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Becoming "Smart": Youth, Smartphones, and Consumer Culture in Urban Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

In technologically advancing Bangladesh, smartphones are central to progress yet are fostering a new consumer culture among youth. This qualitative study investigates how smartphone consumption cultivates a consumption-centred lifestyle and reinforces class and identity-based inequalities. It further explores how these devices generate new norms concerning relationships, pleasure, and self-perception. Data were collected via ethnographic interviews, focus group discussions, case studies, and observation with 45 students across three universities. Findings reveal that purchases are driven more by brand value and social acceptance than technical utility. Influenced by capitalist structures, youth frame consumption as a pathway to pleasure, identity, and social belonging, a process that perpetuates social inequality. A palpable social pressure to participate in this consumerism was evident. Ultimately, smartphone usage has become a cultural determinant of "being smart," a perception shaped by society, family, media, and corporate interests. The study concludes that this dynamic exacerbates class division. These findings aim to equip educators, development organizations, and policymakers to address these inequalities and guide a more critical, beneficial engagement with technology.

Keywords: Smart, Smartness, Smartphones, Consumer Culture, Youth, Consumption-centric lifestyle.

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INTRODUCTION

We are currently living in a dynamic world, where everything is moving forward. This speed began during the Age of Enlightenment and has been increasing over time. Moreover, technology contributes the most to maintaining this momentum. Technological acceleration… [is] evident in transportation, communication, and production… as part of the increasing tempo of modern social life (Rosa, 2013, p. 72). On the other hand, with the continuous growth of technology, the world is now in our hands. We know this best through the mobile phone, a device that lets us communicate from one end of the world to the other. In addition, it allows us to enjoy various other benefits, including sending messages. Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture (Castells, 1996, p. 469). But it has only been about a decade since smartphones appeared on the market. In that short time, they have given people internet access, photo-sharing capabilities, and advanced communication systems (Zong et al., 2019). It also investigates how various smartphone applications are used, and how that use leads to changes in various aspects of urban life (Zong et al., 2019).

For a developing country like Bangladesh, smartphone adoption is not a major concern. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2023), 72.3 percent—more than two-thirds—of households already have at least one smartphone user. Consequently, smartphones of various brands and price points, along with their users, are no longer limited to any specific class, profession, location, or age group. We are now online anytime/anywhere, requiring new theoretical understandings of time and place. This starts with the young, who are inseparable from their phones, and has now spread to their parents. Smartphones use us, bending us to their compulsive rhythms and demanding our attention (Agger, 2011, p. 119). Since their introduction to Bangladesh in 2008, smartphones have had such a widespread impact across all professions that it would not be an exaggeration to call this a silent technological revolution. This is especially true among the youth, 86% of whom are smartphone users (The Daily Star, 2021). Worldwide, there are over 6 billion people with smartphone data plans, and it is projected that this will grow to over 7.5 billion by 2026 (Statista, 2025).

It is noteworthy that the evolution from the cell phone to the smartphone cannot be seen as merely technological. This is because a user of a basic cell phone, by adopting smartphone features, can be positioned within the "smart" or technologically elite class of society. Owing

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to smartphones and social networking sites, consumers might feel smarter (Park et al., 2015). A smartphone user utilizes more advanced features than a basic cell phone user. Through this use, they feel comfortable identifying as "smart." Furthermore, when a new model with more advanced features than the previous one arrives on the market, adopting it allows a person to identify as even "smarter". As a marketing strategy, the Smartphone term was introduced in the market, referring to a new class of mobile phones that provide integrated services from communication, computing, and mobile sectors, including voice communication, messaging, personal information management (PIM) applications, and wireless communication capability (Zheng & Ni, 2006). Various institutions wield discursive power to establish such cultural determinants in our society. The meanings they create through this power have two major effects on the social system. Firstly, the word "smart" signifies a phone with more advanced features and higher brand value. Secondly, to maintain this "smart" identity, its features—such as social media, e-banking, and to-do reminders, etc, must be used regularly. Today, smartphones enable consumers, advertisers, and publishers to better engage and socialize using the ubiquitous experience of this advanced platform by leveraging its features (Sarwar & Soomro, 2013).

