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[ศศิพรรณ หน้า 88 - 96]

Problems of Online Communication : re-assessing mobile phone usage among young people during the COVID pandemic in Thailand and other countries.

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Abstract

Despite widespread agreement that some restrictions are necessary, especially for younger children, the COVID pandemic has imposed new conditions where digital interaction is strongly encouraged or mandated to minimise disease transmission. In these circumstances, several broad pragmatic guidelines for the use of mobile phones are proposed to: (a) promote (both in educational and home settings) more selective and responsible use of mobile devices; (b) minimise avoidable distractions and reduce time lost or wasted; (c) encourage and enable direct social interactions; and (d) still take advantage of these technologies, for remote communication and accessing relevant information when necessary, to achieve positive learning outcomes.

Part of the growing debate about impacts of digital devices on learning relates to mobile phone usage. Amid heightened concerns about standards of literacy and numeracy, educationalists in a number of countries have identified distraction / interruption / lack of concentration / cyber-bullying and other health problems, as issues associated with phone use in schools. This paper briefly summarises the challenges and implications of unrestricted phone use, and compares or planned strategies, formulated to alleviate perceived problems in traditional educational settings.

Keywords : student mobile usage, addictive problems, technological literacy,

บทคัดย่อ

แม้ว่าผู้เกี่ยวข้องกับการสื่อสารส่วนใหญ่จะเห็นพร้องต้องกันว่า การใช้โทรศัพท์มือถือของเด็กเล็กโดยเฉพาะนักเรียนชั้นประถมควรมีการใช้อย่างจำกัด แต่เนื่องจากการระบาดของโรคโควิด-19 ที่ได้ก่อให้เกิดเงื่อนไขใหม่ในการติดต่อสื่อสาร ส่งผลให้การสื่อสารผ่านสื่อดิจิทัลได้รับการสนับสนุนและส่งเสริมเป็นอย่างมากเพื่อช่วยลดการแพร่กระจายของโรค จากสถานการณ์โรคระบาดนี้ องค์กรหรือหน่วยงานต่าง ๆ ได้กำหนดและเสนอแนวทางในการปฏิบัติซึ่งเป็นประโยชน์ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการใช้โทรศัพท์มือถืออยู่หลายประการ อาทิ (ก) ส่งเสริมให้มีการใช้อุปกรณ์เคลื่อนที่ (ทั้งในสถานศึกษาและที่บ้าน) อย่างมีความรับผิดชอบและควรพิจารณาในการเลือกรับข่าวสารให้มากขึ้น (ข) ลดการถูกรบกวนและลดการเสียเวลา (ค) ส่งเสริมให้มีการติดต่อสื่อสารทางเครือข่ายสังคมออนไลน์โดยตรง; และ (ง) เพื่อสามารถใช้ประโยชน์จากโทรศัพท์มือถือในการสื่อสารทางไกลและการเข้าถึงข้อมูลข่าวสารที่จำเป็น เพื่อให้การเรียนรู้สำเร็จไปได้ด้วยดี

อย่างไรด็ตาม ได้มีการอภิปรายแสดงความคิดเห็นเกี่ยวกับผลกระทบของการใช้อุปกรณ์ดิจิทัลในการเรียนการสอนกันอย่างกว้างขวางขึ้นเรื่อย ๆ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งประเด็นการใช้โทรศัพท์มือถือในขณะกำลังเรียนของนักเรียน ท่ามกลางความกังวลนักการศึกษาเกี่ยวกับมาตรฐานของการรู้หนังสือและการคำนวณ ซึ่งนักการศึกษาหลายจากประเทศได้ระบุถึงปัญหาต่าง ๆ ได้แก่ ความใจลอยฟุ้งซ่าน/ การถูกขัดจังหวะหรือรบกวนการสอน / การขาดสมาธิ/ การถูกกลั่นแกล้งในโลกไซเบอร์ รวมทั้งปัญหาด้านสุขภาพต่าง ๆ ว่าล้วนเป็นผลที่เกี่ยวข้องมาจากมาจากการใช้โทรศัพท์มือถือในโรงเรียน บทความนี้จึงแสดงข้อมูล ความคิดเห็นและสรุปให้เห็นถึงผลกระทบของการใช้โทรศัพท์ในชั้นเรียน อีกทั้งการนำเสนอแนวทางซึ่งได้จัดทำขึ้นในรูปแบบแผนกลยุทธ์ เพื่อบรรเทาปัญหาดังกล่าวในสภาพแวดล้อมการศึกษาแบบดั้งเดิม

