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Youth and Mobile Phones: Constructing a Friendship Culture in Bangladeshi Telecommunication Advertising

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Abstract: *This study explores how mobile phone advertisements in Bangladesh discursively construct and normalize particular notions of youth friendship within a postcolonial cultural context shaped by neoliberal consumer ideology. Drawing on postcolonial media studies and cultural studies, the analysis examines the dominant narratives, visual-symbolic elements, and linguistic strategies through which friendship is represented in advertising discourse. The findings reveal that youth friendship is framed as a technologically mediated, consumption-oriented, and pleasurable relationship aligned with neoliberal values such as individualism, choice, lifestyle branding, and self-expression. Advertising discourses reconfigure friendship from a socially embedded and morally grounded bond into a commodified social practice sustained through mobile connectivity. These representations privilege urban, affluent, English-speaking, and cosmopolitan youth identities, while marginalizing rural, working-class, and vernacular-speaking youth thus indicating that social exclusion processes are active in their construction. By promoting globalized aesthetics and metropolitan colloquial language, mobile phone advertisements contribute to the normalization of a 'fun' and depoliticized youth culture, reinforcing postcolonial hierarchies and neoliberal imaginaries of youth friendship in Bangladesh.*

Keywords*: Cultural Globalization, Mobile Phone Advertising, Bangladeshi Advertising, Neoliberal Consumer Culture, Youth Friendship, Postcolonial Media Studies*

Introduction

Telecommunications companies (telcos) are the major players in contemporary Bangladeshi advertising industry. Bangladesh is considered a telco-friendly country due to its small size[1], overpopulation, and rapid economic growth (Pradeep, personal communication, June 5, 2023). Telco commercial efforts target youth because of their disposable income, market size, aspirational lifestyle, brand loyalty, and are believed to be early adopters and trendsetters (Liechty, 2003;

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[1] According to Pradeep, some 10,000 towers can cover the whole of Bangladesh.

O'Boyle, 2006b). Thus, mobile companies try to attract the curious, impatient, thrill-seeking minds of the youth by shaping their dreams, desires, and fantasies by making friendship a key aspect in their advertisements that highlight sharing and connectivity. The mobile phone becomes a space where friendship of young people is performed and displayed (Green & Singleton, 2009). Grant and O'Donohoe (2007) suggest, "While marketers celebrated mobile phones as a 'brand in the hand' of youth markets, young people themselves valued their mobiles as a 'friend in the hand" (p. 223). Friendship is a close association between two or more people, marked by feelings of care, respect, admiration, concern, and love (Price & Arnould, 1999). While friendship includes family members, romantic partners, and extended family members (Dunbar, 2018), this study, however, defines it as a close association outside of family members and romantic partners. The aim of this research is to examine the relationship between market forces and the construction of youth friendship in Bangladeshi telecommunication advertising.

Research indicates that advertising has a bias towards young people (Ewen, 1976; Mahoney, 2004; O'Boyle, 2006a, 2006b). This is very much true in Bangladesh, primarily because youth comprise one-third of the entire population, while 70% of the population is under the age of 35 (Biswas, 2017; MRDI 2020). The definition of youth varies from individual countries' national laws to international conventions. In Bangladesh, the Government marks youth as the age bracket from 18 to 35 years. This population group often defines their identity through commercial symbols and have interdependence with consumption (Theodoridis & Miles, 2019) and consumerism becomes a social practice (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010). Consumption plays a vital role in their everyday lived existence (Lim, 2010). However, the youth get less attention in global South[2] research (Hansen, 2008). Social science literature regarding the youth continues to be produced according to white Western perceptions of reality and Western traditions of socio-cultural analysis (Pathak-Shelat & De Shano, 2014), which has given an ethnocentric view to global youth studies (Nilan & Feixa, 2006). Froerer (2006, cited in Nisbett, 2007) further indicates that researchers pay comparatively less attention to the South Asian notion of youth friendship. This study, therefore, examines how global products penetrate local culture through advertising and facilitate a type of friendship in the context of global South, more particularly in Bangladesh.

The advertising market in Bangladesh is rapidly expanding, with total ad expenditure projected to reach around US $669–685 million by 2025. The industry is increasingly moving toward digital platforms, with digital ad spending expected to hit US $3.8 billion by 2026, growing at an annual rate of 10.1% (*The Financial*

[2] According to Imas and Weston (2012), 'global South' is not a geographical division between the developed West (Europe and North America) and the underdeveloped South (Asia, Latin America, and Africa), rather it indicates the socio-economic and politico-cultural inequalities of the current world created largely through colonial, postcolonial, and neo-colonial practices.

Express, February 13, 2025). Mobile companies have become the major spenders in the Bangladesh advertising industry, which set the trend in the last two and a half decades (Alam, 2025; Chowdhury & Akhther, 2017). D'juice (short form of digital juice), the second-largest youth-based operator in the world with 12 million subscribers, is the first youth-targeted major mobile plan in Bangladesh, launched in 2005. It is a sister company of *Telenor*, a Norwegian multinational Telco that is known as *Grameen Phone* (GP), the largest mobile operator in Bangladesh.