Discursive power institutions exert this influence across society, with a pronounced effect on youth. This is because youth are the most adept at utilizing the full suite of smartphone features, especially social media. Because of their social position, what's novel for teens is not the technology but the public life that it enables. Teens are desperate to have access to and make sense of public life; understanding the technologies that enable publics is just par for the course (boyd, 2014, p. 21). However, the uncontrolled use of smartphones driven by high demand and acceptance among youth has fostered a complex new culture. This culture is socially perceived as the process of "becoming smart." Evolving technology has caused young generations to be increasingly exposed to constant social and technological changes in the environment, which consequently requires new skills and investment in attaining, sharing and creating knowledge, which requires access to information systems and, consequently, networking (Lu et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2016). Rather than a matter of technical feasibility, this process is fundamentally about the formation of personal identity, dignity, interpersonal relationships, and cultural values. The embedding of mobile communication in society matters because coordination is increasingly conducted via mobile phones. At a personal level, knowing that the mobile phone is increasingly interwoven into society helps us understand why we have become so attached to it and why we can feel anxiety (some would say freedom) when we are without it.

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Understanding the process of social embedding helps us consider whether this is pathology or a healthy need for social interaction (Ling, 2012, pp. 3-4).

A significant portion of young people in developing countries like Bangladesh, now in the third decade of the 21st century, use smartphones uncontrollably. Their dependence is so intense that they cannot imagine life without them. In most cases, this addiction is fueled by social media. Through these platforms, young people connect with each other and seek to establish their social position. Users of smartphones were nervous and anxious without them in daily life, and they experienced symptoms that made it difficult to stop using them, leading to problems in daily life (Lee et al., 2015). Furthermore, the accessibility of social media has integrated young people into a larger, hybrid culture. This integration, in turn, has given rise to an entirely new cultural form. Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3).

Most existing research has focused on the practical aspects of smartphones. However, the anthropological meaning of the term "smart", how it defines culture and is practiced, remains understudied. Specifically, there is a need to examine how smartphones provide a complete structure for young people's social lives, aspirations, and cultural values, and how this, in turn, affects our existing social structures.

The purpose of this research is to examine the cultural implications of smartphone engagement among youth. Specifically, it investigates how the process of smartphone-related cultural consumption fosters a consumption-centric lifestyle, marked by class and identity inequalities. Finally, it explores how smartphones generate new social definitions and norms for life, relationships, joy, and happiness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In contemporary society, smartphones have become an inseparable part of everyday life. Their widespread and excessive use has significantly transformed human behavior and social interaction. The advanced features of smartphones have not only enhanced efficiency and connectivity but have also influenced multiple dimensions of social life, including religion, culture, education, marriage, and other social institutions. These domains play a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities. As such, smartphone usage cannot be understood merely as a technological practice; rather, it must be examined as a cultural and social phenomenon.

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Through a systematic review of existing literature, this study adopts an anthropological perspective to examine the processes and socio-cultural factors that have shaped youth into what may be described as "smart" individuals. In particular, it examines how smartphone use contributes to identity formation and socialization in contemporary cultural contexts.

Smartphones as an Integral Part of Culture

In their cross-cultural research, Peltonen et al. (2018) observe that mobile applications have become an inseparable component of daily life. Their study reviews smartphone application usage among more than 25,000 users across 44 countries. Despite differences in cultural backgrounds and languages, the findings suggest that mobile applications facilitate social interaction in ways that transcend geographical boundaries. However, the authors also note a limited understanding of the factors that regulate usage patterns. Their findings demonstrate that the use of specific application categories is closely tied to cultural values, illustrating how app usage has become an integral part of smartphone culture, shaped by numerous social and cultural factors.

"Smartness," Socialization, and the Formation of Self-Identity

Akeusola B. N. (2023) employs a quantitative research framework to examine smartphone usage patterns, social and mental well-being, and socio-cultural influences. Based on data collected from 1,241 participants across different regions of Nigeria, the study explores how young Nigerians perceive and use smartphones. The findings reveal that while smartphones are widely used, many youths do not perceive them as significantly shaping their personal values or preferences, unlike other social and cultural influences. This suggests that the relationship between smartphone usage and identity formation is complex and context-dependent.

