

## RESEARCH PAPER

# From tools to symbols: exploring the complex nexus of smartphones in Bangladesh

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines how smartphones have evolved from functional tools into potent symbols of status, identity and social capital among young adults in urban Bangladesh. Drawing on qualitative case studies and digital urban ethnography in Dhaka, the research explores how these devices are embedded in everyday social performance and aspirational behavior. Grounded in attachment theory, the theory of attainment, mimetic desire and Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus, the study investigates the motivations behind smartphone choices, the emotional bonds users form with their devices and the performative display of smartphones in social and romantic contexts. Findings reveal that high-end smartphones are often acquired not for utility, but to project prestige, demonstrate 'tech-savviness' and navigate peer and societal expectations. The study also highlights how smartphone ownership influences impression management, particularly in youth interaction and romantic endeavor. These insights shed light on the broader implications of digital technology in shaping identity and social hierarchy in a rapidly transforming society.

### Keywords

smartphones, social capital, identity, status symbol, digital anthropology, attachment theory

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### Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has reshaped communication, social interaction and consumption patterns. Among these technologies, smartphones have become essential companions, evolving from simple tools to integral parts of modern life (Miller *et al.*, 2021). Beyond their practical uses, smartphones have gained symbolic significance, indicating social status and prestige. They

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have become powerful status symbols, transcending age, gender and ethnic boundaries, and serve as indicators of social position and economic success (Stald, 2008). This phenomenon raises intriguing questions about why smartphones, among all technological advancements, have attained such prominence as status symbols.

Throughout history, technological innovations have often enhanced individual status, whether through luxurious cars, cutting-edge laptops or prestigious wristwatches. However, smartphones mark a significant milestone because of their portability and versatility (Stald, 2008). Unlike many other possessions, smartphones are highly portable and frequently visible, making them ideal tools for signaling social status. The quality and brand of smartphone often play a crucial role in this display as users tend to take pride in showcasing high-end devices while feeling reluctant or even embarrassed to be seen with older or less expensive models. This research explores the dynamics within Bangladesh, focusing on its growing smartphone user base and the critical role of smartphones as status symbols in the urban landscape. The Global System for Mobile Communication reports a substantial presence of smartphones in Bangladeshi society, with a significant proportion of mobile phone users adopting these devices (GSMA, 2023). With projections indicating continued growth in smartphone adoption, it is crucial to examine the factors driving their symbolic significance beyond practical use.

Unlike many other personal belongings, smartphones are both highly portable and consistently visible in social contexts, making them powerful instruments for expressing and negotiating social status. In this context, social status refers to an individual's perceived position within a social hierarchy, shaped by factors such as economic capacity, lifestyle choices and access to modern technological goods. Importantly, this status is not only passively held but actively performed through everyday acts of consumption – one of the most prominent being the public use and display of smartphones.

The quality of a smartphone plays a critical role in this symbolic performance. This quality is determined by a range of interrelated factors: brand reputation (e.g., Apple, Samsung), price category, technical specifications (such as camera resolution, processing speed, and storage capacity), design and aesthetic appeal and how recently the model was released. These elements collectively inform how a device is socially perceived. Premium smartphones are often associated with affluence, cosmopolitanism and alignment with global consumer trends, whereas older or budget-friendly models may connote economic limitations or a lack of technological sophistication. As a result, individuals – particularly young adults – frequently feel compelled to showcase their smartphones as visible markers of prestige. This tendency is especially pronounced in peer-driven environments, where constant comparison fosters subtle social judgments. Conversely, users may feel discomfort, embarrassment or even social exclusion when using older or lower-tier devices, underscoring the smartphone's growing role as a contemporary symbol of identity and status.

This study seeks to explore how smartphones function as symbols of prestige and social standing among young adults in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. It examines how smartphones acquire symbolic value and how this value influences social norms, behaviors and peer perceptions. By doing so, the research aims to shed light on the broader implications of digital technology in contemporary urban society, particularly the ways in which smartphones shape social interactions, cultural practices and individual self-presentation.

## **Literature review**

Some scholars believe that mobile technology is used more for identity building and social status differentiation than for practical purposes. This trend is increasingly visible in modern society, where cell phones represent identity and social status. Wirth *et al.* (2008) explore the dynamic growth of mobile communication devices and services, showing that smartphones affect identities and social statuses beyond their pragmatic use.

Smartphones differ from other non-portable personal technologies, like desktop computers, printers and televisions, in two key ways. First, they maintain a consistent presence with users throughout daily activities, leading to significant dependence and a strong interpersonal connection (Kolsaker and Drakatos, 2009). Second, their frequent use in public settings and high visibility gives them significant symbolic value, allowing individuals to express their identities (Stald, 2008; Leung and Wei, 2000). As a result, many people view their smartphones as personal extensions with symbolic meanings. Research indicates that smartphones are often used to achieve positive social outcomes and to express identity (Blom and Monk, 2003).

Most earlier studies on smartphone use have primarily focused on functional aspects—such as how people interact with different features, how much time they spend on their screens or how intensely they use their devices (Wei 2008; Lou *et al.*, 2021; Tezol *et al.*, 2022). While these studies offer useful insights, they often miss the deeper, more symbolic roles smartphones play in everyday life. Smartphones are not just tools for communication or entertainment; they have become personal artifacts that reflect who we are, how we want to be seen, and where we fit within our social circles. Recognizing this, Lou *et al.* (2022) attempt to shift the focus toward the non-functional dimensions of smartphone usage, particularly how these devices help express identity and status.