However, *Airtel Ltd.,* jointly owned by Malaysian *Axiata* and Indian *Bharti Airtel*, became the major friendship network in Bangladesh since 2015. Studies indicate that the rising middle-class consumers of Bangladesh are rapidly embracing digital technologies, particularly the mobile internet, for engaging with the new consumers (Islam, 2018; Munir et al., 2015; Mukaddes, 2017). Youth occupy a significant part of the country's emerging consumers, as 80% of the total Bangladeshi internet users are between 18 to 34 years of age (MRDI, 2020). Hence, examining the relationship between youth and advertising becomes a study of the Bangladeshi middle class. Production of youth as consumers is a cultural project that is the same as producing middle-class subjects in society (Liechty, 2003). This study contributes to the limited body of research on youth and advertising in Bangladesh, as this topic has received little scholarly attention.

Integrating postcolonial and cultural studies theoretical framework with neoliberalism[3], this study investigates the nexus between the market and the idea of youth friendship in the context of Bangladesh. Cultural studies investigate how culture is produced, distributed, consumed, and regulated within relations of power, ideology, and social inequality (Hall, 1997). While a cultural studies approach considers both youth and advertising as useful sites for studying culture (O'Boyle, 2006a), a postcolonial lens provides the consumer aspirations of the post-colony's subjects that is/was shaped and reshaped through the reality of their colonial past and neocolonial present. Both theoretical inquiries oppose the relentless marketization process of neoliberalism (Gilbert, 2008), considering it as a cultural practice of commodification (Hall, 2011). This study focuses on the production perspective of advertising by investigating how a cultural text, like youth friendship, is articulated and displayed by advertisers. A producer-oriented focus is useful in advertising studies as it helps to make sense of the perspectives of industry professionals by knowing their meaning-making processes. By drawing on in-depth interviews with the Bangladeshi advertising industry professionals, this study analyzes the construction of a cultural text, namely friendship, in relation to young people. Ultimately, in this study, I examine how the cultural work of Bangladeshi advertisers redefines, replaces, or reinforces the notion of youth relationship in Bangladesh, and how these changes intersect with more traditional

[3] Neoliberalism is a political-economic rationality that promotes market-based principles such as deregulation, privatization, and individual entrepreneurial freedom as the organizing logic of society and governance (Harvey, 2005).

understandings of youth friendship in ways that transform their meaning and relevance. This study helps to understand how the narratives of telco-friendship produce and reinforce a cultural logic of neoliberalism as well as reconfigure ideas of friendship through Bangladeshi advertising.

The research question that guides this study is: *how do mobile phone advertisements in Bangladesh discursively construct and normalize particular notions of youth friendship within a postcolonial cultural context shaped by neoliberal consumer ideology?* In the following section, I focus on illustrating the connection between friendship and mobile technology, followed by an analysis of youth, advertising, and consumerism before moving on to the theoretical discussion. This paper then describes the findings, followed by the discussion section.

Friendship and Mobile Phones

Friendship is a co-constructed phenomenon categorized by closeness, intimacy, and reciprocity (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013). It varies in terms of context, but some features are prevalent in every society, including caring, trust, loyalty, honesty, and enjoyment of each other's company (Price & Arnould, 1999). Friendship is an area where youth identity is constructed and exhibited (Green & Singleton, 2009). The youth are experimental about friendship during the adolescent period and explore new types of relationships. Research (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013) indicates that current friendships are more fragile, superficial, and fleeting than ever before, and social media appears to have trivialized the concept of friendship. However, friendships become more important now than in previous times, providing a sense of meaning in life (Allan, 1998), and youth are now more committed to maintaining enduring and meaningful relationships (Spencer & Pahl, 2006).

Research shows that new communication technologies, particularly mobile phones, have significant effects on the development, maintenance, and performance of youth's friendships (Green & Singleton, 2009; Lesitaokana, 2018; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Mobile phones have become an inevitable cultural device globally in maintaining intimate relationships of youths (Lesitaokana, 2018). It is considered an instrument of connectivity, safety, and emancipation, which enables young people to stay in touch with friends at every moment (Campbell, 2006). The usage of a mobile phone among the youth is seen as "'neo-tribalism' in action, as it symbolizes shared values and interests" (Jones, 2002, cited by Grant & O'Donohoe, 2007, p. 226). Furthermore, mobile phones help young people to gain and maintain acceptance within their peer groups. It is a more private form of communication that blurs the space between private and public in a relationship that could not have been possible previously with the land phones (Lesitaokana, 2018). However, Hall and Baym (2012) suggest, increased mobile phone use for maintaining friendships has contradictory consequences, such as overdependency and expectation, and leads to dissatisfaction.