Similarly, Chi-ying Chen (2018) analyzes the use of the social mobile application *LINE*, examining both psychological and social influences on individual usage patterns. The study finds that individuals lacking self-awareness and social skills are more inclined to use digital communication platforms to enhance their social acceptability. In contrast, the research also highlights that young people in Asia often seek to construct and negotiate their social identities across multiple digital platforms, reflecting diverse cultural motivations and social expectations.

The Role of Smartphones in Defining "Becoming Smart" Among Youth

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Kim et al. (2014) conducted an experimental study on smartphone adoption behavior among young American students. Integrating the Technology Acceptance Model, the Value-Based Adoption Model, and the Social Influence Model, the study reveals that smartphones are perceived not only as functional tools but also as symbolic objects that reflect users' identities. This symbolic dimension underscores the role of smartphones in shaping self-perception and social status among young people.

Additionally, Fillieri and Lin's (2017) qualitative study explores how novelty, functionality, brand value, and socio-cultural impact influence consumers' decisions to repurchase smartphones. The study finds that users often reuse smartphones based on cultural influences, emotional attachment, brand reputation, and design, further reinforcing the idea that smartphones carry symbolic and cultural meanings beyond their practical utility.

This literature review emphasizes meaning, culture, and symbolism in understanding smartphone use. Social media platforms are not merely tools for communication; rather, they are embedded within everyday social practices and shaped by local values, relationships, and cultural norms (Miller et al., 2016). Digital anthropologists argue that young people increasingly perceive no clear distinction between online and offline worlds. Instead, they inhabit a hybrid reality in which digital and physical interactions are seamlessly integrated (Pink et al., 2016). In this context, smartphones occupy a central position in daily life, functioning as key instruments through which social relations, identities, and cultural practices are negotiated and reproduced.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research aims to analyze the social construction of products, the production of consumer culture, the relationship between consumption and social order, and consumer behavior. To build a strong theoretical foundation, we will employ several key conceptual frameworks.

Given the deep integration of digital technologies such as smartphones into our cultural sphere, digital anthropology offers a crucial lens. It reveals the process by which the social and cultural relationship between individuals and smartphones is constructed, as well as the powerful forces shaping it. Fundamentally, we argue that digital technology, and especially smartphones, have become central to daily life and cultural communication, acting not as mere tools but as 'transportable homes' for sociality (Miller et al., 2021). Drawing on the principles of digital anthropology (Pink et al., 2016), which reveals how technology is culturally appropriated

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(Horst & Miller, 2006), we conclude that smartphones are an influential part of social and cultural life, far beyond their technical utility.

Supporting this, philosopher of technology Andrew Feenberg (2002) argues that the democratization of technology involves designs with alternative purposes and values, along with consumer participation, a process intrinsically linked to consumerism.

The process of cultural consumption centered on smartphones encourages a consumer-centric lifestyle, which is often associated with class and identity-based distinctions. Furthermore, smartphones are actively creating new social definitions and standards for life, relationships, pleasure, and happiness. The theoretical arguments for this process will be discussed step by step:

Firstly, within the interconnected market system, smartphones are commodities that embody surplus value. Following Karl Marx, surplus value is the value added by workers during production that exceeds the value of their labor power (wages); it is the source of capitalist profit, distinct from mere value addition (Marx, 1963/1971). This generation of surplus value underpins the modern class structure, which is fundamentally based on one's role in *production* (as an owner of capital or a seller of labor). While a consumer does not "consume" surplus value directly, purchasing a smartphone requires sufficient disposable income. The widespread consumption of such commodities can normalize a consumer-centric lifestyle, where access to the latest technology becomes a social marker, often reflecting and perpetuating existing economic inequalities.

On the other hand, to understand smartphone use in a capitalist economy, it is essential to introduce Marx's concept of commodity fetishism (Marx, 1990, pp. 163-177). This concept reveals how the social relations between people in the production process are obscured. Instead of seeing a smartphone as the product of specific human labor and social relations, we perceive its value as an inherent, natural property of the object itself, arising from its relationship to money and other commodities in the market. In essence, commodity fetishism is the process by which the abstract economic value of a commodity is transformed in our perception into a tangible, intrinsic quality of the physical object.