One compelling example of this symbolic role is the rivalry between iPhone and Android users. Much like earlier divides between Apple and Windows users, people often form strong attachments to their chosen smartphone brand. These preferences go beyond technical features – they become statements about taste, lifestyle and sometimes even social class. In many social spaces, owning a particular brand or the latest model can carry meanings of being modern, successful, or in touch with global trends. At the same time, those using older or less expensive models may find themselves subtly excluded or judged. These dynamics reveal how smartphones are woven into the fabric of social identity and peer relationships, influencing not just how people connect with their devices, but also how they connect with each other.

In organizational technology studies, it has been observed that smartphone use fulfills not only functional objectives but also symbolic purposes, providing intangible benefits such as enhancing reputation, establishing legitimacy and creating favorable impressions (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2002; Ceccagnoli *et al.*, 2012). In the field of mobile technology, particularly studies using uses and gratification theories, scholars have identified differences between using mobile technology for identity formation and for practical purposes (Wirth *et al.*, 2008). People consider mobile devices as ‘symbolic representations of their identity’ to convey their actual or ideal image (Dedeoglu, 2012). Research has highlighted fashion and status as significant factors driving mobile technology use (Dedeoglu, 2012; Leung and Wei, 2000). According to Dedeoglu (2012), individuals who view mobile technology as a representation of popularity, status and personal expression are inclined to publicly display their smartphones to convey their real or desired identity. This behavior is common with other tangible items with symbolic significance, as increasing social visibility helps express identity and manage impressions (Solomon, 1983). It is natural for humans to protect and foster their self-identity, leading to behaviors that safeguard material belongings perceived as personal extensions (Mugge *et al.*, 2010).

While the existing literature offers a rich understanding of smartphones as tools for identity expression, social signaling and symbolic differentiation, it is important to note that much of this body of work originates from Western contexts or rests upon generalized, often universalized, global frameworks. These perspectives, while insightful, tend to overlook the particularities of smartphone usage within the nuanced cultural, economic and social realities of the Global South. As a result, there remains a critical gap in our understanding of how the symbolic meanings of smartphones manifest in non-Western urban settings – especially in societies grappling with both digital acceleration and socio-economic stratification.

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, presents a compelling case in this regard. As a city experiencing rapid digitalization amidst pronounced social hierarchies and class disparities, it provides

fertile ground for exploring how digital devices, particularly smartphones, mediate expressions of identity, modernity and aspiration. Despite the increasing pervasiveness of smartphones in the lives of Bangladeshi young adults, few studies have seriously engaged with the cultural and symbolic dimensions of smartphone ownership and use in such contexts. There is limited scholarship that examines how smartphones operate, not just as functional tools, but as performative objects embedded in peer relationships, romantic encounters and status negotiations. This absence is particularly striking given the role of digital technologies in shaping everyday life and the intense desire for connectivity, visibility and validation among urban young adults.

This study responds to this scholarly void by interrogating how smartphones function as cultural symbols and instruments of social distinction among young adults in Dhaka. It seeks to understand the broader socio-cultural logics that underlie smartphone choices and the performative practices that surround their use in public and private life. Specifically, the research explores how young Bangladeshis employ smartphones to signal status, construct identity and manage impressions within their social worlds. The study also interrogates the subtle yet pervasive pressures (from peers, family and society) that compel individuals to acquire high-end devices, even when doing so imposes economic strain. In doing so, the paper situates itself at the intersection of global digital anthropology and the local particularities of Bangladeshi urban young adult culture, contributing to a more geographically inclusive and contextually grounded understanding of the symbolic life of smartphones.

### **Research methods**

Building upon the research questions that emerged from the identified gap in the literature – namely, how smartphones function as status symbols and identity markers among urban young adults in Dhaka, what social pressures influence smartphone choice and usage and how smartphones serve as tools for impression management and social capital accumulation – this study employed a qualitative case study methodology grounded in anthropological inquiry. By focusing on the lived experiences of urban young adults aged 18 to 30, the research targeted a demographic undergoing critical life transitions, such as higher education, early career development, and the formation of new social and digital identities. This group was selected because of their heightened engagement with digital technologies and active participation in both physical and virtual social networks.

The case study approach allowed for a close, contextualized exploration of individual narratives and behaviors, offering insight into the symbolic functions of smartphones in everyday life. Each case was examined holistically, situating participants within their socio-cultural environments where personal aspirations, class structures and peer expectations intersect with digital practices. This approach enabled the study to address the central research questions by tracing how status, identity and impression management are enacted through smartphone use.

In line with the ethnographic tradition emphasized by Miller and Wang (2021), the study adopted a digital urban ethnography framework. This entailed field immersion in various everyday spaces (such as homes, educational institutions, cafés and marketplaces) while also observing digital behaviors across social media platforms and mobile interactions. Data collection was primarily conducted through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, both of which facilitated the collection of detailed, reflective accounts. In select cases, a life-story approach was employed to trace how participants' relationships with smartphones evolved over time and how these changes reflected shifting social contexts and symbolic meanings.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their visible and regular use of smartphones in public and social settings. This sampling strategy was intended to focus on individuals for whom smartphones clearly played a significant role in shaping identity and navigating peer dynamics. Through sustained interaction and rapport-building, the researcher was able to access granular details of smartphone use, such as patterns of display and concealment, preferences for particular brands or models and the emotional or symbolic significance attached to device

ownership and usage. These observations and interviews directly addressed the study's core questions regarding status performance, peer pressure, and identity construction.

