.75)	60 (15)	15 (3.75)
9. I really do not believe in GSM as the best means of communication.	99 (22.25)	117 (29.25)	18 (4.50)	54 (13.50)	75 (18)
10. I believe the recent media report that GSM may induce impotency in males	90 (22.50)	93 (23.25)	99 (24.75)	51 (12.75)	27 (6.25)
11. These various media reports associated with GSM have made to stop using GSM.	87 (22)	106 (26.50)	87 (21.75)	60 (15)	60 (15)
12. The introduction of GSM has more negative impact than positive on the older people.	171 (42.75)	150 (37.50)	27 (6.75)	9 (2.25)	3 (0.75)
13. The various media reports associated with GSM created fear in me.	106 (26.50)	87 (21.75)	48 (12)	63 (15.75)	56 (14)