Secondly, as part of a broader social analysis of consumer behavior, Pierre Bourdieu re-conceptualizes taste (Bourdieu, 1984). He rejects the traditional view of taste as an innate, individual reflection of personal thought. Instead, he interprets taste as a system of consumer choices that reveals its social construction and points to an underlying symbolic power

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2026.7111

structure. This structure is maintained by dominant groups to enforce social distance and distinction from other classes. For Bourdieu, taste thus becomes a tool of social division, classifying what is high versus low, pure versus impure, and legitimate versus illegitimate. Bourdieu extends this analysis to all cultural activities, including leisure. A person's preferences in these domains are not free individual choices but are pre-determined by their position within a social classification system, shaped by their class and the resulting *habitus*. Similarly, a smartphone consumer's choice is not a simple reflection of personal thought or need. Their selection is prefigured mainly by a specific social classification, their economic, cultural, and social capital, which shapes their perception of what is desirable, appropriate, or accessible.

Thirdly, the use and consumption of goods is not based solely on need. Instead, goods undergo a process of multidimensional social and cultural valuation; a cultural framework is constructed around their consumption. In this context, the critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer coined the term "culture industry" in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), in the chapter titled 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). According to their concept, popular culture operates like a factory, systematically producing standardized cultural goods that render mass society passive. It presents mass consumption as inherently pleasurable, regardless of economic conditions. Adorno argued that this mass media culture cultivates false psychological needs, which are then presented as being fulfillable only through consumption within the capitalist system.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach:

This study adopts a qualitative research method to examine, from a critical perspective, the concept of the "smart" life prevalent in our society. It investigates the cultural and social determinants that lead the youth in our country to define themselves as "smart" through their use of smartphones. The primary purpose is not only to analyze the policies promoting smart life but also to critically expose the power dynamics, social classification, and consumer cultural hegemony embedded within this concept.

Research Area and Sampling:

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2026.7111

To capture the diverse perspectives and experiences of young people regarding smartphones, this research focused on the smartphone-using student community at several renowned public universities in Dhaka. However, due to research constraints, it was not feasible to gather data from the entire population of young students across all universities. Consequently, a specific sample of students from selected universities within the research area was chosen, and data was collected using purposive sampling.

We conducted the research in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and selected 45 students from three universities: Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University, and Jagannath University. From each university, we selected 15 students to represent the young people's society. These 45 students are the representatives of their respective universities' youth societies. We have used this sample size to collect information about these students' smartphone usage habits and perspectives through surveys and interviews. This was done to create a comprehensive understanding of the city's youth population's smartphone use, made possible by these 45 students, who represent different age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Source of Data Collection

Data sources can be divided into two categories: primary and secondary.

Primary Source: This research primarily used ethnographic interviews with university students who are regular smartphone users. We supplemented these interviews with focus group discussions, case studies, and media observation of smartphone usage.

Secondary Source: For this study, secondary data on technology, technological consumerism, and the portrayal of smartphones in the media were collected from books, newspapers, academic journals, online articles, advertisements, and radio and television programs.

Data Collection Method

The approach to data collection may vary depending on the type of research. We have made a conscious effort to collect the necessary primary data while maintaining ethical standards. Below, we will describe the methods used in this study.

Ethnographic Interview:

This study employs this method to comprehend the underlying concepts of "smart" thinking and lifestyles. Through open conversations, we aim to understand informants' lives, realities,

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2026.7111

beliefs, and cultures, which, in turn, will illuminate the reasons behind each individual's cognitive framework and technological engagement.

Focus Group Discussion:

This study utilized Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to interpret intricate data, acquire detailed subject knowledge, and explore collective viewpoints. Two FGD sessions were conducted, each comprising six participants. These participants were selected from three universities to represent diverse socioeconomic strata.