In analyzing the data, rather than fragmenting findings into isolated thematic categories, the study employed a narrative reconstruction approach. This method allowed for a nuanced understanding of the subjective meanings and socio-cultural discourses surrounding smartphone use, including themes of modernity, aspiration, class mobility and digital fluency. The ethnographic lens treated smartphones not merely as functional artifacts, but as socially embedded symbols, central to the negotiation of identity and belonging among Dhaka's young adults.

In sum, the anthropological case study method, supported by immersive ethnographic practices and tied directly to the research questions, provided a grounded and context-sensitive understanding of how smartphones both shape and reflect the cultural lives and social performances of urban young adults in contemporary Bangladesh.

### Theoretical approaches

In this research, attachment theory, the theory of attainment, mimetic desire and Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of habitus, capital and field are employed to explore the symbolic significance of smartphones among Dhaka's young adults. Attachment theory highlights how smartphones function as surrogate attachment figures, offering comfort and security akin to human caregivers, particularly in the absence of physical presence. The theory of attainment provides insights into how smartphones have evolved from luxury items to everyday essentials, influencing social behavior and interaction without fundamentally altering human nature. Mimetic desire theory reveals how Dhaka's young adults emulate each other's desires for smartphones, driven by societal norms and aspirations, shaping competitive dynamics and social hierarchies. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field offer a robust framework to analyze how cultural norms, social interactions and the accumulation of cultural and social capital influence smartphone usage among young adults in Dhaka, facilitating identity expression and status negotiation in urban contexts.

#### *Theory of attachment*

Attachment theory accepts that humans have an inherent need to form bonds with caregivers from infancy, shaping their interpersonal interactions into adulthood (Bowlby, 2000). Bowlby identifies four key characteristics of attachment interactions: secure base, proximity seeking, haven and separation distress (Bowlby, 2000). A child's attachment to their primary caregiver serves as a foundation for future relationships, influencing how they seek comfort and security in times of distress (Hodge and Gebler-Wolfe, 2022). Charles Nuckolls provides empirical support for Bowlby's theory, suggesting that attachment is nearly universal in children (Nuckolls, 2001).

Attachment to a primary caregiver extends to other significant relationships throughout life (Sutton, 2018) and can manifest itself with objects like smartphones, especially when caregivers are unavailable (Hazan and Shaver, 1994). Smartphones can fulfill attachment needs by providing comfort and control during distress, much like human caregivers (Parent and Shapka, 2019). Adolescents may rely on smartphones for constant reassurance and support, akin to attachment figures (Hodge and Gebler-Wolfe, 2022). Researchers have applied attachment theory to understand the relationship between adolescents and smartphones (Hodge and Gebler-Wolfe, 2022). Attachment theory offers insights into the addictive aspects of smartphone use, with smartphones serving as attachment objects (Enez and Yalçinkaya-Alkar, 2021). Understanding attachment styles can help predict problematic smartphone use, particularly for those with anxious attachment styles (Parent *et al.*, 2021).

Smartphones are intentionally designed to maximize user engagement and provide neurobiological rewards, thereby fostering feelings of comfort and security (Hodge and Gebler-Wolfe, 2022). These design features contribute to users' perception of smartphones as attachment objects that offer reliable responses during distressing situations (Parent and Shapka, 2019). While much

scholarly research focuses on users' attachment to smartphones, it is essential to recognize that this attachment is shaped not only by individual psychological tendencies, but also by the devices' engineered responsiveness. Studies have explored the relationship between adult attachment styles and smartphone use, particularly how anxious attachment can predict problematic or addictive smartphone behaviors (Trub and Barbot, 2016; Diefenbach and Borrmann, 2019; Parent and Shapka, 2019; Parent *et al.*, 2021). Gritti *et al.* (2023) further argue that interpersonal and attachment patterns are reflected in smartphone usage, suggesting that such devices mediate and reinforce underlying attachment dynamics and the human need for connection.

### *Theory of attainment*

Miller and Sinanan (2017) argue that technological advancements should not be seen as threats to existing ways of life, but rather as tools that help individuals and societies realize goals that were previously unattainable. They emphasize that technology enables the actualization of latent human capacities without altering the core of what it means to be human. For instance, prior to the use of horses, automobiles and airplanes for transport, human mobility was limited by the speed of running. These innovations did not change the essence of human beings, but they expanded the possibilities of movement, allowing people to attain new levels of interaction and exploration (Miller and Sinanan, 2017). Their methodological approach treats technology not as a disruption of an ideal past, but as a medium through which fundamental shifts in awareness and ways of life emerge. The term 'attain' is key here; it implies that certain outcomes, while once unreachable, were always latent within the human condition. This view demonstrates that the cultural application of technology is shaped more by human desires and practices than by the technology itself. Over time, such technologies not only help achieve pre-existing goals, but also inspire new aspirations and ways of being.