คำสำคัญ : การใช้มือถือของนักเรียน ปัญหาการเสพติดโทรศัพท์มือถือ ความรู้ทางเทคโนโลยี,

Background and Recent Changes

Everyone, at some time, has said to a family member, friend or partner something like ‘Pay attention to what I’m telling you !‘ or ‘Listen to what I’m saying !‘ or ‘Do you understand what I’ve said ?’ But this frustrating situation is becoming more common, with so many people distracted, to varying degrees, by mobile phones. In educational settings – where continued concentration is so necessary and essential, this has become a major problem – to the extent that bans or restrictions have been planned or implemented in a number of countries (Khalil, 2019 ; Selwyn, 2019b). From my own experience in undergraduate teaching in Thailand, I have found it necessary to frequently remind students at regular classes to switch off their phones, so that classes are not disrupted unnecessarily.

Common problem and altered pandemic priorities

Mobile or smartphone ' addiction ' has been recognised as a very common problem, for all age groups, for some years; there is a huge literature on the topic, including many books on the subject of how individuals might ' break the habit or ' overcome the addiction '! Although this question of overuse or addictive smartphone behaviours is important in many situations, it is actually just one aspect of a more general debate about the impacts of modern communications technologies on peoples' ways of acquiring knowledge and learning.

Since the introduction of the Internet the priority has been to facilitate rapid dispersal and access to the most recent and apparently directly relevant information (Bilmanoch, 2007). But this pre-occupation with the speed of gathering data has, in combination with other increasing demands on time, reduced the time available for reflection and analysis as well as the capacity to develop a thorough understanding – which has major implications for education (Bennet and Bennet, 2008; Watson, 2020). These trends and impacts, associated with the Internet and other recently developed mobile devices, have been debated for some years; however, the COVID pandemic has forced a re-assessment of the ways in which communication technologies can be utilised – especially in the health and education sectors.

Since early 2020, management of the global COVID pandemic has imposed major changes on the development and use of mobile digital devices. These changes (discussed in the ' Newer Approaches and Implications ' section below), while necessary at present, may not be permanent and may exacerbate some of the problems mentioned above; however, they also confer benefits by enabling remote solutions and outcomes for both educational and non-educational questions in the short term.

The main aims of this paper are:

(a) to briefly review known and potential problems with excessive mobile phone use among young people;

(b) to summarise remedial strategies for educational settings, designed to regulate usage and optimise learning outcomes; and

(c) in a COVID context, to discuss new approaches to the use of mobile phones, both in education and broader social environments.

Mobile Phones – Developing Problems and Strategies in Education

As previously mentioned, changes in young peoples' capacity to access information have been debated for many years; however, it has only been in the last 15 years, with the ubiquitous adoption of mobile phone technology, that some of the practical issues have become apparent (Kawasaki et al., 2006; Khidhir, 2019; Mettathamrong, 2021). See Table 1 and Figure 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of perceived educational and socio-medical problems associated with extensive mobile phone usage.

Problem / Issue	Source
1. Distraction to individual (and surrounding people), inter- rupting concentration on learning or specific tasks.	Selwyn, 2019b
2. Imposes erratic multi-tasking, resulting in unsatisfactory or incorrect conclusions (outcomes).	Selwyn, 2019b
3. Individually isolating activity – with content designed to retain user attention/interest – indirectly reducing direct social interaction and inhibiting development of personal skills.	Misra et al., 2014; Rotondi et al., 2017
4. Contributing to reduced discipline, concerning organisation or prioritisation of necessary online (or off line) tasks.	Selwyn, 2019b
5. Exposure to inappropriate material or trolling, phishing, or cyber-bullying.	Selwyn, 2019b
6. Tends to narrow focus for information to a small number of favoured sites, which may be biased in various ways or unverifiable. Development of skills to search for alternative sources is inhibited or neglected.	Selwyn, 2019b
7. Lack of diverse, verifiable sources and time for reflection or synthesis inhibits development of critical or analytical skills which, in turn, slows improvement in verbal or written communication.	UT Austin, 2017
8. Pre-occupation with online activity can lead to varied health issues (from eye strain, loss of sleep or inadequate nutrition, to tendonitis, to addictive behaviours or serious accidents caused by lack of attention to the surrounding environment).	Clayton et al., 2015; Elhai et al., 2017; Bou mosleh & Jaa- louk, 2018; Khidhir, 2019