Youth are seen as 'pleasure-seeking and self-indulgent' consumers rather than citizens in the commercial media content, like advertisements, by depicting them as a "entertainment junkie, social animal, trendy fashionista and savvy technophile" (Lim, 2010, p.53). From a critical cultural standpoint, commercial societies are 'unfriendly to friendship'. A commodity relation cannot ensure belongingness. Badhwar (2008) notes that the market usually commodifies human relationships and, thus, "weaken[s] the bonds of personal and civic friendship" (p. 302). Moreover, advertising diverts the real needs of a human being into a distorted form of commodity relationship (Harms & Kellner, 1991). Jhally (2000) further adds, "we want love and friendship and sexuality, and advertising points the way to it through objects" (p. 8). Hence, this study examines the cultural production of Bangladeshi Telco advertising, which advances the notion that life is not possible without a group of friends. The following section outlines a connection between youth, advertising, and consumerism in relation to contemporary cultural globalization.

Youth, Advertising and Consumer Culture

Youth is a "culturally, socially and historically produced category" whose contemporary understanding emerged from twentieth-century's welfare capitalism (Ibrahim, 2014). Youths form the number one market segment that pushes new lifestyles with hedonistic consumption, which becomes a powerful marker in making social identities. The connections between youth, advertising, and consumer culture are manifold. Advertising that highlights the aspirations, insecurities, and 'openness' associated with youth identities helps advertisers create a false need (O'Boyle, 2006b). From a marketing standpoint, youth are the adult spenders of tomorrow and are looked upon as future trendsetters (Ferle et al., 2001). Marketers wish to tap into youth's contemporary purchase power and their potential as adult consumers by using images, signs, and symbolic goods. O'Boyle (2006b) indicates that youth becomes the 'dominant aesthetic code' for the advertising industry that generally overlooks older people. Furthering this argument, Mahoney (2004) writes, "Advertising, after all, is obsessed with youth, and in turn, the make-up of agencies is skewed young" (p. 46). The advertising industry not only has a cultural bias towards youthfulness but also has an occupational requirement for hiring young people, considering them more creative (O'Boyle, 2006b).

Consumption is a significant vehicle in constructing the choices of youth lifestyle (Ibrahim, 2014). The cultural construction of youth's 'cool lifestyle' is often identified as the commodification of youth culture advanced by the commercial media, advertising, and marketing industries (Danesi, 2014). The youth can be located in the transnational spaces of globalization. For a section of critics (see Juluri, 2002; Lukose, 2005; Nilan & Feixa, 2006; Tully, 1994), there is a process that represents the commodification and subsequent homogenization

of youth culture. They argue that advertising is a powerful unifier that helps to create a vast single youth market having astonishing similarities in taste. From this standpoint, the youth becomes a global consumer category that is fundamentally tied to Americanization or McDonaldization (see Lukose, 2005; Nilan & Feixa, 2006) and seduces the world into sameness by advancing a uniform consumption habit. Global youth is discursively constructed as a segment sharing a similar set of modern, global, Western desires at its core. From this position, local youth cultural projects are believed to be structured by a global neoliberal ideology of shaping youth identity primarily by prompting a stylized consumption. Youth is a site through which global products enter into local markets, enabled by advertisements, an important agent of cultural globalization.

Another group of scholars (Barker & Jane, 2016; Pieterse, 2006; Theodoridis & Miles, 2019; Willis, 1990), however, regard the relationship between youth and consumption as a creative process which "opens up the possibilities for the freedom of expression and self-identity" (Theodoridis & Miles, 2019, p. 5). Willis (1990) argues, that youth "have active, creative and symbolically productive relations to the commodities that are constitutive of youth culture" (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 576). For them, the global youth segment emerges as a transnational market ideology through the dialectical process of globalization and is not merely a story of homogenization (see Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006; Pieterse, 2006). By interpreting globalization as a process of hybridization, they argue that cultures do not disappear or become extinct in the face of foreign cultures, but adapt, absorb, and synthesize. Therefore, youth cultures are not pure, authentic, and locally bound; instead, they are syncretic and hybridized products of interactions across space; moreover, power and hegemony are reproduced and reconfigured in the process of cultural hybridization (Pieterse, 2006). The theoretical frameworks of this study that include a postcolonial and cultural studies approach combined with neoliberal discourses will further elucidate this issue in the following section.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study is guided by a combination of theoretical resources including, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and neoliberal discourse, to investigate how friendship is discursively constructed in mobile phone advertisements in Bangladesh. Instead of considering these theoretical approaches individually, this research draws them into an integrated analytical framework where cultural studies offers the lens to examine the meaning-making process, while postcolonial studies situates these meanings within the uneven historical relationship between the global North and South, and neoliberal discourse analyzes the covert market rationality that shapes such construction. From a cultural studies approach, advertising is considered as discursive cultural texts that construct and disseminate meanings about youth, friendship, and identity. Bringing the concept

of 'discourse' from the cultural studies perspective, this research articulates how certain symbols, images, narratives, codes, and cues standardize and regularize a particular understanding of youth friendship. Concurrently, ideology is used to explain how these constructions re/produce and represent hegemonic values, while commoditization interprets how cultural texts like friendship are converted into profitable meaning within consumption culture. From this perspective, the youth is not just an age cohort but a site where identity is constructed and circulated through the consumption process (Lukose, 2005; Barker & Jane, 2016). Cultural studies approach, therefore, is helpful to understand how advertising reproduces and represents dominant meanings through cultural texts.