This theoretical framework can be usefully applied to the case of smartphone adoption in Bangladesh. Once regarded as luxury items, smartphones have rapidly become everyday necessities, driven by increased accessibility, affordability and integration into daily life. According to GSMA (2023), smartphone penetration in Bangladesh has accelerated significantly as a consequence of local manufacturing initiatives and the declining cost of devices, making them widely available across socioeconomic groups. The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (2024) reports over 130 million mobile subscribers, with a large portion using smartphones as their main means of digital access. In 2025, approximately 75.8% of Bangladesh's total population of 171.5 million used mobile phones (Data Commons, 2025). This widespread use reflects broader shifts in digital inclusion, where smartphones serve as gateways to essential services, education, social connectivity and economic opportunity (Ahmed and Wadud, 2021). Rahman and Afrin (2022) further illustrate that in urban areas, especially among students and working professionals, smartphones are not only a status symbol but also integral to daily routines and digital lifestyles. Viewed through the lens of the theory of attainment, this transformation underscores how smartphones have become embedded in cultural practices, reshaping behavior and interaction without altering the fundamental nature of humanity. Rather than disrupting a previous ideal state, smartphones in Bangladesh represent an expansion of human potential, enabling new forms of connection and aspiration in a digitally transforming society.

### *Mimetic desire*

René Girard's theoretical framework posits that individuals' desires are significantly shaped by the desires of others, initiating a process of imitation and emulation (Girard, 2013). Mimetic desire, as articulated by Girard (1977), refers to the phenomenon whereby individuals covet what others covet, leading to instances of rivalry and contention as they compete for the same objects or goals. This conceptualization forms the basis of Girard's comprehensive model for interpreting human behavior and societal dynamics, highlighting the pervasive influence of imitation on both individual aspirations and collective interactions (Girard, 1965).

Girard's seminal exploration of mimetic desire serves as a foundational pillar in his interdisciplinary examination of human behavior and culture (Girard, 1965). Mimetic desire, as defined by Girard, encapsulates the inherent tendency of humans to desire objects sought by others, and to have goals and aspirations shared by others, exerting a profound influence on individual actions and societal dynamics.

In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, Girard (1965) delves deep into human psychology, arguing that mimetic desire not only shapes personal choices, but also impacts relationships and societal structures. He suggests that this inclination toward imitation often breeds competition and conflict as individuals and groups vie for the same objects or status, valued because of their desirability to others (Girard, 1977). René Girard's theory of mimetic desire is crucial to understanding consumer behavior in Bangladesh, especially how people's desires for smartphones and other goods are influenced by societal norms and aspirations. This framework helps us see how these desires lead to competition and shape societal dynamics, revealing the cultural importance of consumerism and status symbols in Bangladeshi society.

### *Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts*

Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of habitus, capital and field offer a comprehensive framework for understanding social dynamics and power relations within societies. Habitus, defined as ingrained dispositions acquired through socialization and life experiences, guides individuals' perceptions and behaviors, shaping their engagement in social practices (Jenkins, 2003; Wacquant, 2014). Bourdieu views power as culturally and symbolically constructed, legitimized through interactions between agency and societal structure, with habitus playing a central role in guiding behavior and thought (Wacquant, 2014).

Bourdieu conceptualizes capital as diverse resources individuals and groups possess, encompassing economic, cultural and social dimensions (Blunden, 2021). Economic capital, such as wealth, coexists with cultural capital, which includes knowledge and preferences, and social capital, defined by networks and connections (Bourdieu, 1986). These forms of capital influence individuals' positions and opportunities within societal hierarchies (Blunden, 2021). The concept of field refers to structured social arenas where individuals and groups compete for various forms of capital, spanning such domains as education, politics and culture (Swartz, 1997; Crossley, 2001). Within these fields, individuals navigate hierarchies, drawing on their habitus and capital to assert influence and achieve goals (Swartz, 1997; Crossley, 2001). The research utilizes Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field to understand how smartphones acquire symbolic significance among Dhaka's young adults. This framework explores how cultural norms, social interactions and the accumulation of cultural and social capital influence young people's use of smartphones to assert their identities and navigate status hierarchies in urban Bangladesh.

### **Contextualizing smartphones in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh's young adults are deeply embedded in a ubiquitous smartphone culture that defines the country's digital landscape. According to the Association of Mobile Telecom Operators of Bangladesh (n.d.), Bangladesh ranks as the fifth-largest mobile market in the Asia-Pacific region, boasting a staggering 191.38 million mobile phone subscribers, with a notable shift towards smartphones from traditional devices.

In Dhaka, this smartphone culture has sparked significant changes across various socioeconomic domains, particularly in commerce and entrepreneurship. The widespread adoption of smartphone apps in such services as food delivery and transportation signifies a pivotal move towards digital commerce. Notably, smartphones have empowered marginalized groups, such as women entrepreneurs, enabling them to utilize social media platforms for business ventures, especially amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, smartphones have

democratized entertainment, with gaming emerging from niche interest to become a mainstream cultural phenomenon.

While smartphones offer essential functional benefits, such as enabling communication, navigation and digital engagement, they also incidentally confer social capital upon Bangladeshi young adults, subtly elevating their status within peer networks. In particular, smartphones serve as practical tools for organizing leisure and lifestyle activities, with their influence especially visible in the tourism sector where apps and digital media shape travel choices and experiences. Additionally, for Bangladeshi labor migrants, smartphones remain indispensable communication lifelines, bridging vast geographical distances and maintaining vital familial connections. The symbolic value attached to smartphone ownership, therefore, emerges not as the primary intent, but as a consequential byproduct of the embeddedness of smartphones in everyday social and functional routines. The pervasive influence of smartphones on Bangladesh's young adults extends far beyond mere technological adoption, permeating various aspects of social, economic and cultural life. As smartphones continue to evolve into indispensable tools for communication, commerce and leisure, their impact on the experiences of young adults in Bangladesh remains intricate and multifaceted.