Observation:

In this context, we observed the behavior of various individuals, including smartphone users, to understand their habits, preferences, and social norms related to mobile phone use. This observational methodology is crucial for understanding how people use smartphones as tools for self-expression, communication, and entertainment. As part of the research, we relied heavily on observational methods to gather data on consumers' behavior, attitudes, and motivations. By observing individuals' behaviors, we identified patterns, trends, and correlations that helped me understand the complexities of consumer decision-making.

Case Study:

In a case study, information is gathered using various techniques, and the "case" is examined as a complex working unit in its natural setting (Johansson, 2002). We relied mainly on the case study method to collect data from the young generation about their experiences with smartphones. Moreover, what they feel whenever they use it.

Data Analysis Process

After collecting data, it needed to be analyzed. This analysis is a crucial part of the research. If the analysis is not done correctly, the research will not yield meaningful results. Our research was conducted over one year in 2024. This included four months of fieldwork, followed by two months dedicated to data analysis and organization. All collected information was systematically organized into thematic categories. The findings were presented through detailed observation and narrative, as qualitative research prioritizes in-depth understanding and contextual interpretation over numerical data. In our research, various types of data emerged. Therefore, we had to analyze these data in relation to the objectives of the study and the scope of the investigation.

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2026.7111

Ethical Consideration

When conducting anthropological fieldwork, researchers must adhere to a stringent set of ethical guidelines. In this study, these principles were rigorously observed. During interviews, we carefully avoided questions that could cause distress and actively worked to prevent any bias toward individuals or groups. We guaranteed that no personal information would be disclosed without explicit consent and took particular care not to dismiss or belittle any participant's thoughts or beliefs. Prior to participation, each respondent was fully informed of the research's topic and purpose and was assured that the collected data would not be used in any harmful manner. Ultimately, the research was built upon a foundation of mutual cooperation, sincerity, and ease between the researcher and the participating individuals and community.

RESULTS

> "Mobilization of the phone isn't really a technological process- it's cultural" (Meyerson, 2001).

Although everyday technologies like smartphones were long of little academic interest in the social sciences, recent scholarship has begun to examine how broader social forces exert a multidimensional impact on technology consumption.

Smartphones, as a major communication medium in modern society, are also undeniable carriers of aesthetic culture. In contemporary youth culture, consumers treat the smartphone as a cultural object integrated into daily life. This practice connects them to a larger consumer culture and emerges as a site of cultural creativity and power. Indeed, the link between consumption and youth culture is undeniable; young people are active consumers who constantly generate cultural meanings from their consumption, meanings that are inextricably tied to larger social and cultural structures.

This process of cultural consumption also immerses them in a realm of fantasy and social positioning, where each individual occupies a specific place within a social hierarchy, forging a particular identity. This agency becomes dominant in social practices such as managing personal relationships, emotional life, self-presentation, fashion, and the construction of personality. Thus, a tangible piece of technology is gradually transformed into a social environment.

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2026.7111

To analyze the significance of young consumers, we must ground our understanding in the perspectives of the youths themselves. Therefore, this study approaches young people's smartphone use as a complex interaction of consumption, linking it to youth culture, broader consumer society, agency, and power. Simultaneously, it will analyze how young people interpret and assign meaning and value to their own phone use.

Cultural consumption–centric lifestyle:

The use of smartphones or the preference for a particular brand or model among young people is not limited to technical functionality. Under the influence of the capitalist marketplace, smartphone consumption rapidly integrates youth into a consumer culture where they embrace consumption as a meaningful daily practice, linked to pleasure, hobby, and self-identification. Consequently, smartphone use is no longer an individual-centered act. While a market ideology claims that our purchases are purely personal matters, the social and cultural reactions to smartphone use reveal that these phenomena are deeply collective.

Therefore, our analysis must shift to examine specific cases. This case study will shed light on the multidimensional social aspects of everyday smartphone use.

> Al-Amin, a Dhaka University student, has a weakness for new smartphone models. Although he currently owns two smartphones from different brands, he uses a Redmi Note 9 Pro for daily tasks. Because they are expensive, he thinks carrying them is always dangerous. He also believes using smartphones harms his studies. Therefore, he does not consider smartphones essential; he bought them only out of his attraction to them. Although Al-Amin has an iPhone 14 Pro Max, he does not use it regularly. However, when he goes to social events, parties, or outings with friends, he brings it with him. He feels he cannot attend such events without a high-end smartphone because it maintains his social status. Branded phones give him a sense of nobility. Consequently, he also believes that using any phone other than a branded smartphone is incompatible with his personality.

