Digital Dependency; Unveiling the Impact of Mobile Phones on the Young Generation in Bangladesh and Asia

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Abstract

The rapid proliferation of mobile phone usage among the youth in Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, has sparked significant concern regarding its negative impacts on mental health, academic performance, physical well-being, and social interactions. While mobile technology offers various benefits, excessive use has led to rising mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, academic distractions, physical health problems, and disruptions in social and cultural norms. This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the detrimental effects of mobile phone dependency on young people in Bangladesh, addressing existing research gaps by employing a mixed-methods approach. It seeks to explore the full range of impacts, including mental, academic, physical, and social consequences and offers recommendations for promoting responsible mobile use. The study will inform policymakers, educators, and health professionals in developing strategies to mitigate these negative effects while fostering digital literacy and well-being among the youth.

Keywords: Mobile phone usage, youth, mental & physical health, social impact, digital dependency, responsible mobile use

Introduction:

The advent of mobile technology has revolutionized the world, providing unprecedented access to information, communication, and entertainment. Mobile phones, particularly smartphones, have become indispensable tools in modern life, with their influence most profoundly felt among the younger generation. Across Asia, where more than half of the world's population resides, mobile phone usage among youth has surged dramatically in recent years. In countries like Bangladesh, where economic growth and technological advancements have expanded access to affordable smartphones and mobile data, young people are increasingly reliant on mobile devices for their daily activities. However, this growing dependency comes with significant challenges and risks that demand attention.

In Bangladesh, mobile phone penetration has risen to extraordinary levels, with the number of mobile connections now exceeding the population. As of 2023, over 180 million mobile connections were reported, a statistic that underscores the pervasive role mobile technology plays in the country's socio-economic landscape (Mei et al., 2023). Young people, especially those between the ages of 15 and 24, are among the most active users, relying heavily on mobile phones

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for education, social networking, entertainment, and professional opportunities. While these devices offer valuable benefits such as access to online learning platforms, job markets, and communication tools, their excessive use has raised alarm due to the negative consequences it bring (Mondal et al., 2020).

The benefits of mobile phones are well-documented—youths in Bangladesh use them to stay informed, connected, and engaged with the world. However, as with any powerful tool, mobile phones have a darker side, particularly when they are overused or misused. This study aims to examine the negative impacts of mobile phones on the younger generation in Bangladesh, contextualized within the broader Asian region. It explores how over-reliance on mobile technology can lead to issues related to mental health, academic performance, physical well-being, and social relationships, all of which are becoming increasingly prevalent among youth in the country.

Literature Review:

Asia is home to over half the world's population, with millions of young people who are avid users of mobile phones. Countries like China, India, and Bangladesh have seen a steep rise in smartphone ownership due to affordable technology and widespread access to mobile internet. In Bangladesh, mobile penetration has grown dramatically over the past decade, with over 180 million mobile connections recorded in 2023, surpassing the country's population. Youth, particularly those between the ages of 15 and 24, are the primary users of mobile technology, relying heavily on it for socializing, entertainment, and education. However, this rapid adoption of mobile phones is not without its negative consequences.

Despite the widespread use of mobile phones in Bangladesh and Asia, there is a notable gap in comprehensive research on the long-term impacts of mobile dependency on young people. While studies have touched on individual aspects, such as mobile addiction or its effect on academic performance, few have examined the broader, interconnected consequences of mobile overuse on the mental, physical, and social well-being of youth. Furthermore, most research in this field is concentrated in Western contexts, with limited empirical data from developing countries like Bangladesh. Addressing these gaps is crucial to better understanding the extent of mobile technology's influence and developing effective strategies to mitigate its negative effects (Sahu et al., 2019). This study is, therefore, timely and necessary. By focusing on Bangladesh, it provides a critical examination of how mobile phones are shaping the lives of young people in a rapidly developing country. Through a mixed-methods approach, this research will not only shed light on the immediate negative consequences but also offer insights into long-term risks and opportunities for intervention.

Mobile technology has rapidly transformed the way people communicate, access information, and navigate daily life. In Asia, particularly in countries like Bangladesh, mobile phones have become ubiquitous, especially among the younger generation. While the benefits of mobile connectivity are undeniable, the negative consequences of mobile overuse are increasingly concerning. This article explores the mobile phone's impact on young people across Asia, with a particular focus on Bangladesh, where the rapid growth of mobile usage has resulted in social, mental, and educational challenges (Renau et al., 2015).