### **Beyond functionality: a new saga of smartphones in Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh's dynamic socio-cultural milieu, smartphones have evolved beyond mere functionality to become indispensable status symbols. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2023), mobile phone ownership stands at 97.9% of households, with smartphones owned by 63.3%. The rise of social media platforms has solidified smartphones as conduits for digital community engagement. With 59,004,100 Facebook users in Bangladesh as of May 2023, smartphones play a crucial role in connecting individuals and fostering a sense of belonging (Pokrop, 2023).

The symbolic association between consumer technologies and social status is not a recent phenomenon. Historically, devices such as televisions and videocassette recorders (VCRs) in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by personal computers and branded electronics in the early 2000s, have functioned as markers of modernity, affluence and cultural sophistication. Smartphones, in this continuum, represent the latest manifestation of this global trend, where technological objects are imbued with symbolic capital. What sets smartphones apart is their unique portability, high visibility and integration into daily social practices, factors that amplify their capacity to project status and identity in more immediate and performative ways than their predecessors.

In contemporary urban Bangladesh, owning the latest smartphone is no longer merely about functionality; it is a visible statement of economic standing and social prestige. Our research highlights a cultural shift in how smartphones are perceived: once seen primarily as tools for communication, they are now regarded as potent symbols of personal identity and social recognition. Among young adults, smartphone choices are frequently influenced not by practical needs but by social pressures, aspirational advertising, and the desire to conform to prevailing norms. Devices with advanced features (particularly high-quality cameras) enable users to curate their digital personas on Facebook and Instagram, thus reinforcing their cultural relevance and sense of belonging.

Moreover, smartphones function as sources of both social and symbolic capital, shaping interpersonal relationships and perceived social worth. The constant push to own the newest model is fueled by marketing strategies and societal expectations that equate technological novelty with success and trendiness. Peer and familial influences further intensify this dynamic, often compelling individuals to purchase high-end devices regardless of financial constraints. This phenomenon extends into various social spheres, including romantic interactions, where smartphones are strategically displayed to create favorable impressions. In this way, smartphones transcend their utilitarian roles to become integral instruments for navigating and negotiating social hierarchies in a digitally connected society.

### *Status superseding functionality*

We found that many young adults do not choose their smartphones simply on the basis of practicality or necessity. Instead, they are often drawn to the appeal and prestige of high-end devices, which are seen as symbols of social status and personal success. What stood out to us was the strong influence of peer behavior in shaping these choices. Seeing friends or classmates using premium smartphones often creates a sense of pressure or aspiration. People begin to associate certain brands or models with popularity, confidence or trendiness. This social environment encourages individuals to invest in high-tier smartphones, not just for their features, but to feel accepted, validated or even admired. Decisions about smartphone purchases are deeply influenced by the desire to fit in, keep up or stand out, reflecting motivations that go far beyond basic functionality.

Furthermore, our study reveals that while high-end smartphones may not be essential for academic purposes, there is a preference among students to acquire them to keep up with fashion. One participant we interviewed highlighted this trend, noting a rush among peers to acquire new iPhones immediately upon release. He explained:

Whenever a new iPhone is released, everyone I know rushes to get it right away. It's like a race to see who can have it first. It's not just about having the newest technology; it's also about showing it off and being seen as someone who's up to date and trendy.

This behavior is perceived as competitive within social circles, with memes on social media often revolving around new phone releases, suggesting that not having the latest device could mean missing cultural references. Smartphone brands exploit this consumer behavior by continually introducing new designs and features that foster a sense of exclusivity.

Our research highlights that this drive for social inclusion is especially strong among younger people. They often seek recognition and distinction among peers, using their smartphone choices to make a memorable impression. Therefore, young consumers buy smartphones for more than just their functionality; these purchases reflect a deep desire for social status and a sense of belonging. Additionally, our findings indicate that individuals often feel pressured to purchase specific smartphone models, not only out of necessity, but also because of peer influence and prevailing social pressures. While smartphones have become indispensable for many, a significant number of respondents in our study admitted that their initial smartphone purchase was influenced by peer opinions. Thus, contemporary smartphones serve not only as functional gadgets, but also to display social status, transforming smartphones into symbolic objects rather than solely utilitarian devices.

### *Expression of one's self*

Our research indicates that young adults in Dhaka use smartphones in three distinct ways to meet their personal needs. First, smartphones showcase their identity and allow them to seek validation by sharing content on social media to gain recognition and approval. Second, smartphones satisfy their aesthetic and sensory desires by providing high-quality images, videos and other multimedia content. Third, smartphones enhance their capabilities by leveraging various apps and features to achieve their personal and professional goals.

Our study uncovered a noteworthy trend within the cultural fabric of the country: the presence of a distinct personal identity associated with smartphones. In this context, some smartphone users tend to identify closely with their smart devices. Consequently, a smartphone becomes an extension of an individual, with users carrying it almost everywhere. The absence of the smartphone leaves them with a sense of incompleteness, emphasizing its role as an integral part of their identity. One of our respondents made this very clear:

Nowadays especially, smartphones are used for all kinds of things. When we use one, we also use apps which then again serve us as tools for self-expression, communication, etc. They not only

influence how we connect with people and share things from our lives but also determine how we experience real-life situations as well as how we present ourselves online and offline.

So, in the constructed digital world where we present ourselves as digital avatars or the real blood and sweat world which we experience with others, we are with our phones. A respondent who uses Samsung's Galaxy S21, a relatively expensive phone in Bangladesh, told us:

A smartphone is one of the most important things in our daily life. We tend to do almost every type of work through it. So, I think that it represents our taste, preferences and personality.