The case of Al Amin clearly highlights the role of smartphones in cultural consumption. For this consumer, the device's value does not stem from technological necessity but is instead entirely socialized. He accepts the smartphone as a meaningful symbol of his social status and a tool for his personality formation, thereby acquiring a specific, desired identity.

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2026.7111

Frequently, consumers treat the phone's brand as an identity card signifying that status. As one respondent noted: *"If there is no expensive brand, there is no status."* Through smartphone use, consumers employ a strategy of self-construction. They simultaneously connect their identity to their peer world while attempting to signal their uniqueness within it. This is expressed in the feeling that *"If you have a smartphone in your hand, you can walk around with a different attitude*", said one respondent.

Furthermore, they validate the brand as a signifier of social class and a source of perceived social power. This is captured in the perception that: One participant stated, *'The iPhone brand is very 'posh.'*

Class and identity structure through cultural consumption:

Nowadays, young people are highly conscious about their smartphones. This consciousness stems primarily from concerns about keeping up with society and gaining appreciation from friends or on social media. Fundamentally, this reflects a dual desire: to stand out (in an elite sense) or to fit in. However, while young people often define smartphones in terms of social class, identity, or functionality, the reality can be quite the opposite.

To illustrate this contradiction, we present a case that reveals the sense of deprivation felt by someone without a smartphone and examines how they interpret this lack from their social and cultural position, through the lens of the younger generation.

> Shammi, a student at Jahangirnagar University, previously owned a smartphone, but after it was stolen, he could not afford a new one. Consequently, he now uses an old Samsung button phone. Because he cannot use a smartphone, he constantly feels its absence. He particularly suffers from an inferiority complex, as he cannot access social media like his friends. He feels bad because he is unable to take selfies or browse the internet like his peers. Usually, he avoids taking out his phone in public because it is outdated and, in his view, does not look good. When he sees his friends and peers holding new and attractive smartphone models, he feels sad and left behind, believing he has fallen behind others simply because he lacks a smartphone.

This case reveals that consumer behavior regarding smartphones is so deeply intertwined with an individual's social environment that, without the device, the consumer fails to maintain desired consumption practices. This failure leads to feelings of inferiority and powerlessness. This occurs because, according to the norms of consumer culture, individuals seek to maintain

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2026.7111

or follow popular trends to ensure their participation within their social group. One participant stated, "*When everyone uploads selfies on Facebook, it feels bad if I can't do it myself."*

Young people often believe that the inability to participate in these digital practices diminishes their capacity for self-presentation. One of the participants stated, "*If I don't have a good smartphone in my hand, I feel ashamed to take out my phone when I go out."* Furthermore, lacking a smartphone can trigger a crisis in their perceived social standing within that same culture. Another participant stated, "*I feel bad about myself if I don't have an expensive smartphone when I go out with friends."* Among the many young students in our study, we observed a clear tendency to adopt smartphones as a primary tool for self-presentation and identity creation. This is illustrated by statements such as: One participant stated, "*The phone looks very premium, so I bought a Pixel device. It's perfect for mirror selfies."*

The role of smartphones in defining ways of life:

Meanwhile, some users have fully adopted smartphone culture as a way of life, reorganising their daily activities and social practices around it. This integration creates constant pressure to update their social media presence, maintain streaks on apps like Snapchat, and follow various digital trends, such as restaurant culture or Instagram gossip. In their daily lives, smartphones have become the most essential tool.

> Maliha, a student at Jagannath University, is entirely dependent on her smartphone, using it for about 20 hours a day. She considers it essential for everything like email, downloading content, taking selfies, social networking, reading news, and gaming. According to her, the smartphone is a modern device that helps keep her life moving. She also finds it indispensable for staying connected with friends and keeping up with them. She is very attracted to smartphone advertisements in newspapers, on TV, and on billboards. These ads draw her to new models and spark her interest in purchasing new phones. For Maliha, the smartphone is a highly fashionable accessory. Most of the time, she uses phone cases with colours and aesthetic designs that match her clothes and outfits, believing this makes her more stylish and attractive. For her, the smartphone has now become an essential part of daily life. She believes it would not be possible to live a single day without it.

