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TITRE / TITLE:

**TEENAGE GIRLS, MOBILE PHONES AND PERCEPTIONS OF AUTONOMY : THE
EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG DAMSELS IN THE MOLYKO NEIGHBOURHOOD,
CAMEROON**

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine the impact of mobile phones on teenage girls in the Molyko neighbourhood. It argues that to the material girls that flood the Molyko neighbourhood, a cellular phone represent among other things a technology of contradiction, connectivity, identity, safety, status and above all a gadget to idealise autonomy. With just a single beep a girl has the power to influence the action and mode of socialisation of a man later in the evening. On the other hand, a phone not only aid the young girls to escape parental control of their social life but also use it as a tool through which they gather the latest gossips in town, especially the arrival of a *mboma*, who often visit the neighbourhood during weekends for fun. The introduction of mobile phones in the neighbourhood thus has triggered social consequences with far-reaching ramifications. To achieve the objective of this study that of exploring the impact of phones on the social behaviour of young girls, principally two methods would are used: face-to-face interviews and personal observation as well as a deep reading of advertising images.

Keywords: Cell/Mobile phone, Molyko, Social behaviour, Young girls,

Introduction: Situating the Study

Two things have inspired me to write this paper: the first one is an encounter I had in January 2003 between two freshmen of the University of Buea, returning from the December break. These two young varsity girls had just returned to Molyko with a lot of social anticipations beside academics. By then the researcher was a second year History student in the University. In fact, on this scorching afternoon was returning home from a lecture and was strolling along the university street. Upon getting to the main university junction, the researcher met two young girls who had just seen themselves after awhile due to the break. One of the girls having not seen her mate for a time beckoned on her smiling from across the road.

The other, as if had already seen the friend and expecting her call, instantly responded, 'hey my friend.' The first girl crossed over to meet herself. Amazingly, they did not greet themselves with warmth as would have expected from friends with some degree of closeness and as the excitement of seeing the other had given the impression. Rather, the first girl immodestly brandished her new *Samsung* mobile phone. Not allowing her friend to appreciate the slickness of the phone, she immediately asked her to show her own phone. The young freshman possessing the new *Samsung* was so amaze to learn that her friend hadn't a

phone yet. She could not conceal her amazement thus had to ask void of any sense of embarrassing her friend, “my friend don’t tell me that you are still to have a phone?” (translated from Pidgin English). It should be noted that these neophytes had spent barely eleven weeks in the university, and this period before the Christmas vacation is commonly considered as the period when most students especially the girls undergo social metamorphosis and this is very visible when they return in January.

It is during this period that most youngsters experience social life with little or no parental control, have their first intimate lust relationships, lose their chastity as well as begin to enjoy the pleasures of a semi-independent life (since most students live in Residential Halls). A number of inferences could be drawn from the short account: the popularity and appropriation of cell phones by youth, the social status attached to those that possess this gadget, social exclusion of those that are ‘unconnected’. The question we may be tempted to ask at this point is: how did this young unemployed varsity girl acquire her *Samsung* phone? Our speculation now as of then is that it was a present from a man-friend or a relation in the diaspora.

The second thing is the popularity of mobile phones among the youth in the Molyko neighbourhood, how it has been appropriated and used by especially young girls as well as how it has changed social relations since its inception. In fact, the telephony culture is very visible and en vogue in the neighbourhood. Curiously, little scholarly attention has been paid to growing phenomenon of cell phones and its effect on the social attitudes of youths. Nkwi, however, has examined the history of telephone in Buea, Cameroon from the colonial period through the postcolonial and the changing communication landscape the introduction of cellular phone has triggered (Nkwi 2008; 2009: 50-57). The sociology of mobile phone in the neighbourhood is very complex and has generated an economy of its own with mostly unemployed youths enjoying from the briskness of the business that has ensued (Nkwi 2009: 60-66). The dynamics of this teleconomy notwithstanding, little has been said on how young damsels in Molyko use their handset as a tool of manipulation and control, and to assert themselves within social spaces.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to examine the impact of mobile phones on the social attitudes of teenage girls in the Molyko neighbourhood. In order to achieve this, the following specific objectives are useful:

1. Examine briefly the introduction of cell phones in the Molyko neighbourhood.

2. Assess how the inception of mobile phone has generated a sub-culture among young damsels in this varsity town.
3. Discuss the various ways through which the young girls have appropriated the cell phone and how they are using it as a tool of manipulation and control.
4. Discuss how the persuasiveness of advertising images influences the brand of phones young girls in the neighbourhood go for and how the types of phones determine their social networks.