Our study reveals that smartphones are integral to expressing personal identity, seeking social approval, and achieving self-empowerment. Within the cultural context, users closely associate themselves with their smartphones, considering them as the extensions of their identity. High-end smartphone users view these devices as essential not just for tasks, but as reflections of their taste and personality.

### *Source of social capital*

A smartphone often serves as a source of social and symbolic capital for some users. We have some stories that portray the scenario very vividly. During social gatherings, individuals commonly engage in photographing themselves. Those possessing top-tier smartphones are frequently solicited to capture photos, including selfies. This practice not only facilitates the sharing of images but also serves as a mode of communication and maintenance of social relationships. In Bangladesh, around 4% of smartphone users use iPhones (Statistia, 2023). This might lead to situations in which the iPhone user receives special attention since the phone is expected to capture the best photo or complete the required task efficiently. Hence it is evident that high-end smartphones are good at executing tasks: 'The smartphone indicates our class belongingness. It indicates our social status.' Usually, the more solvent you are, the more expensive your phone will be. During our research, we have seen that many buy expensive phones just to get attention. As one respondent put it: 'Maybe it means that the person belongs to a wealthy family', implying that using a high-end phone in Bangladesh (the respondent in question was specifically referring to iPhones ) may mean that the person is from a wealthy family with prospects of social position and educational qualifications. Smartphones have become the medium through which individuals can socialize, impress and stamp their authority in certain social settings. An owner of an expensive phone can initiate a conversation with others as they have the means to take photos, record videos of an important social event and share these documents. For example, in social settings, individuals with the latest iPhones are often asked to take and share photos on social media. At a social gathering at the University of Dhaka, after a successful club meeting, a student who usually took group photos with his iPhone 13 deferred to a fellow student with a new iPhone 15 Pro Max. Despite minimal differences in photo quality, he hesitated to use his older phone, highlighting how smartphone models can influence social status.

### *The illusive appeal of a new phone*

For some mobile users, an older and obsolete phone often degrades status and prestige. In our research, we became aware of a new mechanism behind the tendency to buy the latest smartphone. In our research, a participant stated: 'Using older smartphones in a group of friends or coworkers creates a fear of missing out'. Throughout the data collection, we observed a tendency in the young population always to keep up with trends. Apple releases new phones every September, which cultivates visible competition among the young population regarding who can get the new phone first. Social media-based content creators upload content related to new phones to boost views. The advertising and design of new phone models are also responsible for people buying new phones. Companies send their phones early to technology content creators to create hype in the market. Developers also add distinctive features that show visible differences in device models. For

example, iPhone 11 and iPhone 14 have the same camera features (dual cameras, 12MP main ultra-wide), but their cameras are in different alignment, just so people can differentiate between models.

Many individuals replace their old smart devices with new ones, feeling that sticking to an old version of a smartphone may reflect upon their status. An old smart device can often become a burden rather than a necessity and can have a negative impact on a person's socialization. For example, a third-year student at the University of Dhaka told us:

I bought a Google Pixel 5 last year. However, Google Pixel 7 is now on the market and it has a better camera quality. I think my old phone is not serving me well. I am planning to buy a new one and my friends are motivating me to do so. The new phone has multiple new features that will enable me to take better photos and post them on social media. I am saving money and hopefully next month I am going to buy the new version.

Many young people in Bangladesh dream of getting their hands on brand-new, high-end smartphones, but they cannot afford them. The inability of parents to grant their children's desires sometimes leads to tension within families. This highlights the noticeable stress caused by the desire to have a new phone. The sale of smartphones in Bangladesh has also seen the rise of a black market. Individuals participate in this marketplace for the primary purpose of financing the purchase of new smartphones. These transactions can be risky since there is a considerable likelihood that buyers will not receive completely functional units. Nevertheless, people are compelled to shop at this market if they want to update their phones.

### *Smartphone and smartness*

Having a new and prestigious brand of smartphone is seen as smart. Young individuals with feature phones are often stigmatized as 'unsmart' or not trendy. Premium brands also have unique characteristics that are frequently associated with intelligence. The iPhone provides Airdrop (a feature for sharing media), FaceTime (a feature for making calls) and Memoji (a feature for using emoticons), which are exclusively compatible with other iPhones. Young people who use these features are likely to be considered digitally smart. Camera lens covers are available online and from mobile accessory retailers. These 'converters' modify the appearance of the iPhone 10 to resemble higher-tier versions, such as the iPhone 12 and 13. The popularity of these converters highlights a widespread eagerness to display newer iPhone models.

Enhanced functionalities of contemporary smartphones align employees with technological advances which may result in portraying them as 'smart' employees. During our interactions with young individuals in formal work settings, insights emerged affirming that possessing the latest high-end smartphones is indicative of technological proficiency. Notably, participants shared instances where having cutting-edge devices led to them being sought for minor tasks because of their perceived technical expertise. Individuals with high-end phones are often perceived as astute, consequently gaining favor within professional circles.

In formal work environments, owning brand-new and high-end smartphones reflects technological knowledge. One of our participants described the minor tasks he is frequently asked to do as a result of his perceived tech-savvy reputation: 'Hey, can you just edit the social media design in a few minutes?' Individuals identified as technology enthusiasts through their use of high-end phones, can garner recognition and be esteemed for their technical prowess at the workplace: 'I guess I'm on the list of favorites of the boss'.