The rapid advancement of mobile technology has sparked significant academic interest in its impact on young people worldwide. Research in developed countries often emphasizes the benefits of mobile phones in educational contexts, improving accessibility to information and promoting social interaction (Katz, 2015). However, the literature also highlights growing

concerns about mobile addiction, social isolation, and mental health issues, particularly in young users (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). In Asian countries, where digital infrastructure is expanding rapidly, the impact of mobile phones on youth has not been adequately studied, and much of the existing literature is limited to anecdotal evidence and small-scale surveys. Several studies have documented the relationship between mobile phone overuse and mental health issues among youth. Lepp et al. (2014) found that increased smartphone usage among college students was correlated with higher levels of anxiety and depression. Similarly, Boumosleh & Jaalouk (2018) concluded that mobile addiction leads to poor mental health outcomes, such as sleep disturbances and emotional instability. In Bangladesh, however, limited research has been conducted on the long-term psychological impact of mobile phone dependency, despite rising concerns over its prevalence.

Studies across the globe have shown that mobile phones, while beneficial for accessing educational resources, can be a significant distraction for students. A study revealed that texting and social media use during study time is negatively associated with academic performance. In Asia, including Bangladesh, similar trends have been observed in smaller studies, such as (Ahmed & Perji, 2011), which highlighted the negative correlation between mobile phone use and students' academic achievements. However, large-scale, comprehensive studies in the South Asian context remain scarce. Prolonged use of mobile phones has been linked to a range of physical health problems. Long-term mobile phone use could contribute to symptoms such as headaches, vision problems, and musculoskeletal issues due to poor posture. A study specific to Bangladesh (Ferdous, 2019) found that students who spent more than four hours on mobile devices daily reported increased levels of fatigue and eye strain. However, most studies focus on short-term physical effects, and there is a gap in research concerning long-term health consequences among young mobile users in Bangladesh. Mobile phones, particularly social media platforms, have changed the dynamics of social interactions among the youth. Studies have noted how mobile phones influence youth culture, relationships, and social behaviours. In Bangladesh, traditional social structures, which place a high value on family and community interaction, are being disrupted as young people become increasingly absorbed in virtual worlds (Karim & Rahman, 2022). This shift is still under-researched, and there is a lack of comprehensive data on how mobile dependency is reshaping cultural norms in Bangladesh and broader Asian societies.

Methodology:

The study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews. The survey will target university students and young professionals in urban and rural areas of Bangladesh. Interviews will be conducted with educators, health professionals, and parents to gain insights into the broader impacts of mobile phone usage on youth.

The Rationale of the Study:

The need for this study arises from the increasing dependency of young people in Bangladesh and Asia on mobile phones and the lack of comprehensive research addressing the negative impacts. This research seeks to fill the gap by examining the full spectrum of consequences that mobile overuse has on mental health, physical well-being, academic performance, and social interactions. Understanding these impacts is crucial for policymakers, educators, parents, and health professionals to create strategies that encourage responsible mobile phone use and minimize harm.

Given the rapid technological advancement and cultural shifts in the region, this research is both timely and necessary. Excessive use of mobile phones has been linked to a range of mental health problems among young people. Research shows that constant engagement with social media, instant messaging apps, and online gaming can increase feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. In Bangladesh, where mental health resources are already limited and stigmatized, the rise in mobile addiction is exacerbating these challenges, particularly among students and young professionals.

Many youths find themselves caught in a cycle of digital dependency, constantly checking notifications, engaging in online comparisons, or falling victim to cyberbullying—all of which contribute to poor mental health outcomes. Mobile phones also pose a significant threat to academic success, as their addictive nature often distracts students from their studies. In Bangladesh, the growing use of mobile phones among university students has led to concerns about declining academic performance. Many students spend hours on social media platforms, gaming apps, or watching videos, leaving little time for their academic responsibilities.

The constant distraction of notifications and instant messaging can break students' focus, leading to lower retention of information, missed deadlines, and ultimately, poorer academic outcomes. While mobile phones offer tools for learning, such as access to online libraries or educational videos, their overuse for non-educational purposes can outweigh these benefits. Beyond mental and academic challenges, mobile phone overuse can lead to physical health problems. Young people who spend prolonged periods staring at screens are at risk of developing vision problems, headaches, and sleep disturbances. Additionally, poor posture from sitting for extended periods while using mobile devices can result in musculoskeletal issues, such as neck pain or back strain. In Bangladesh, these physical ailments are becoming more common among students and young professionals, who often use mobile phones late into the night, disrupting their sleep cycles and causing chronic fatigue. These health issues, compounded by the lack of awareness regarding proper mobile use, are rarely addressed in public discourse. Mobile phones have significantly altered the social fabric of youth culture in Bangladesh.