Staking the Study Area

A few words concerning the study area may be in order. Molyko is a small cosmopolitan neighbourhood situated in the erstwhile colonial town of Buea. It has a surface area of about two kilometres and its population is heterogeneous in character (Mokake 2008: 8). This heterogeneous population is dominated by the youth. Most of the youth are students of either the University of Buea or some of the secondary, high or other professional schools in the locality. It should be mentioned that the lone Anglophone university in the country is located here and as such acts as a centre of attraction for thousands of youth who either migrate into the town to obtain university education or benefit from the economy that the creation of the university has triggered (Lum and Ntangsi 2004). Most of the hotels and Guest Houses in Buea are situated here because of a ready market.

The gender composition of this rapidly urbanising town is also very interesting. The youthful population is dominated by girls who are in their teens or twenties. They constitute about 58% of Molyko's population. Some of the girls are students while others are engaged in the informal economy: hair-dressing saloons, tailoring workshops, petty business and others are 'call-box' operators. Yet, others are sales agents in mobile telephone shops that litter the town.

Molyko also hosts two of the largest Super Dealers (an MTN agent who liaises between the public and MTN by providing services to the public) and the only Regional Office of the most popular network provider, fondly known by its acronym MTN. ORANGE, the other service provider also has a Regional Office in this neighbourhood. In fact, these two regional offices are adjacent to each other. Cellular phone promotions by these network providers often begin here before spreading into neighbouring quarters. An added phenomenon linked to the phone is the increasing number of phone repairers with over fifty repairers located in Molyko alone. Most of these repair shops also serve as phone accessories shops. Some of the items sold include varieties of phone batteries, chargers, phone cases/covers, USB cables etc.

In addition, they also provide other services like to download popular sounds into phones. This change in the socio-economic landscape of telephone (Horst and Miller 2006) in Buea and Molyko in particular is a recent development associated to the changing sociology of the mobile phone (Geser 2004). As Nkwi argues, it is the uncertain economy of the town that is the leading logic behind the boom in mobile phones in Molyko. It is within this social space of Molyko, presented here in a summary fashion, that the study examines the impact of the cell phone on the social behaviour of young damsels.

Methodology

The data for this study was acquired from essentially primary materials. The principal tool was the use of oral interviews. Fifteen ‘highly connected’ young girls between the ages of 17 and 27 years responded to questions like why girls prefer the cutest phones; the number of phones they possess; how cell phone facilitate the establishment of their social contacts; how the type of phone one has determine one’s social status and relations. The personal communications were done both in private and public spaces. From the responses, the underpinning impression was that young girls use their phones as a tool to control their social relations and simultaneously to escape social control from parents or guardians.

The essay was also developed with data from personal observation techniques and a deep reading into advertising images from the two principal network providers. The images were pregnant with information as it was realised that mostly girls with flashy phones were used on these advertisements. These advertising images were analysed. All the images were youth-oriented and presented young girls using cute phones. One of the images by MTN when the company introduced its “Me-2-U” service presented a happy young girl that has just received credit from her boyfriend. The ‘Me-2-U’ is a service option wherein Airtime credit can be transferred from one user to another without the receiver necessarily paying for a credit card. The sender is debited 50 frs. No doubt, this played the trick on the psych of young girls and their choice of phones, as they aspire to identify with the girls on the billboard adverts. For cross-reference purpose, available literature on the topic was reviewed.

The Youth and Mobile Phones

In its present digital version (GSM), the mobile phone has break boundaries in spectacular ways since 1995, when it was predominantly used for business purposes and possession was restricted to income earners most of whom had completed school, and with no gender barrier (Geser 2006: 2). However, by 2001, the velocity at which the technological gadget had diffused the different social strata and countries with rather divergent levels of socio-

economic development. With its increasing diffusion over the years, certain generational cleavages were dismantled. Of interest here is the increasing popularity of the mobile phone among young people. It has been argued that this phenomenal increase in cell phone appropriation could be explained by the fact the youth are more susceptible and adaptive to technological change than adults. Another reason that explains the proneness of young people to mobile phones is that the globalisation of this technology creates new avenues for the youth to communicate among their social peers. Geser provides empirical evidence the world over show that young people are most eager to embrace new communication technologies among all demographic groups (2006: 4). As such the mobile phone has become an object of intimacy comparable to keys or wallets.