Yet, the cultural studies lens alone is not sufficient if context, such as geographical and historical, is not considered (Morley, 2015). A postcolonial approach, therefore, is employed in this study to situate the discourses within the geopolitical, cultural, and historical contexts of Bangladesh as part of the global South. This study has utilized concepts like 'colonial taste' and 'Western hegemony' to interpret how the narratives in advertising often foster former colonizers' aspirations, aesthetics, and lifestyles, reproducing colonial orders in the former colony's cultural representation. Simultaneously, the concept of 'global-local' interpretation assists in explaining how this global cultural influence is not merely forced but is reshaped in local cultural contexts. The postcolonial perspective, thus, allows an investigation of how the formation of youth identities happens through an intersection between global consumer culture and local socio-cultural meanings. In this regard, this research admits that the cultural context of postcolonial societies, like Bangladesh, may interpret friendship identities differently from individualistic Western societies (Brace-Govan & de Burgh-Woodman, 2008; Fernández, 1999; Murthy, 2012). A postcolonial approach, hence, offers the rationale for investigating how the notion of friendship is rearticulated within a historically and culturally situated context.

A neoliberal framework makes it possible to see how the cultural constructions of friendship are commodified and aligned with consumerism and marker-driven values. Bringing the idea of 'market rationality', this research explains how the notion of youth friendship is constructed in Bangladeshi advertising that advances a consumer culture. Neoliberal culture, Hall (2011) argues, relentlessly produces 'marketing and selling metaphors' that occupy public discourse by promoting an ideology of "greed is good" (p. 722). Thus, the construction of consumer subjectivity is important, in this regard, to understand how younger people are treated as market actors whose identities and lifestyles are shaped through consumption practices. Additionally, the idea of 'commodified relationship' is utilized in this study to explain how an affective bonding like friendship is rearticulated and reshaped in consumption practices. This is more relevant in the context of telecommunication, where connectivity itself becomes a commodity associated with capitalist market expansion, namely neoliberal globalization (Brown, 2025; Chakravartty, 2004;

Dokeniya, 1999; Schiller, 2000). Telecommunication companies have become the major players in the Bangladeshi advertising industry from 2000, which set the trend for the last one and a half-decade (Alam, 2025).

This study employed these three theoretical approaches in an integrated manner. Cultural studies conceptualize the meaning-making processes and discursive analysis of Bangladeshi advertising; postcolonial studies contextualize these cultural texts within the socio-political and historical context of Bangladesh; and, neoliberal perspective interprets how market-oriented consumptive ideologies articulate, regularize, and circulate these cultural representations. Together, this integrated analytical framework helps the research to offer a critical explanation of how the notion of friendship is re/articulated at the intersection of history, culture, and market economy. In this manner, this research explores how telecommunication advertising functions in Bangladesh, deploying certain ideological narratives of friendship, revealing how meanings are constructed and negotiated in a local context, and often altered within a postcolonial mediascape and neoliberal globalization.

Method

This study relies on qualitative analyses to understand how advertisements construct friendship discourse that is re/shaped by the industry people in Bangladesh. It draws on qualitative methods as they are useful in addressing research questions on why producers construct a certain cultural text and what meanings they are co-constructing with consumers. I had conversations with a total of 50 advertising industry people in Bangladesh. Like other advertising industries in different countries, the Bangladeshi advertising industry has three major ends: client/ business organization, advertising agency, and producer/ad-filmmaker. Therefore, I divide the total interviewees into three broad categories: interviewees from 1) 12 client/business organizations; 2) 25 advertising agencies; and 3) 13 producer/ ad-filmmakers.

Interviews serve my purpose best as my research plans to explore how a particular cultural text, like that of a friendship culture, is constructed by Bangladeshi advertisers. By interviewing them, I examine how and why they create a particular notion of friendship to advance certain types of cultural meanings and what factors become important in their communicative processes while constructing the meanings. Interviews may be categorized in a variety of ways, such as unstructured, semi-structured and structured, and semi-structured interviews are the most widely used interviewing format for qualitative research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I focus on semi-structured format because structured interviews are more suited for quantitative data and generally used in survey approaches. In my study, I conducted a total of 50 face-to-face in-depth interviews, which lasted 40-60 minutes. The research protocol of this study focused

on the factors that become important for Bangladeshi practitioners in producing the notion of a friendship culture in their work. Since the context and respective roles played by industry people in their production processes differ, the questions needed to be tailored accordingly.