### *Social pressure*

We encountered a recurring theme among young individuals who find themselves compelled not merely by personal needs, but also by external pressures to opt for high-end smartphones. An

illustrative example comes from an individual willing to take out a bank loan to acquire a sophisticated device:

My previous smartphone was too rudimentary and almost obsolete. I often felt left out when my friends used high-quality smartphones for photos and lag-free online gaming. Additionally, my adherence to what they termed ‘medieval technology’ became a source of mockery. Frustrated, I decided to take out a bank loan, and now I am the proud owner of an iPhone 14 Pro Max. This smartphone not only meets my needs but also reinstates my status within my peer group.

This narrative depicts smartphones as status symbols. The absence of a high-end smartphone can lead to feelings of insecurity and isolation, emphasizing the influence of societal expectations. The quest for these cutting-edge devices has transformed from a pursuit of achievement into an attainment.

The pressure to acquire a high-end smartphone comes not only from peer groups, but also from close relatives and family members. An illustrative example is provided by a Dhaka-based 25-year-old professional, a recent employee at a non-government organization, who recounted succumbing to familial pressure to upgrade his smartphone. The respondent’s brother, employed in a multinational corporation with a substantial salary, objected to the respondent’s old Android device:

That device didn’t go along with his status. He wants me not to go to his home ever with my old device. Yes, I myself didn’t feel the need to go for a brand-new expensive smartphone, but I was compelled to do so because of my brother’s pressure.

In urban Bangladesh, it is expected that individuals in important social positions will use expensive smartphones. Furthermore, upon securing employment, individuals are expected to transition to a ‘standard’ smart device. In the past, high social status and affluence were associated with large TVs and expensive cars, but these have been replaced by the smartphone.

### *A way to impress*

In the contemporary urban social landscape of Bangladesh, smartphones serve as a notable tool for making impressions, particularly in interactions with the opposite sex. Many individuals consider smartphones crucial in shaping initial impressions when meeting new people. Young males often flaunt their smartphones in the presence of romantic interests. They adopt distinctive postures while using their phones, ensuring that others are aware of their high-end devices:

I have seen some of my friends frequently showcase their smartphones, especially in front of females. Those with expensive devices tend to do it more often, believing that smartphones signal their social status and facilitate initiating conversations.

Female respondents echoed similar sentiments, noting that males with new and prestigious smartphones often tend to use them to impress girls:

I think we commonly believe that males who use expensive smartphones are typically from a well-off background. I don’t see any problem with this display of smart devices.

However, an opposing view was presented by another female respondent who found this gesture inappropriate:

Why should someone show off his smart device in such a crude manner? I don’t find it appealing at all, but some of my female friends tend to be impressed by males who own expensive smartphones. This scenario sometimes initiates a conversation that eventually leads to a romantic endeavor.

Our research reveals that smartphones play a significant role in shaping surface-level judgments and impressions of individuals. The device used can influence the way people are perceived during initial interactions. This impression mechanism has altered the dynamics and purpose of owning a high-functioning smartphone, with individuals frequently upgrading their phones every year, even if their existing devices remain fully functional.

## Analysis

This research on the symbolic value of smartphones among Dhaka's young adults can be analyzed through René Girard's concept of mimetic desire (Girard, 1965), which suggests that our desires are influenced by others', leading to imitation and competition (Girard, 2013). In this context, smartphones have evolved beyond their functional role to become symbols of status, identity and social capital. The popularity of smartphones as status symbols reflects the influence of mimetic desire, where individuals want high-end devices because others want them, seeing them as markers of social standing and success. This study shows that people often feel pressured to acquire high-end smartphones, not only by personal needs, but also by societal expectations and peer influence.

Girard's framework provides a lens to understand smartphone ownership among Dhaka's young adults. The research echoes Girard's contention that mimetic desire influences both individual choices and societal structures. It illustrates how societal norms shape young adults' desires for smartphones, reflecting a pervasive pattern of imitation within their cultural context. The study highlights how smartphones serve as tools for impression management among Dhaka's young adults, particularly in romantic pursuits, where displaying these devices strategically helps create favorable impressions. This behavior resonates with Girard's analysis of characters in cultural contexts, entangled in imitative desires and rivalries, underscoring how mimetic desire shapes behavior among Dhaka's young adults.

Analyzing the impact of smartphones among Dhaka's young adults through Miller and Sinanan's theory of attainment (Miller and Sinanan, 2017) provides insights into how technology shapes their lives. The theory suggests that smartphones unlock new human capacities, enabling novel forms of communication, socialization and expression previously inaccessible. Smartphones have become symbols of status, identity and social capital among Dhaka's young adults, aligning with the theory of attainment's view of technology enhancing human capabilities. Smartphones expand avenues for expressing identity, building relationships and engaging with society.

Using smartphones for impression management, particularly in romantic and social contexts, illustrates how technology satisfies latent human desires among Dhaka's young adults. The pursuit of social recognition and status persists, now facilitated through smartphone displays, reflecting ongoing social dynamics amplified by technological advances. Moreover, the theory of attainment aptly fits this research as it emphasizes how technological progress inspires new aspirations among Dhaka's young adults, evident in the pressure to own the latest smartphone models and engage in continuous upgrades. While fundamental human desires remain unchanged, smartphones reshape social landscapes by offering innovative means for fulfillment, reflecting shifts in awareness and lifestyles without compromising essential humanity.