The number of youth in possession of cell phone has increased with the drop in phone prices that accompanied the flood of the markets with a variety of brands and sophisticatedness of phones. Though, this point needs to be considered with caution because most still go for the dearest and trendiest ones. New markets are sites for cheaper phones to young people especially in developing societies. In these developing societies, the perception of the mobile phone is changing assuming new meaning that supersede its utility as a medium solely for voice communication. According to Hulme and Peters, it is increasingly perceived as a multi-purpose devise (1). Thus, the teenagers define and re-define the identity of the cellular phone as a dynamic social technology. Being a symbol of identity this technology has generated a lot of contradictions: it has created new social networks, hierarchies and insecurities.

Since the mobile phones became popular among youth, social theorists have developed frames to better understand relationship between young people and mobile phones. The principal frame has been to look at the importance of fashion as a statement about identity in the life of teenagers (Katz and Sugiyama 2005; Campbell 2006) and this helps them to understand their identity. Some perceive it beyond the framework of fashion (Lorente 2002). Other studies have shown that the admiration by young people of the cell phone is not even in terms of gender. It has been shown that young girls are more prone and addicted to the cell phone than boys. Perhaps, this is because their movement in space is more tightly controlled than that of boys: so that they can maintain a degree of contacts at certain hours only by phone (Geser 2006: 5-6). This has contributed in levelling gender differences.

Damsels, Mobile Phones and Parental Control

The cell phone aids young damsels in Molyko to escape parental surveillance as much as it provides the opportunity for the parents to monitor the movement, actions and social relations of their daughters. Unlike the fixed phone, the mobile phone, spatial boundaries of the home become highly porous to discretionary communication. The category of youth described here as damsels are young girls in their late teens and twenties who are unmarried, have a feeling of 'self-autonomy,' and that have developed a culture of manipulation with the cell phone being their only weapons. Some well-to-do parents bought cell phones for their daughters for a number of cogent reasons: to keep a certain control on the whereabouts of their offsprings; for coordination and security purposes; for assuring themselves that their children are well, and for allowing them phone home whenever they are in need (Geser: 2006: 7). Because of this possibility of overcoming the spatial boundaries of the home, teenage girls in the town enjoy a considerable degree of latitude to call and receive calls without the embarrassment of revealing a possible romantic liaison, or very late at night when other family members are likely to be asleep.

The introduction of late-night calls for almost free and free SMS in the months of May 2009 provides an opportunity for young girls to communicate freely late into the night. In fact, when late-night calls were introduced it took just a charged battery and at most 100 frs to call in the night on end. One could therefore communicate with a friend for as long as the battery permits. Presently, this service has been reviewed given a maximum of eight minutes for 100 frs. This is far cheaper than call rates during the day that is as high as 180 frs/min within the same network and higher if one calls a subscriber of a different network. To Nyamnjuh, because the two principal networks hardly work simultaneously most people are forced to purchase phones with the option of double SIM Cards or swap these SIM Cards in a single phone without this option (2009: 5).

Within the social context of Molyko, the damsels have exploited this service though largely to a negative end. Through this service, students share assignments tips, brief friends of their location and the 'breaking news' in town. It was also used for safety purposes as some of the girls responded. At a time when insecurity is a major concern to the local authorities the young girls that often keep late nights revealed that they could contact a male friend or relation to escort her up later in the night or in case of an assault or difficulties to communicate their parents. In addition, this service allowed the girls to communicate freely without the supervision of their parents and to establish a social network with their peers.