This Case reveals a consumer who has made her daily life dependent on smartphone use. She values the smartphone not only as a means of integrating into the contemporary global environment and a shared culture, but also as a means of accessing specific fashion and beauty

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2026.7111

standards, enabling a more curated self-presentation. In this way, each user becomes a cultural consumer of the smartphone, a role that becomes inseparable from their identity.

Therefore, in light of all three cases, it can be concluded that the smartphone, beyond its practical functions, accrues significant social and cultural value. This value is linked to the presentation of personality, socioeconomic status, personal style, and alignment with peer status, as constructed through social media.

Influence or pressure of the surrounding culture

The process of cultural consumption is invariably shaped by pressure from larger social and cultural power structures. In this study, we observed this influence at work among the youth groups we engaged with. It is not that all consumers initially adopt smartphones and their associated cultural practices out of genuine free will or personal choice. Instead, the surrounding social and cultural structures compel them to accept predetermined meanings of smartphone consumption.

The following case study illustrates this phenomenon:

> Moushumi is a student at Dhaka University. Both of her parents are teachers at a private college. As their only daughter, Moushumi had all her wishes fulfilled before she even asked—except one. She was never allowed to use a smartphone. Her leisure time was spent with storybooks and television, and she socialized by meeting and chatting with friends in person at school and college. She was raised in a very controlled manner from a young age. After she was admitted to Dhaka University, she was finally given a smartphone. However, having been kept away from the internet and social media since childhood, Moushumi possesses little skill, willpower, or interest in the smartphone world. Because of this, her peers sometimes call her "British" , a teasing label that stems from her perceived lack of proficiency with smartphones and her general disinterest in digital culture.

This case illustrates a compelling example of a social contract and the rhetoric of peer taste. It demonstrates that smartphones have become an unwritten symbol of youth, modernity, and keeping pace with the times, a status that does not originate from a sense of practical necessity.

Consequently, consumer culture permeates the youth social environment so thoroughly that even an individual who desires to opt out cannot free themselves from its influence. Therefore,

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2026.7111

decisions regarding the consumption, practice, and use of smartphones are largely collective rather than individual within a given cultural and social sphere.

Ultimately, even against personal preference, consumer culture within the context of capitalist structures the commodification of technology in such a way that there is no alternative but to become a consumer to participate in youth society. In this way, consumer culture indirectly establishes control over the individual, functioning as a pervasive cultural power structure.

DISCUSSION

The main aim of this study was to investigate how teenage smartphone involvement functions as a mechanism of cultural consumption that promotes a consumer-oriented lifestyle, perpetuates social disparities, and establishes new social norms. The results, derived from comprehensive case studies, affirm that smartphones are essential cultural artefacts. They serve as channels for a consumerist identity, evident indicators of class and taste, and catalysts for reinterpreting notions of a significant social existence. The concept of "smartness" is thereby exposed not as technical skill but as a socially stratified display of consumer capital.

The research reveals that smartphone consumption is essentially a symbolic behaviour, which corresponds with and expands upon Marx's notion of commodity fetishism. Participants such as Al-Amin esteemed the iPhone not for its functionality but for its ability to signify "nobility" and uphold social status during festivities. The separation of value from use-value, in which the smartphone is perceived as an "idea" rather than a functional tool, illustrates the obfuscation and recontextualization of social interactions as intrinsic characteristics of the commodity (Marx, 1867/1990). This discovery expands upon the research of Kim et al. (2014), who recognised smartphones as emblematic identification artefacts; we demonstrate that this symbolism is actively exploited in social rituals to establish and exhibit hierarchy, so directly promoting capitalist consumerism.