Traditionally, family and community play central roles in the socialization of young people. However, the rise of mobile phones has changed the dynamics of these interactions, with many young people spending more time in virtual spaces than engaging in face-to-face communication. Social media platforms, while providing opportunities for global connectivity, often lead to superficial relationships and a decline in meaningful, in-person interactions. In Bangladesh, this shift has raised concerns about the erosion of cultural values and the weakening of family bonds, as young people become more isolated in their online worlds.

Research Questions:

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

i. What are the primary negative impacts of mobile phone usage on the mental health of young people in Bangladesh?
ii. How does excessive mobile phone use affect the academic performance of young people in Bangladesh?
iii. What are the physical health consequences of prolonged mobile phone usage among youth in Bangladesh?
iv. How is mobile dependency affecting the social and cultural behaviours of the younger generation in Bangladesh?

Research Objectives:

The following are the research objectives of this study:

i. To assess the mental health impacts of mobile phone overuse among the youth in Bangladesh.
ii. To analyze the relationship between mobile phone dependency and academic performance in students.
iii. To explore the physical health issues related to long-term mobile phone use among young people.
iv. To examine the social and cultural implications of mobile dependency on the younger generation.

Analytical Findings and Discussions:

Potential Outcomes; Mental Health Impacts (Abuhamdah & Naser, 2023):

i. **Anxiety and Depression:** Excessive phone use, especially on social media, has been linked to increased anxiety and depression. Constant comparison to others, fear of missing out,[2] and online negativity can exacerbate these conditions, leading to feelings of inadequacy or loneliness.
ii. **Sleep Disorders:** Phone addiction often leads to disrupted sleep patterns, particularly because of late-night screen use. The blue light emitted by phones can interfere with melatonin production, making it harder to fall asleep, leading to insomnia or poor sleep quality.
iii. **Attention and Focus Problems:** Constant phone use, especially multitasking between apps and notifications, can decrease attention span and impair cognitive function. It becomes harder to concentrate, which can affect work, studies, or personal productivity.
iv. **Increased Stress:** Overreliance on phones for constant connectivity can lead to stress, as people feel pressured to respond to messages, emails, and notifications immediately. This "always-on" mentality can contribute to chronic stress and burnout.
v. **Social Isolation:** While phones are designed to connect us, excessive phone use can lead to social isolation. Being glued to a screen often takes time away from real-world social interactions, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation over time.

Physical Health Findings (Islam et al., 2024):

i. **Eye Strain and Vision Problems:** Prolonged phone use can cause digital eye strain, leading to symptoms like dry eyes, headaches, blurred vision, and difficulty focusing. This condition, often referred to as "Computer Vision Syndrome," can worsen over time if not managed.
ii. **Neck and Spine Problems:** "Text neck" is a common condition caused by looking down at a phone for extended periods. This poor posture can lead to neck pain,

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[2] also known as FOMO

stiffness, and eventually long-term damage to the spine and musculoskeletal system.

iii. **Hand and Thumb Strain:** Repetitive strain injuries[3] like "texting thumb" or "phone finger" are caused by excessive texting or swiping. These can lead to pain, inflammation, and reduced mobility in the fingers, wrists, and hands.

iv. **Sedentary Lifestyle:** Phone addiction often leads to a sedentary lifestyle, as people spend more time sitting or lying down while using their devices. Lack of physical activity can lead to weight gain, obesity, cardiovascular problems, and a higher risk of chronic diseases like diabetes.

v. **Hearing Damage:** Using phones with earphones or at high volumes can lead to hearing problems or long-term hearing loss, especially when listening to music or watching videos for prolonged periods.