From the two most used sampling options—random and purposive—this study follows the purposive sampling strategy. For a purposive strategy, the researcher assumes, based on their a priori theoretical understanding of the topic being studied, that certain categories of individuals, advertisers in my case, may have a unique and important perspective, experiences, or understanding of the phenomenon in question. Prior to conducting interviews in Bangladesh, I had phone conversations with resource people in this area in Bangladesh and studied relevant literature regarding the industry. I spent more than two weeks with a number of people who are knowledgeable in this field and visited some advertising agencies and production houses. After getting a primary understanding and developing an initial rapport with relevant people, I made a tentative list of interviewees, which was finalized after a number of editing-reediting throughout the data collection period. I recorded all of the interviews. Transcription of tape recording is time-consuming, as Spicer (2004) recommends, one hour of recording takes five to six hours to transcribe. In my case, around 51.03 hours of my total interview were done by a professional team consisting of five members.

For data analysis, I used thematic analysis, where themes emerge from a coding process (Clarke & Braun, 2017). I followed a two-step coding process that generated more than 60 open codes at the initial stage. After that, I paid attention to selective/axial coding, where open codes were understood in relation to the socio-cultural and historical context of Bangladesh and assigned to the events and other phenomena to connect with the theoretical framework of this study. Through this process, I ended up with two broad themes—(a) new form of relationship; and (b) metropolitan colloquial language—which are elaborated in the next section.

Findings

New form of relationship

A new form of youth friendship is manifested in contemporary Bangladeshi Telco commercials. Youth are shown spending their maximum time with friends and sharing a variety of experiences with each other. There is a perception that they are more comfortable with friends than with their family members. Mobile companies communicate this insight in their advertisements.

Telco marketing of friendships has evolved from a fun-loving category of societal youth. Drabir Alam, an official of an online agency, says, “Youth are now connected with many people on social media. Telco originally picked the friendship idea from social media” (personal communication, May 27, 2023).

Telcos have shifted their business from mobile communication to internet service and Telco commercials highlight young people's access to social media and connectivity through mobile internet. Though all mobile operators have a strong focus on youth, Airtel coined the idea of friendship most effectively, which was introduced by d'juice in 2005. Sajid, director of a mobile operator, points out (personal communication, June 2, 2023),

> Previously, it [friendship] was a domain of GP [Grameen Phone]. But Airtel successfully grabs the idea by continuously beating on friendship. Thus, whoever talks on the friendship topic now, the audience thinks, it's Airtel. Youth is central to Airtel's friendship. If you study the perception of the market, you'll see every brand directly or indirectly copies the prototype of Airtel's youth.

Rintu, the Head of Marketing of Airtel, indicates that while other mobile operators see the youth from a broad age range (16-40), Airtel is very much focused on teenagers. He adds (personal communication, May 19, 2023):

> Airtel targets youth who are bracketed from 16 to 20. Other operators emphasize youth. But we exclusively focus on their friendship, which makes our brand different, which we call market differentiation or segmentation. Now, Airtel is known as a friendship network. From a selling point, friendship is a unique idea that connects the youth's emotions and expectations. Friendship is all about connectivity and sharing, which goes directly with the function of a cell phone. Youth want to share everything with friends wherever they are traveling and shopping, whatever they are wearing, and eating. For youth, sharing is an achievement. They want to be appreciated and acknowledged, and friendship provides that scope.

The discourse of sharing becomes important to show friendship. Brand segmentation is an important strategy for doing business in a competitive marketplace. So different communicative strategies are deployed by different companies to establish their brands. As a sister concern of Robi, another mobile operator, Airtel and Robi divide their youth market into two segments; while Airtel targets upper- and upper-middle-class urban youth from 16 to 20 age range, Robi focuses on the middle-class and rural youth from 24 to 35. The tagline of Robi is *jole uthun apon shaktite* (come up with your power), and Airtel is *fun-furti-friendship* (fun-enjoy-friendship). Robi targets the basic/mainstream youth who are considered as 'realistic', 'practical', and 'responsible'; in contrast, Airtel'youth are more fun.

Telco friendship is shown as horizontal, which is practiced within a group (see figure 1). It does not believe in dyadic bonding. Showing a friend circle in commercials is cost-effective for Telco because a group can highlight the features of an offer/service through their fun activities. Besides, the production cost of a

friendship commercial is meager. However, the construction of Telco friendship seems formulaic and prescribed. Sumon, an ad-filmmaker, says (personal communication, May 19, 2023):

> You will see total four to five friends from an affluent-urban-English medium background, one is bookish who wears reading class and asks some stupid questions; one is very overweight who loves eating mostly fast-food; one is slim and less intelligent; one is very smart, must be a boy, who describes and shares the new offers of a Telco service among other friends and he is the 'trendsetter' and 'cool' youth in the lot. You will find one or two girls in the cohort who love/s to do selfies, photo sessions, and show excitement.



