



Mobile phone text messaging use among university librarians of Lahore city

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KEYWORDS

Short Message Service (SMS);
Lahore City Pakistan;
Librarians' use of SMS;
Pakistan libraries

Abstract Short Message Service (SMS) has become a cheap and popular source of communication in today's society. The present study examines the mobile phone text messaging patterns of 96 university librarians from 29 public and private universities in Lahore, Pakistan. Data were collected through a survey questionnaire. Results indicate that university librarians use SMS tools, but do not prefer this technology as a means of communication through phone or e-mail. A majority of librarians use SMS to connect with friends/relatives or for entertainment purposes. They rarely use SMS to communicate with library users, professional colleagues, or administration.

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Introduction

Short Message Service (SMS) is a communication service component of the Global System for Mobile (GSM) communication system that uses standardized communication protocols to allow the exchange of short text messages between mobile phone devices. SMS text messaging is the most widely used data application in the world. The term SMS is used as a synonym for all types of short text messaging. SMS as used on modern handsets was originally defined as part of the GSM series of standards as a means of sending messages of up to 160 characters to and from GSM mobile handsets.

"SMS was developed in the United Kingdom in the late 1980s, and the first text message was sent on Dec. 3, 1992"

(Britannica online). Texting is an "act of sending short messages with cellular telephones using the Short Message Service (SMS), which has a limit of 160 characters per message" (Britannica online). Cellular services were introduced in Pakistan in the 1990s. According to an Information Economy report published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Pakistan is among the five dynamic economies of developing Asia in terms of increased penetration of mobile phones (United Nations, 2011). Initially, it started with two mobile companies and rapid development of this market has since followed. Recently, in July 2010, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) celebrated its 100 million cellular subscriber (Khan, 2012).

As we are now rapidly entering the information age, life styles are shifting accordingly. The culture of text messaging has become more popular in Asia and Europe than the United States (Shuter & Chattopadhyay, 2010). SMS is more economical than any other communication source which might explain this trend. As mobile phones have an advantage over the Internet as the user does not need to switch on

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a computer or laptop and to connect with others. According to PTA data, by the end of January 2011, six out of ten people in Pakistan will possess a cellular phone (2010). And, mobile phones are replacing land and Internet connections with just 3,098,117 landline subscribers and 1,794,467 broadband subscribers in comparison to the 112,875,586 cellular phone subscribers in December 2011 (PTA, 2011).

SMS is a vital source of revenue for companies providing a wide range of services and packages to their customers. There are various mobile companies in Pakistan including Mobilink, Telenor, Warid, Ufone, and Zong which offer attractive SMS packages such as Zong's Weekly Bundle of 1000 SMS for Rs. 10 a week. Approximately 128 SMS are exchanged in highest per person each month in Pakistan (PTA, 2010). In Asia-Pacific, Pakistan ranks fourth in SMS traffic over the festive season 2008–2009 (PTA, 2010). According to a survey conducted by LIRNEasia (Salazar, 2007), 50 percent of mobile phone subscribers in Pakistan use SMS services with 77 percent of people typing their own SMS and 23 percent asking others to type SMS for them. However, not all cellular subscribers use SMS services possible because of the low literacy rate or technology stress.

In light of the growth in SMS use, librarians are now shifting their focus from manual to virtual services. Libraries should modify their services to meet the changing life styles of their clients who now prefer SMS as a primary source of communication by developing services for an increasingly IT-literate population. Academic librarians, meanwhile, should be more proactive in serving its young patrons who grow up the technological devices in their hands at an early age. Currently, mobile phones are cultural icons, as SMS has become a popular way of communication, particularly amongst the younger generations. Thus, SMS can potentially provide an effective and fast way of communication between librarians and their users.

This technology can be used to provide quick and easy access to library services. According to Needham and Ally (2008), using SMS will eliminate the need to manually print out notices and mail them to clients. Libraries can use text messaging for renewals and reservations, and this approach can be used to advertise events, new books, and information services more widely. The use of SMS can be very helpful in solving administrative issues. SMS provides a number of opportunities for library professionals to market their services effectively, easily, and in a cost effective way.

Mobile communication is easily affordable for everyone. In less than a decade, the use of mobile phone text messaging has become prevalent, particularly among teenagers and young adults. Texting is increasingly the primary means of communication for young generations (Needham & Ally, 2008, p. 58). This study focuses on exploring the use of mobile technology among librarians working in public and private universities in Lahore. This study illustrates how university librarians can develop their services for an increasingly ICT-literate population. It will also show how librarians can play a more active role in society.

Research objectives

The study of librarians in Lahore City, Pakistan has the following research objectives:

1. Determine SMS usage behavior of librarians.
2. Explore the use of SMS related to librarian job activities.
3. Measure the perception of librarians of SMS as a communication tool.
4. Determine how much SMS they send or receive for library services.

Literature review

A number of studies have been conducted on SMS technology, use of SMS to provide library services, and its impact on greater use of library services. All over the world, advertisements have shifted from print to electronic tools with SMS as the most economical, convenient, and timely. Weimer (2010) found that other sectors have realized the importance of SMS, however, librarians have been slower to recognize its benefits in extending library services at a very low cost. In Asian countries, use of SMS in providing library information services is not very common despite a large majority of cellular phone subscribers. The youth especially favor SMS because it keeps them in constant social contact with friends (Lin & Tong, 2007). Karim, Darus, and Hussin (2006) conducted a survey on undergraduate students at a Malaysian public library to measure their perception of mobile phone services in library and information services. Many universities were using mobile services to communicate with students in Malaysia; however, the concept of library services through SMS is new. Though, students said that they would definitely subscribe to library services if offered especially renewal services.

Many libraries around the world are using this technology to provide services. Curtin University in Australia is among the pioneers in providing SMS services to transmit library information in 2005. Similarly in the United States, the University of California has implemented such services by purchasing cell phones with a package of unlimited text messages and designating a text-messaging librarian (Weimer, 2010). Telecommunication companies all over the world are offering attractive packages to libraries. An Australian company Altarama offered this technology by converting SMS into emails allowing librarians to convert email to SMS (Weimer, 2010). Parker (2007) also conducted a study to investigate the use of SMS by 50 libraries from all over the world with websites in the English language and which offer SMS to their users were selected. Data were collected using search engines and content analysis, and it was found that libraries were mostly using this technology for circulation purposes while just a few libraries were using it as a reference service.

With the emergence of a greater marketing need, libraries are adopting different promotional strategies. Profit (2008) conducted a survey on software and equipment used by academic libraries of different countries to provide reference services. He presented various ways of text messaging used by the libraries and reported that some libraries use very simple and low cost technology to send SMS, while some libraries use commercial software and advanced technology for these services. Although some free software is available for this purpose, libraries must still pay connection fees.

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