Family Dynamics and its Negative Impacts (Mahmud et al., 2020):

i. **Reduced Family Interaction:** When family members are constantly on their phones, it limits meaningful face-to-face interactions. This can create emotional distance, as family members may not engage in real conversations or shared activities, weakening family bonds.

ii. **Parent-Child Disconnect:** Children may feel neglected or less important if parents are absorbed in their phones. Similarly, parents may struggle to connect with children who are always on their devices, leading to a lack of emotional intimacy and communication between them.

iii. **Modelling Problematic Behavior:** When parents are addicted to their phones, children often model this behaviour. It creates a cycle where children also become overly reliant on technology, limiting their ability to develop social and communication skills in real life.

iv. **Conflicts and Frustration:** Excessive phone use can lead to conflicts within the family. Arguments over screen time, lack of attention, or not being present can escalate into larger issues of resentment, especially between spouses or between parents and children.

v. **Lack of Quality Time:** Families may spend time together physically, but if everyone is absorbed in their phones, the time spent is not truly "quality time." This can weaken the emotional connection and sense of unity within the family.

vi. **Delayed Emotional Responses:** When family members are too focused on their phones, they may not be fully present in conversations or moments of emotional importance, leading to feelings of being misunderstood or neglected.

vii. **Negative Impact on Mental Health:** Phone addiction can cause stress, anxiety, and even depression, which can spill over into family life. A stressed family member might withdraw further into their phone for comfort, which exacerbates the problem and affects the family's emotional well-being.

viii. **Diminished Communication Skills:** Children and teens who are addicted to phones may struggle to develop effective communication and conflict-resolution skills. This can make family discussions or solving problems together more challenging.

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[3] abbreviated as RSIs

To counteract these issues, setting clear boundaries around phone use,[4] encouraging open communication, and engaging in activities that foster connection without screens can help improve family relationships.

Behavioral Health Issues (Munusamy & Ghazali, 2020):

    i.   **Addictive Behavior:** Phone addiction shares characteristics with other behavioural addictions, such as compulsive use, withdrawal symptoms when not using the phone, and a loss of control over the time spent on the device. This can interfere with daily functioning, social life, and responsibilities.

    ii.   **Increased Risk of Accidents:** Phone addiction can lead to dangerous behaviour, such as texting while driving or walking, which significantly increases the risk of accidents, injuries, or even fatalities.

While phone addiction itself may not seem life-threatening in the immediate sense, its long-term consequences can be harmful. Chronic mental and physical health issues, social isolation, and even dangerous behaviours like distracted driving make it a serious concern. Over time, these health issues can escalate, reducing the quality of life and leading to more severe conditions, especially if left unaddressed among youth.

The Positive Side of Mobile Technology for the Youth in Asian Countries Perspective (Lee & Busiol, 2016):

    i.   **Access to Education:** Mobile devices enable access to online learning platforms, educational apps, and resources, especially in remote or underserved areas. Youth can participate in distance learning, skill-building courses, and even certifications.

    ii.   **Social Connectivity:** Youth can maintain social relationships through messaging apps and social media platforms. This connectivity enhances emotional well-being and fosters relationships, especially in densely populated areas with social diversity.

    iii.   **Employment Opportunities:** Mobile access helps youth engage in the gig economy[5] and access job opportunities via online platforms. They can learn new skills related to business, entrepreneurship, or tech through mobile apps.

    iv.   **Access to Information:** The internet via mobile phones allows young people to stay informed about global and local news, health updates, and governmental policies, increasing their social awareness and engagement in societal issues.

    v.   **Entrepreneurship and Innovation:** Youth can start small businesses or create innovative apps and services. Many Asian countries are experiencing a boom in digital startups, with mobile technology playing a central role in expanding businesses and reaching broader audiences.

    vi.   **Digital Literacy:** Using mobile devices helps the younger population gain digital skills, which are increasingly necessary in the modern workforce. In many Asian economies, digital literacy is linked to better job prospects and social mobility.

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[4] such as phone-free family time or dinners
[5] e.g., freelancing, delivery services