The phone is a tool in the hands of these youngsters to manipulate their parents and other family members. Most of the girls confessed that they sometime use this communication gadget to extort money from their parents. The interesting issue here is the point that this money is hardly used for constructive purposes like to purchase school needs like books or lecture notes but to buy fancy outfits like handbags, shoes, jeans and make-ups. These items are of great importance to these girls as they help in establishing a social identity and status. The respondents were of the opinion that they just need to load up their phones (usually by their man-friends) beep or call home or relations overseas. They often present themselves in very desperate conditions that normally attract the sympathy and monetary benefits. With this instrument of power in the hands of the category of girls under study, men become victims of their irrational consumerism since they go for the most expensive and trendiest phones in the market.

With the cellular phone, the damsels in Molyko perceived a degree of autonomy and resistance to control. Some switch off, ignore calls or give misleading (incorrect) information about their location or activity. In this way their safety and well being are disconnected from herself. Being that most of these young girls are pseudo-independent from their parents, they have the latitude to go to where they desire, attend parties late into the night and hang-out with whosoever they choose. Their choice of peers is determined by their level of connectivity and degree of socialisation.

Cellular Phones, Connectivity and Social Life

If anything the cell phone has given teenage girls in the neighbourhood to connect to the wider world, to access new social spaces and to control their social life/relations. In the preceding section we have discussed the reasons why parents purchase phones for their children. In the section our concern is to examine the ways through which young girls in Molyko assert a degree of independence and in turn manipulate their social ties and lifestyle. This would be examined in terms of the level of connectivity, types and/or number of phones and how these bear on their social network.

The first point to examine here is the issue of connectivity. This communication concept is very complex especially in a discourse concerning teenage girls in Molyko. Molyko's damsels perceive connectivity beyond just being hooked-up by a technological device to one's peers within a given social space, but as a phenomenon whereby one can benefit from being connected. This sense of connectivity is intricately linked to the social life of these youth. With this complex sense of connectivity, they stop at nothing to get connected

in order to become a beneficiary of this process. Thus, it is very common for these youth to possess more than one phone or number. Some have number of all the three mobile networks: CAMTEL, MTN and ORANGE. The number of phone-numbers one has shows how connected the person is in relation to others.

A girl was of the opinion that they were just being strategic. The more numbers one has determines your degree of social network. It is also an opportunity for one to decide on who she wants to be in contact with and at what time since all the numbers are hardly given out the same person. Special numbers are given to 'special people' with the latitude to contact them at all times while others have restricted access to them. In fact the number of phones one has reveals the person's social status which in turn influences her social ties. With these multiple contacts damsels are able to schedule and reschedule appointments sidelining those they do not want at a particular moment.

The content of these phone are often very revealing. To Horst and Miller, it is an avenue to interpret a person's social network, both hidden and overt (2005). One unique characteristic among these girls is that the storage capacity of their phones is often nearly full to capacity because of the multiple contacts they have. Of the five phones whose phonebook were perused 2/3 of their content was contacts of men, most of whom were not of the same age group as these girls. These were mostly well-positioned married men (*Mbomas*) residing out of town. They frequently visit Molyko during week-ends to fun with some of the girls, old enough to be their daughters. It should be noted that most of the girls are/were uncomfortable with somebody perusing their phones. The text messages in the phones are telling of how promiscuity has eaten deep into the social fabric of this erstwhile colonial town.