Examining smartphone use among Dhaka's young adults through attachment theory offers profound insights into their integral role in daily life, fulfilling fundamental needs for security and connection (Bowlby, 2000; Hodge and Gebler-Wolfe, 2022). Smartphones function as 'attachment objects', providing comfort, security and connectivity akin to relationships with human caregivers, especially in a digital age where technology mediates social interactions (Hazan and Shaver, 1994).

The research highlights how smartphones facilitate impression management and social status among Dhaka's young adults, reflecting efforts to secure social bonds and establish themselves in social hierarchies – behavior akin to seeking a secure base in attachment theory (Bowlby, 2000; Hodge and Gebler-Wolfe, 2022). Anxiety over losing or being without a smartphone, known as 'nomophobia', mirrors separation distress, revealing deeper anxieties about disconnection from

social networks and identity. Moreover, the addictive nature of smartphone use among Dhaka's young adults aligns with attachment theory's understanding of human reliance on consistent and responsive relationships for reassurance (Hodge and Gebler-Wolfe, 2022). Smartphones provide immediate social feedback that reinforces attachment through neurobiological responses, akin to the comfort derived from interactions with care givers.

Through Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of habitus, capital and field, we gain insight into the complex social dynamics surrounding smartphone ownership and usage among Dhaka's young adults. Habitual practices, such as constant upgrades and strategic showcasing of devices, reflect ingrained dispositions shaped by societal norms and peer influence, guiding how young people navigate the smartphone landscape and make decisions (Bourdieu, 1986).

Exploring capital reveals diverse resources related to smartphones among Dhaka's young adults. Economic capital is evident in the pursuit of high-end devices, symbolizing social status. Cultural capital manifests itself in preferences for specific models, reflecting individual tastes and identities. Social capital emerges from networks formed around smartphone use, offering social advantages. These forms of capital intersect to shape the positions and opportunities of young adults in the smartphone domain (Bourdieu, 1986). The concept of field elucidates structured social spaces where Dhaka's young adults compete for smartphone-related capital. In these arenas, power dynamics and social hierarchies influence interactions in social, romantic and professional contexts. Young adults strategically employ their habitus and capital within this field to enhance social standing and assert their identities through smartphone ownership.

In examining smartphone usage among Dhaka's young adults, these theoretical frameworks offer a holistic perspective on how technology, culture and social dynamics intersect. They show that smartphones have transcended their utilitarian functions, becoming potent symbols that signify identity and social status in today's rapidly evolving digital landscape. Delving deeper into these dynamics could provide insights into their evolution over time, offering valuable perspectives on their influence on broader societal trends and individual behaviors within Bangladesh's young adult culture. This nuanced understanding is essential for navigating the complexities of digital integration and comprehending its implications for young adults' identity and social interaction in Dhaka and similar contexts.

While this study offers rich ethnographic insights into the symbolic and social significance of smartphone use among young adults in Dhaka, it is not without limitations. The research is geographically limited to an urban setting, excluding rural and semi-urban populations whose experiences with smartphones may differ as a result of infrastructural and socio-cultural variations. The focus on young adults aged 18–30 further narrows the scope, omitting generational perspectives that could reveal different patterns of digital engagement. Additionally, while class and peer influence are discussed, the study does not provide a systematic analysis of socio-economic stratification. The qualitative approach, while valuable for depth, limits generalizability, and the findings reflect a specific temporal moment in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Despite these constraints, the study opens important avenues for future research. Comparative studies across rural and urban contexts, longitudinal analyses of changing smartphone symbolism and more intersectional approaches incorporating gender, class and religious identities would enrich understanding of digital culture in Bangladesh. Moreover, this research departs from Western-centric models that dominate much of the literature on mobile technology, offering a grounded account from the Global South. By situating smartphone use within the unique social and economic realities of Dhaka's urban youth, the study contributes to a more inclusive digital anthropology and highlights the need for further research into how digital devices shape identity, social status and cultural practices in emerging urban centers.

## **Conclusion**

This research journey into the relationship between smartphones and the evolving social dynamics of Bangladesh has revealed a layered and intimate portrait that goes far beyond the devices'

functional utility. Through detailed case studies of young adults in Dhaka, we have traced the transformation of smartphones from simple communication tools into powerful symbols of status, identity and social belonging. The widespread adoption of smartphones reflects more than just technological advancement; it signifies a deep societal shift in how individuals navigate visibility, aspiration and connection in an increasingly digital world.

Our findings, grounded in real-life narratives, highlight the compelling influence of social environments on smartphone ownership. Pressures from peers and family frequently shape decisions, pushing individuals toward high-end devices to align with prevailing norms and expectations. The persistent urge to own the latest model, often driven by fear of social exclusion, illustrates how trends and collective behaviors inform personal choices. Within these cases, smartphones emerge as a key medium for self-expression as young adults use them to project identity, gain social validation and build their digital presence. These devices also function as vehicles of social and symbolic capital, playing a visible role in group dynamics, social gatherings and even romantic encounters. In many of the narratives we explored, smartphones were consciously displayed to manage impressions, enhance social positioning or initiate interaction, illustrating how these objects are embedded in the everyday performance of identity.

Ultimately, what emerges from our case-based inquiry is a nuanced understanding of how status, identity, peer influence and impression management are all interwoven in the ways smartphones are used and valued. These devices are no longer mere gadgets; they are social artifacts that reflect and reinforce broader cultural meanings and aspirations. As smartphones continue to evolve, our study offers grounded insights into their deepening role in the lives of young adults in Bangladesh, while also pointing to broader global patterns in the social role of technology.

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