vii. **Health and Well-being:** Mobile apps related to fitness, mental health, and well-being enable youth to maintain healthier lifestyles, track physical activity, and access health information and services remotely.
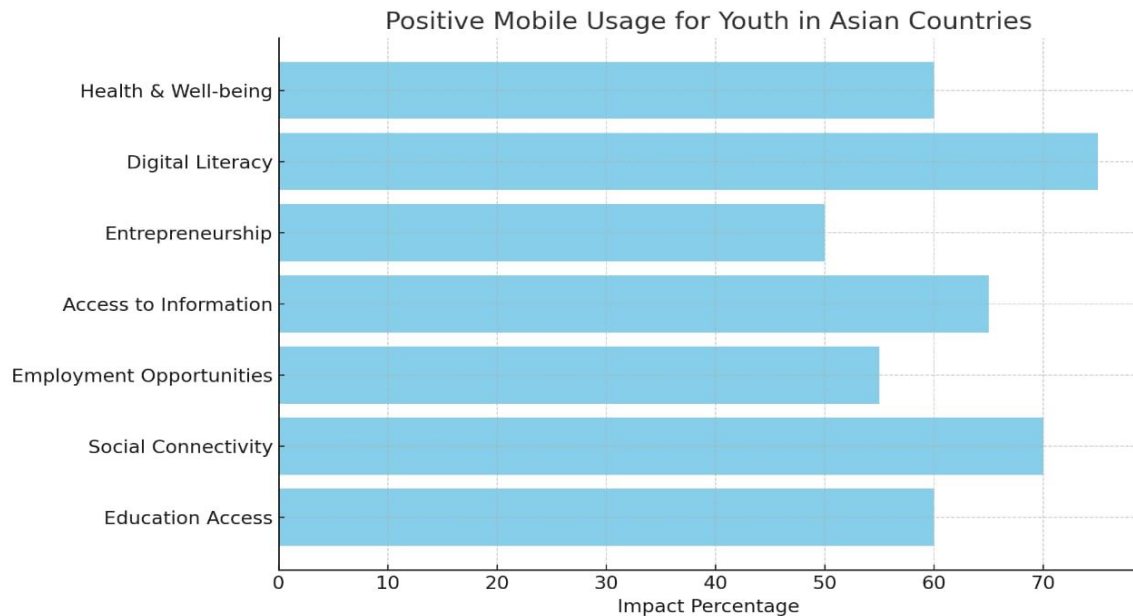
Figure 1: Chart of Positive Impacts of Phone usage in Asian Countries (Lee & Busiol, 2016)

Negative Impacts of Mobile Phone Usage on the Youth (Mak et al., 2014):

i. **Exposure to Pornography:** Easy access to adult content can negatively influence youth, leading to issues like addiction, distorted views on relationships, and mental health issues. The lack of effective content filters in some regions exacerbates the problem.

ii. **Cheating in Education:** The use of mobile devices has made it easier for students to engage in academic dishonesty. Mobile phones enable quick access to answers during exams, reducing the focus on learning and critical thinking.

iii. **Trends to Get Viral:** Many young people feel pressured to become popular or go viral on social media. This can lead to risky or inappropriate behaviour, mental health struggles, and prioritization of superficial validation over real-world achievements.

iv. **Unhealthy Money-Making Practices:** Mobile platforms have opened up opportunities for questionable or exploitative money-making schemes.[6] This can divert youth from legitimate career paths and lead to financial instability.

Special Focus on Bangladesh:

i. **Economic Barriers and Digital Divide:** Despite the widespread use of mobile phones, there remains a significant digital divide in Bangladesh. Many young people in rural and economically disadvantaged areas lack access to quality smartphones and reliable internet connections. As mobile phones become integral

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[6] e.g., gambling apps, pyramid schemes, or unrealistic social media influencer aspirations

to education and economic opportunities, this divide risks further marginalizing already vulnerable populations. The disparity between urban and rural youth in terms of mobile access exacerbates inequality in education and job prospects.