Figure 1: A typical friend circle in a Telco commercial (Airtel Bangladesh, 2018, Feb. 27).

The internal hierarchies among friends are not very acute. However, generally, boys are depicted in superior positions. The prototype of friendship comes from the Indian Airtel. Pradeep, an official of Airtel and Robi, explains (personal communication, June 5, 2023):

> We brought the idea of friendship from Airtel India, which successfully launched this idea there. We adopted their successful campaign, *har ek friend zaroori hota hai* [every type of friend is necessary] in Bangladesh. We launched the *bondhu* [friendship] network here with a campaign of *bondu chara life impossible* [life is not possible without friends].

The image of Bangladeshi Telco youth looks like urban Indian youth, which is derived from Bollywood and demonstrates several professionals. Rashed Zaman, a cinematographer, claims (personal communication, May 9, 2023), "even terms

such as *alti-bulti*, *panja*, *director's cameraman,* etc., came from India, which I did not hear in the USA". Likewise, an agency official, Sharmin, adds (personal communication, July 5, 2023), "Though dance is not popular in Bangladesh, we see dance in Airtel's commercials because an Indian company partially owns Bangladeshi Airtel". In the same vein, Piplu, an ad-filmmaker, points out (personal communication, June 8, 2023):

> We are pushing for an aspirational youth image on Telco commercials. We designed our youth following Indian youth, but the clothing, food habits, and language of Bangladeshi youth are different. We need to locate local insights to make commercials for Bangladeshi youth. We should create Bangladeshiness in our work.

The narratives of friendship bring forth a sense of longing for identity, tradition, and the Bangla language that can be called inherently Bangladeshi. There seems to be a tension in acknowledging Indian influence on post-liberation Bangladeshi culture, while realizing that the cultural flows are inevitable with the intensification of global processes. However, this ambivalence continues to manifest in the conversations.

For some, youth depicted on friendship networks are considered urbanized. Their presence is limited to Dhaka. They argue that the Telco ads provide a stereotypical and mechanical representation of youth. Farhan, an agency official, tells (personal communication, May 11, 2023) me that Bangladeshi youth are struggling in many ways. Thus, showing a *masti* (fun) youth is a linear depiction lacking reality. Rintu, an Airtel official, holds a different view (personal communication, May 19, 2023): "Bangladesh is not dull and blue. It's bright and colourful. Therefore, we try to highlight a happy Bangladesh in our friendship commercials. Some brands are working with sorrows, but we've no space for that. We only capture fun and *furti* [enjoyment]". Some argue that it is not advertising which introduces a new type of friendship, rather Telco friendship reflects the current reality. Farooq, an agency professional, argues: "we keep in touch with the current generation, depict them for what they are, making our content relevant. We don't need to lie".

The integration of market and capital, along with new technologies, reshaped the relationship of Bangladeshi youth shown in Telco commercials. Arwup says (personal communication, June 11, 2023) that the 'boy-meets-girl-gets married-produces-kid' narrative, used earlier, is fading from society. The aspiration of Telco friendship is measured by a certain amount of material and social currency. He further illustrates:

> Urban affluent youth are living in an emotional vacuum. Telco friendship is an escape for them. Telco commercials promise them that life is possible, relationships are possible. Look at their dress, how polished the background is. Telco promises a fake, superficial, and fantasized life that

> does not exist. But youth like that fantasy for escaping from their real life. (Arwup personal communication, June 11, 2023)

Telco advertisements also demonstrate an effort to break the gender barrier. A few of them think that marketers use subtle messages to influence the desire of emerging young consumers. Vashkar reported that GP's campaigns—*kachei thakun* (stay close) and *kache asher galpo* (story of coming closer)— promote the idea of intimacy (personal communication, July 7, 2023). Echoing Vashkar, Taufique, an agency official, adds, "D'juice once offered free talk time after midnight! I ask: who do youth talk to after midnight? Of course, not with their family members! Obviously, they talk to their girlfriends/boyfriends at midnight for some kind of sexual pleasure" (personal communication, July 10, 2023). It may be mentioned that d'juice's taglines, jingles, and television commercials are popular among urban youth. One of d'juice's jingles was: 'Will you respond to me? Can you respond to me?' (Tumi ki sara debe? Paro ki sara dete?). That TV commercial depicts a group of boys and girls coming out of their homes at midnight, breaking all conventional barriers and gathering in an open space. In the context of Bangladesh, the portrayal of teenagers freely mixing at midnight along with a jingle (Will/can you respond to me?) can be suggestive of sexual innuendoes. Mixed-gender interaction in the country is perceived by conservatives as lewd and immodest and a consequence of the infiltration of foreign culture. This can be considered an example of Western cultural norms interacting with the local in ways that produce hybridized media narratives. Relationships are being reconstructed in relation to globalized processes.