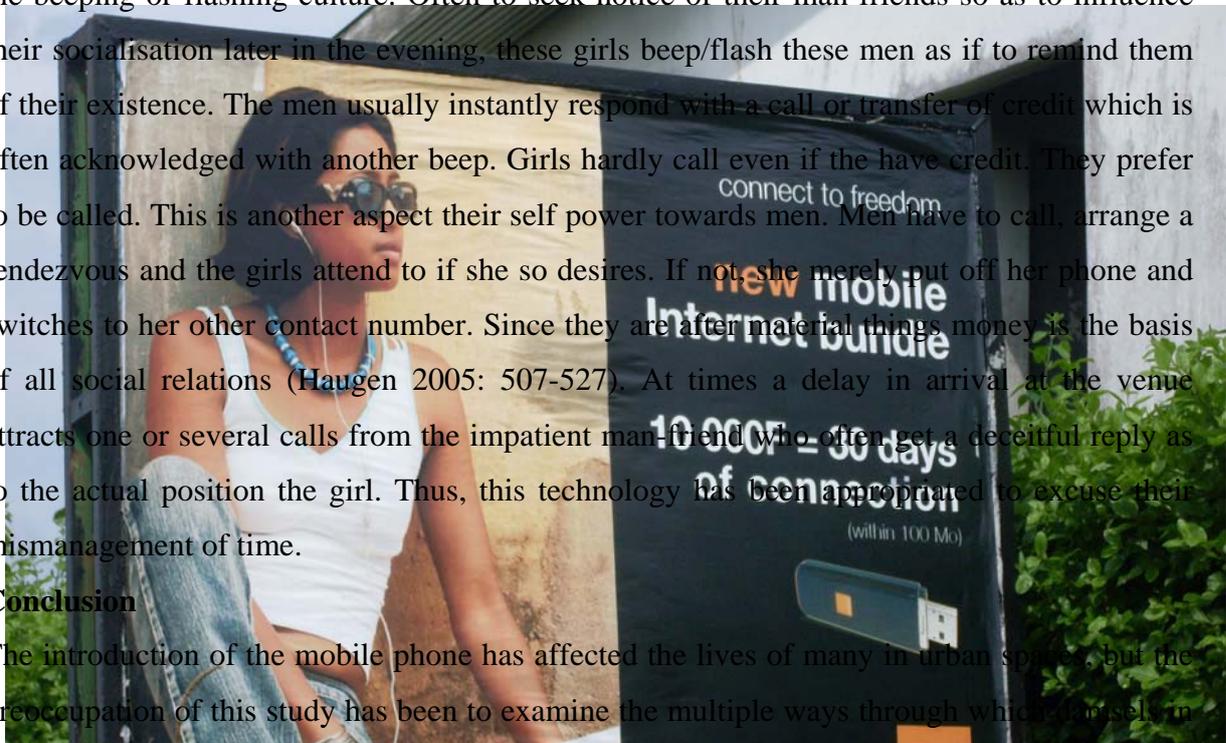
The more connected one is the more benefits one earns. These girls often have as many man-friends as to the number of phones they possess. Since the phone has eased communication between sexes by creating a social space where they meet, the more sophisticated one's handset has a psychological influence and reveals the degree of social connection based on the fact that most of the phones are bought by the multiple men that chase these girls. Consequently, a stable connectivity is a sine qua non for memorable evenings. The tendency therefore is for young girls to date as many men as they can manipulate so as to get the latest cutest phones in town. One need not forget the prestige attached to having more than one phone. This introduces a debate on sex and phones. Why do these girls trade sex for phones? But how do they establish these networks? Respecting an

appointment with a friend of the opposite sex is also an opportunity to become more connected as one may meet the friends of one's company or other admirers/suitors.

Another issue that has accompanied the cell phone among young girls in Molyko is the beeping or flashing culture. Often to seek notice of their man-friends so as to influence their socialisation later in the evening, these girls beep/flash these men as if to remind them of their existence. The men usually instantly respond with a call or transfer of credit which is often acknowledged with another beep. Girls hardly call even if they have credit. They prefer to be called. This is another aspect of their self-power towards men. Men have to call, arrange a rendezvous and the girls attend to it if she so desires. If not, she merely puts off her phone and switches to her other contact number. Since they are after material things, money is the basis of all social relations (Haugen 2005: 507-527). At times a delay in arrival at the venue attracts one or several calls from the impatient man-friend who often gets a deceitful reply as to the actual position of the girl. Thus, this technology has been appropriated to excuse their mismanagement of time.

Conclusion

The introduction of the mobile phone has affected the lives of many in urban spaces, but the preoccupation of this study has been to examine the multiple ways through which young girls in Molyko have appropriated this technology and are using it in different ways to satisfy their malicious desires. It shows how young girls use their cell phone not only to escape parental surveillance but as a tool to extort money from them and other members of their social networks. This has led to a new feeling of power and perception of autonomy in their social lives. The study has argued that young girls are more addicted to the cell phone than their male counterparts and they use it for different purposes, and this has had a heavy toll on their social behaviour vis-à-vis their man-friends. The role of advertising images in this process of socialisation was also examined and it was seen that such persuasive images have not only produced the desired results but have a negative influence on the way young girls perceive a phone.





Pic 1:

Pic 2:



Pic 3:

Pic 4:

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