ii.   **Regulatory and Parental Oversight:** In Bangladesh, there is minimal regulatory oversight to control the content young people are exposed to via mobile phones. Parental control is also weak, with many parents either unaware of the risks or unable to monitor their children's online activities. The lack of digital literacy among parents and guardians has left many young people vulnerable to the negative influences of mobile technology, including exposure to inappropriate content and dangerous online trends.
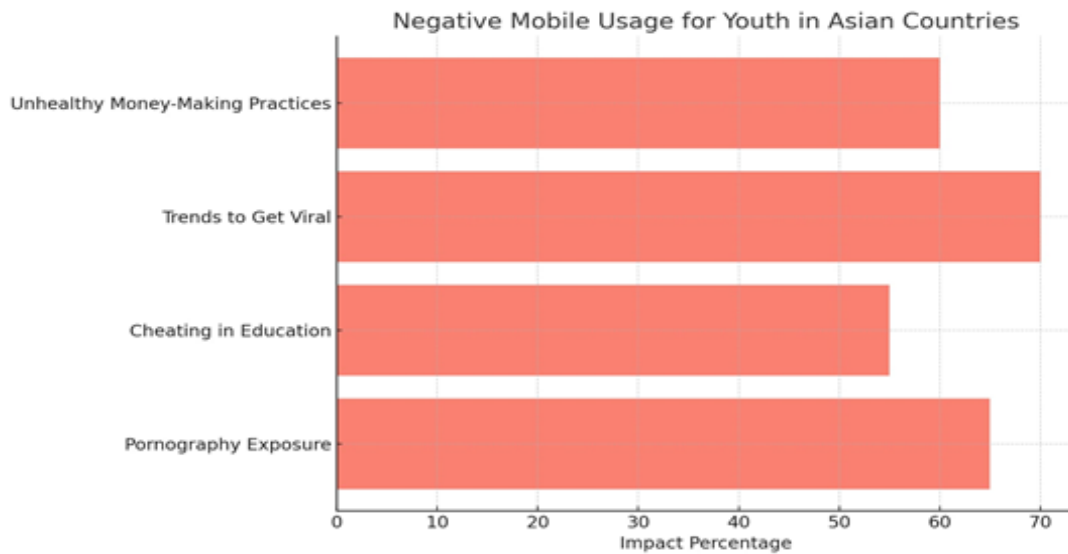
Figure 2: Negative Impact on Phone usage in Asian Countries (Mak et al., 2014)

Recommendations for Managing Negative Mobile Use among Youth in Asian Countries:

Based on analysis and findings, the following are recommended for managing negative mobile use among youth in Asian countries:

i.   **Improved Digital Literacy Programs:** Governments and educational institutions should implement comprehensive digital literacy programs that teach youth about responsible mobile usage. These programs should include the risks of online behaviour, cyberbullying, privacy issues, and misinformation.

ii.   **Stricter Content Filtering and Monitoring:** Governments and tech companies need to enhance content filtering mechanisms, especially to control access to adult content. Parents and educators should also be empowered with tools to monitor and control online activities.

iii.   **Promotion of Positive Online Behavior:** Schools and media outlets should encourage campaigns that promote ethical and constructive online behaviour. This can include showcasing the benefits of educational and professional platforms while discouraging harmful behaviours such as seeking fame through dangerous viral trends.

iv.   **Regulation of Online Money-Making Schemes:** Governments need to regulate exploitative or fraudulent online money-making practices. Financial literacy programs should be designed to educate youth on safe and legal ways to earn money, discouraging risky or unverified schemes.

v.   **Support for Mental Health and Well-being:** The pressure to get viral or engage in harmful online practices can have mental health implications. Providing access to counselling services and incorporating mental health education into the school curriculum can help youth navigate the challenges of the digital age.

Conclusion:

Mobile usage among youth in Asian countries presents a double-edged sword, offering both significant advantages and considerable risks. On the positive side, mobile devices provide greater access to education, foster social connectivity, and open up employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. These advantages can contribute to improved digital literacy and healthier lifestyles through information and wellness apps. However, the darker side of mobile use reveals issues such as exposure to harmful content like pornography, academic cheating, pressure to go viral on social media, and involvement in unhealthy or fraudulent money-making schemes. To fully harness the benefits while mitigating the risks, a balanced approach is needed. This includes promoting digital literacy, implementing stricter content filters, fostering positive online behaviour, and regulating online economic practices. Additionally, providing mental health support for young people facing the pressures of the digital world is crucial. By addressing these challenges holistically, governments, educators, and society at large can ensure that mobile technology empowers youth to thrive in an increasingly digital world while protecting them from its potential harms.

Mobile phones are deeply embedded in the lives of young people across Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, where rapid technological growth has brought both opportunities and challenges. While mobile phones have improved access to education and economic opportunities, their overuse is leading to adverse outcomes in terms of mental and physical health, academic performance, and social relationships. This research aims to provide a holistic understanding of the negative impacts and offer actionable solutions to promote responsible usage. By addressing the research gaps, this study will contribute to the growing discourse on digital health and well-being among youth in Bangladesh and Asia. Young people in Bangladesh and across Asia. While it offers unprecedented access to information, education, and economic opportunities, it also poses significant risks to mental health, physical well-being, and academic achievement. By promoting responsible mobile usage, enhancing digital literacy, and enforcing regulatory safeguards, society can mitigate the negative impacts of mobile technology on the younger generation, ensuring they can harness its benefits without falling victim to its drawbacks.

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