Telco framing of friendship builds a 'global mindset', explains Rintu (personal communication, May 19, 2023). For him, "Bangladeshi youth do not want to confine themselves within a local space. Rather, they aspire to be global. That is what we want to promote in our friendship network. Free mixing of men and women cannot be restricted in the current world". Shakib, an agency official, gives a psychological analysis (personal communication, June 9, 2023) by explaining why mobile phones take a vital position among Bangladeshi youth. He argues that Bangladeshi youth have to deal with sexual repression to a large extent, and hugely rely on cell phones for seeking sexual pleasure. Sakib further explains:

> In Western countries, youth engage in lots of activities, but in Bangladesh, youth are largely dependent on mobile phones for recreation, as they have almost nothing to do. Bangladeshi youth learns from Western movies, music, and TV serials. For instance, they get exposed to ideas of open relationships. In Bangladesh, same sex interaction is more prevalent, and interaction with the opposite sex is negligible. Most of them do not go to co-education schools. Thus, mobile phones are becoming outlets for dating, chatting, visiting porn sites, and so on.

Shaon, a Grey Advertising official, thinks that Bangladeshi society is not prepared yet for the ways in which Telco represents boy-girl relationships. Telco's depiction of boy-girl relationships is not reflective of the dominant reality in Bangladeshi society. He argues (personal communication, June 10, 2023) that Airtel shows a group of boys and girls in their commercials, having fun and travelling to different places across the country in their hoodless jeep (see figure 2). This kind of free mixing is not commonly seen in Bangladesh. Shaon asks, "If someone has sex and becomes pregnant, does Telco take responsibility to show their social sufferings in their commercials? If not, how does that brand claim to represent their friendship?" For Shaon, a brand should consider issues of social influence.



Figure 2: Friend circle on an Airtel TVC (Airtel Bangladesh, 2017, October 18)

In sum, this section focuses on how a new discourse of youth relationships emerges in the narratives of Bangladeshi advertising professionals that conflicts with traditional practices. The next section explores an emerging youth argot, a new lingo, enabled by advertising and mobile companies in the Bangladeshi society.

Metropolitan colloquial language

A certain youth language has emerged in Bangladeshi Telco commercials, which can be termed the metropolitan colloquial language. D'juice started using this new youth argot, a mixture of Bangla (non-standardized), Hindi and English language, in Bangladeshi advertising in 2005. This hybridized usage of the Bangla language has been harshly criticised by the High Court and the cultural elites of Bangladesh (Sultana, 2014). Language is an important and sensitive issue in Bangladesh[4]. The

[4] When erstwhile Pakistan had declared Urdu as its official language, student-led protests had broken out against Pakistan's refusal to recognise the Bangla language as one of the state languages of

advertising industry previously followed a standard Bangla, known as *pramito* Bangla, which was practiced by the urban, educated middle class. Later, industry people found that the standard Bangla is not as effective in communicating with the greater audiences, particularly with the young generation. After researching oral languages, industry people started using a non-standardized (*apramito Bangla*) and hybrid language. Awrup shares (personal communication, June 5, 2023) his experiences about working with d'juice mobile plan:

> After producing djuice commercials, we visited different private universities in 2005, and then onward, we found they talked with different dialects among themselves, like *dosto, kothin bhab, jotil, ajaira, pachal, minka chipa, jakkas,* etc. We picked their languages for d'juice campaigns, hurting elite class sensibilities, as Bangladeshi advertisements followed the language of the elite class till that time, where the lower classes and rural people had no access.

Tarek, an ad-filmmaker, further adds (personal communication, July 5, 2023), while d'juice introduced that language, youth started reinforcing it. Then again, advertisers reproduced that language just like an echo-chamber. It works in a feedback loop and has become the everyday language of the youth culture. For some professionals, d'juice came a bit earlier when the Bangladeshi middle class was not prepared to accept that language. A decade after d'juice's arrival, in 2016, Airtel came into the Bangladeshi market and began taking d'juice's place. These two youth-based mobile operators have had a significant impact on promoting a friendship culture among affluent urban youth. While the tagline of d'juice is 'bondhu-adda-gaan' (friend-fun-music), Airtel's is 'fun-furti-friendship'. However, Airtel is very much influenced by the youth outside of Bangladesh, more particularly, urban Indians. Sumon tells (May 19, 2023) me that Airtel's *dhoon* (tune) is directly influenced by Indian music, but d'juice's was purely Bangladeshi rock.