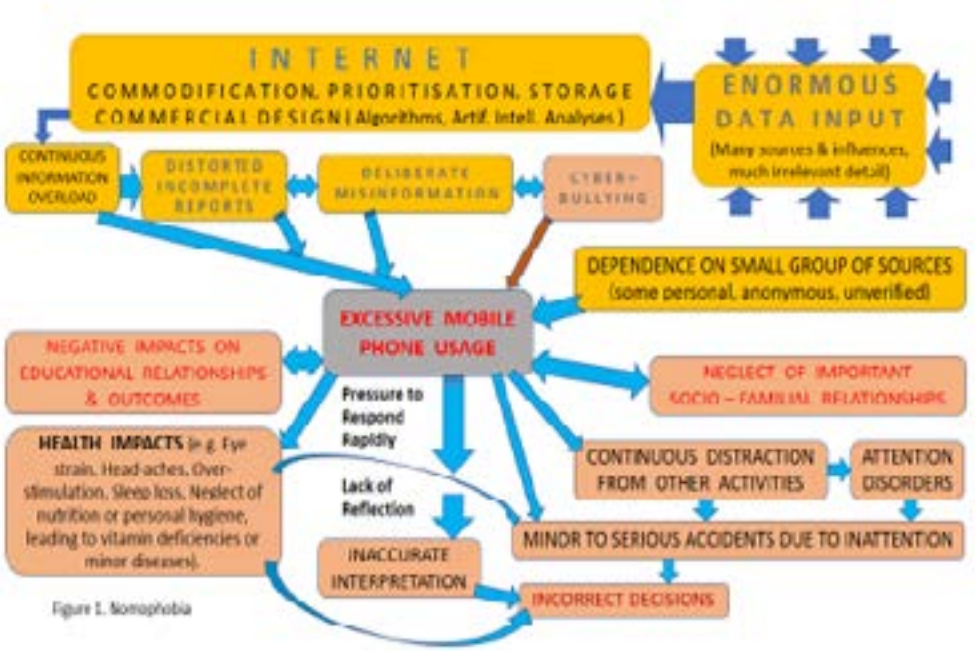
The many observed and potential problems had heightened concerns for student learning and welfare, prior to COVID, and a number of strategies were being developed, trialled or implemented in different countries – see Table 2.

Table 2. Some strategies to minimise learning or health problems from mobile phones in school settings (sources: Selwyn, 2019a, 2019b).

Strategy / Initiative
1. Total school site bans (with medical exemptions).
2. School hour bans (with secure locker storage during class hours).
3. Class time bans on use, with access at lunch-hour.
4. Total bans at primary schools – with selective restrictions on use at High Schools.
5. Minimal use permitted, restricted to emergency or urgent classwork project needs.

Unfortunately, while a number of studies have been completed on observed problems relating to excessive mobile phone use by young people (King et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2018; Tangmun-

kongvorakul et al., 2019), much less is published on the results of phone management strategies, trialled or implemented in schools. Furthermore, the recent pandemic has imposed conditions where individual home learning and online classes (totally dependent on computers and mobile phones) have become the normal, or only, educational option for most students for periods of weeks or months. To complete this brief review of the current situation, Figure 1 progressively synthesises the external influences, the personal social interaction impacts and potential health issues resulting from excessive mobile use.



The above tables and figure demonstrate the range of issues involved, the limited strategies devised for alleviating problems in schools and the numerous direct or indirect impacts of excessive mobile phone use; however, it should be noted that there is considerable disagreement as well as attitude and policy shifts about restricting phone use. For example, in New York a ban in schools was first introduced in 2006. But it was lifted in 2015 for a range of reasons, some of which had nothing to do with the original issues (e.g. distraction, discipline, cyber-bullying). The reasons given for lifting bans related to variable enforcement of restrictions at different schools, provision of secure lockers for storage of phones during class hours and concerns raised by parents about student safety.