Secondly, this consumption is meticulously categorised, offering robust evidence for Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of taste as a mechanism of social differentiation. The perceived hierarchy from Gold Edition iPhones to basic models to Android devices serves as a tangible representation of socioeconomic stratification. This is not solely a matter of personal preference but an expression of economic and cultural capital, wherein prevailing tastes are developed to reinforce "social distance," as Bourdieu posited. Respondents' profound sense of inferiority and deprivation, feeling "left behind" without a smartphone, exemplifies the harsh social isolation perpetuated by this system. Our findings extend beyond the quantitative trends identified by

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Peltonen et al. (2018) to elucidate the qualitative experience of inequality manifested within young culture through particular app and brand utilisation.

Thirdly, smartphones play a pivotal role in the creation of new cultural standards for life and happiness, a phenomenon effectively elucidated by Adorno and Horkheimer's (1944) "culture industry" thesis. One of the respondents - Maliha's situation illustrates the internalisation of a standardised, consumption-oriented paradigm for an ideal existence, as she restructures her life around social media upkeep and fashion coordination. The pressure, mockingly termed "British" for nonconformity, illustrates the coercive peer enforcement of these standardised norms. This corresponds with the fact that digital platforms are integrated into social practices and influenced by local values (Miller et al., 2016), although it underscores a more troubling consequence: these platforms may undermine local identity in favour of a globalised, commercialised self-representation. This fills a void in the literature, exemplified by Chi-ying Chen's (2018) emphasis on identity negotiation, by demonstrating that such negotiation is predominantly biassed towards pre-packaged, commercially viable identities.

This study asserts that the smartphone has become the primary cultural artefact for teenagers in a digital anthropological "hybrid reality" (Pink et al., 2016). The principal interface where the contradiction of modern agency manifests: a means for personal identity formation that concurrently serves as a device for societal regulation and consumer conformance. This clarifies the observed inconsistency in literature, such as Akeusola B.N. (2023), which identified a minimal perceived impact on values. Our ethnographic analysis indicates that the influence is significant, functioning within the realm of habitual practice and implicit social pressure, characteristic of the "habitus," rather than as an explicit belief.

CONCLUSION

To question its innocence, technology must be analyzed not only as a new innovation but within a larger social and cultural context. This research took the contemporary smartphone as its prime example, uncovering the multidimensional aspects of its complex relationship with youth. The analysis demonstrated that this relationship is defined, symbolized, and evaluated within a framework of cultural consumption and power, framing the smartphone as a critical nexus where youth culture, symbolic meaning, and political power dynamically intersect.

These findings have important implications. Theoretically, they challenge neutral or deterministic models of technology, affirming that devices like the smartphone are deeply embedded in, and shaped by, social and political struggles over meaning and control. In

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practice, this suggests that interventions aimed at youth technology use, whether by educators, parents, or regulators, must account for the complex landscape of cultural practice and symbolic resistance, rather than treating the device as merely a tool for good or ill.

This study is not without limitations. Its focus was primarily on urban youth in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which may limit the direct transferability of its conclusions to other demographics or technological ecosystems. Furthermore, the rapidly evolving nature of both technology and youth culture means these relationships are inherently fluid. Therefore, future research should employ longitudinal methods to track these dynamics over time and expand comparative studies across different cultural and socioeconomic settings to test the robustness of the nexus model proposed here.

Ultimately, the smartphone emerges not as an isolated object but as a premier site where contemporary society negotiates values, agency, and control. By examining it as such, this research provides a framework for understanding how all-pervasive technologies become woven into the very fabric of social life and power structures, a question of increasing urgency in our digitally mediated world.

RECOMMENDATION

The results of this study demonstrate that the concept of "smart" is socially constructed and functions as a mechanism for creating social classes. As a constructed concept, it can be countered with deliberate educational policy. We propose a policy to foster "digital culture criticism." Such a program would train individuals in the responsible use of technology, demonstrating how misuse can harm personal and societal well-being.

Furthermore, educational ideals should shift from a teacher-centric model of "smartness" toward values such as creativity, cooperation, and social responsibility. Consequently, the findings of this study can play a vital role in social development. They can inform policy and legal frameworks, particularly in regulating media and advertising.

Ultimately, these recommendations seek to establish cultural values that directly challenge the constructed ideal of being "smart." The goal is to ensure that technology serves as a tool for human benefit, rather than becoming a dominant criterion for defining personal identity and worth.

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2026.7111

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