In Australia, there have been calls for a national mobile phone ban in public schools (Australian Associated Press, 2019), however, the different State and Territory jurisdictions (with responsibility for education) have differing viewpoints and several have no plans for restrictions. Many Australian adults favour some form of restriction in schools (with medical exemptions), but there is some debate on the extent of limits – from total site bans, to the full school day, to class hours only with access at lunch-hour. There are also parental concerns that total school bans could jeopardise student safety, during transit to and from school

Doubts have also been expressed about whether school day bans would significantly reduce cyber-bullying – which can be initiated at any time, 7 days a week. More pragmatic or hybrid strategies have been suggested, where bans at primary schools are considered appropriate and beneficial, but are not feasible at High Schools. The reasoning being that secondary students need to use phones to access information for classwork purposes and they are more mature, to be able to cope with cyber-bullying – should it occur (Selwyn, 2019a).

Newer Approaches and Changed Circumstances

In addition to the Internet and other technological impacts mentioned above, that influence educational theories concerning learning or communication, digitisation had been associated with massive shifts in attitudes to the demands, needs and value of data and a growing commodification of knowledge. This, in turn, had led to a widespread re-assessment of concepts such as the nature and types of knowledge, the process of acquiring information and of learning, as well as ways of preventing the degradation or loss of knowledge (Pritchard et al., 2010; Pacharapha and Ractham, 2012; Tanney, 2013; Watson, 2020).

Then, as previously mentioned, the COVID pandemic resulted in changes in drivers of development of online platforms and technologies – away from the primary advertising and commercial, entertainment and leisure priorities. For example, health and educational imperatives have forced a re-assessment and driven modifications based on improving effective communication of public health information to mass populations quickly; it has also been important to stimulate interest and engagement for a wide range of young people in educational settings, where online classes have become almost universal.

In other words, during an emergency (pandemic) context, the emphases have been: (a) ensuring extensive distribution and easy access to basic practical information (for everyone), influencing daily activities; (b) facilitating both community and governmental interactions, for mutual benefits but without incurring unnecessary health risks; (c) devising better ways of delivering necessary reference information and developing alternative methods of stimulating learning, understanding and educational outcomes, where face-to-face teaching and social interaction is not advisable. These changed emphases also have broader longer-term social implications that are beneficial, as they: foster general online access and technological literacy among all age groups; encourage efficient and responsible use of technology for the common (or community) good; promote developing online alternatives to help address future emergency situations.

Recommendations in a Pandemic Context

The evidence about mobile phone use is mixed. For example, while an extensive range of physical and mental health issues have been associated with excessive use of these devices, a recent survey of Thai youth revealed that one of the most frequent uses was to take and post photos of mundane daily activities (Mettathamrong, 2021); hardly a medical risk ! Selwyn (2019a) points out that over 130 studies concluded that it was very difficult to demonstrate causal relationships between mobile phone multi-tasking and academic performance. Other surveys demonstrate that changes in the use of mobile phones and digital communication generally have occurred in all age groups, due to COVID-19 (Chae, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020).

However, from the complex, changing conditions described above, several general conclusions can be drawn. These include: the trend towards a more information-rich environment and more sophisticated, interconnected communication devices will continue; the need for online / internet / device literacy will increase for all age groups; excessive use of digital devices can lead, directly or indirectly, to a range of physical or social health problems for individuals. Any guidance relating to mobile phone usage, either in social or educational settings, has to be inclusive and flexible. It is recommended that the focus is on necessary, responsible usage – even if some restrictions on use are considered necessary at some times, for the common (group or family) good.

The justification for restricted access / use can be framed both in terms of educational and cultural values, by: (a) optimising learning outcomes; (b) emphasising consideration for others; (c) encouraging direct one-to-one or group social interactions in regulated environments – this will hopefully extend to informal familial or social occasions, leading to improved personal skills, more effective communication and stronger relationships.

In summary, although beneficial in many ways, mobile phone usage has created both health and social problems for young people, and the changed priorities imposed by COVID may aggravate some of these issues in the short term; however, it is to be hoped that the initiatives and lessons, learned under pandemic conditions, can be applied to benefit future generations.

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