Airtel is greatly influenced by the Hindi culture industry in terms of showing youth fashion, food habits, expressions, vocabulary, activities, and so on. The taglines, jingles, and payoff lines of Airtel India and Airtel Bangladesh are almost similar. While Airtel Bangladesh says, 'life is impossible without friends', Airtel India says, 'every type of friend is necessary'. The Bollywood film industry has a profound and diverse impact on Bangladeshi Telco commercials. Films are particularly important being the fundamental vehicle disseminating lifestyles among youth (Capuzzo, 2012). Picking the word 'swag' (cool) from a recent Bollywood

Pakistan. The unrest eventually crystallised into the Bangla Language Movement. A few students lost their lives to police violence demanding recognition of Bangla as the state language of the then Pakistan (Bangladesh was the Eastern part of that Pakistan) on February 21, 1952. The Language Movement fueled nationalist movements, leading to a liberation war and an independent Bangladesh in 1971. February 21st is declared as the International Mother Language Day by UNESCO, and is now celebrated globally for linguistic freedom.

movie, Airtel launched its 4G TVC. A hybrid language combining Bangla, Hindi and English, which is termed as 'Banglish', 'Bandi' and 'Hinglish', has become popular in Bangladeshi commercial media. Hybrid language is also popular among Indian youth, a phenomenon of "class-based cosmopolitanism of the urban middle classes" (Fernandes, 2000, p. 622), and promoted by Indian popular media.

Telco youth are mostly from English medium background and attend private universities, and are identified as 'Gulshan-Banani' youth, referring to the affluent residential areas. Their English competence is also part of this privileged background and language becomes an instrument to acquire a better life (Sultana, 2014). Friendship commercials follow a mixture of English and Bangla with an aspiration of 'global' and 'cool' youth. Sharmin says (personal communication, July 5, 2023) that the industry people depict an aspirational youth as trendsetters and early adopters of technology. She quotes a phrase—*local at heart, global by nature*—and explains that the industry pursues a glocal (global+local) youth in friendship commercials.

Consequently, a section of officials argues that even though Telco helps the country's ad industry to flourish, it plays a vital role in polluting traditional language. Ramendu, an advertising agency official, thinks Bangladeshi FM radio stations and the ad industry are the two institutions that should take responsibility for ongoing language pollution (personal communication, April 13, 2023). He points out that the experts from Mumbai provide training to the people of Kolkata (capital of West Bengal, a state located in the Eastern part of India) with a mixture of Hindi, English, and Bangla; later these Kolkata trainers provide training to the people Bangladesh industry. This is a cycle of how 'language pollution' continues. Nonetheless, Rintu does not agree with this position. He argues (personal communication, May 19, 2023) that we do not replace current words with English or Hindi; rather, we replace unused words while making advertisements. Regarding the usage of 'swag' (cool) in Airtel's 4G commercial, as mentioned earlier, which they picked from a Hindi movie named *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017), Rintu clarifies:

> The word 'swag' means 'coolness'. It was already known in our society, while we made the 4G TVC, we just assisted in making it more popular. We used that word to be more communicative with the youth. If it were the D'juice brand, it might use 'jakkas' [fantastic], but as Airtel believes in a global mindset, we are tied to keeping a Banglish [Bangla+English] tone because today's youth talk with a hybrid language. They don't speak in English entirely; rather, they insert some English words in each Bangla sentence.

While I asked several practitioners regarding the meaning of 'swag', nobody knows the exact meaning of it. As Arwup indicates (personal communication, June 11, 2023), "We do not find any exact context for using the term 'swag'. None of us know the meaning actually, but some curious people will put meaning in this hybrid

argot". The term 'swagger' signifies social class and becomes useful for explaining contemporary youth culture, which "refers to the performance of style, involving knowledge of what to wear and how to wear it" (Harvey et al., 2013, as cited by Mason, 2018, p. 1118). Adnan, an ad-filmmaker who was the director of Airtel 4G TVC, states (personal communication, June 18, 2023), "Swag replaces the idea of 'coolness' that represents those who are the trendsetters. Swag represents the upper-class English medium and private university youth. They follow the Western lifestyle and make a trend in the local market". Bangladeshi advertisers attempt to keep a global/Western taste while producing content for the local youth. Ripon, a sound editor, explains (personal communication, June 13, 2023), "Previously, we used *ektara-dotara* [local folk musical instruments] for making music, but now we need to reproduce it through modern instruments. Youth are oriented to global music in their everyday life; thus, we need to adapt the technique to make it fit for contemporary youth."

However, a large section of professionals thinks that the mixture of different languages in advertisements is not an innovation of industry people; instead, industry mimics society. They argue we cannot avoid English words while making campaigns; otherwise, it will not resonate with current youth. It is a process of cultural globalization, which is unavoidable in the current context. Language is not something static; it is always changing, and more importantly, youth language is continuously changing. Hindol, a marketeer, indicates (personal communication, June 19, 2023),

> Hybridity in language is natural in a globalized world, as social media creates new languages every day. We design our communication campaigns according to the trend of the majority. For better communication, we need to pick the youth's language. For instance, instead of using 'heavy energy', we use '*heavvy energy'* for highlighting our *Mojo energy drink* as our target youth are using this word [*heavvy*] in their daily conversation.

In sum, this section focused on a transformed youth language that appears in contemporary Telco advertising in Bangladesh. By promoting this new language in their media representation, the advertising industry seems to be integrating the upper-class youth in terms of social class, while simultaneously alienating them from the rest of the country. In a heterogeneous society like Bangladesh, Banglish becomes central to forming friendships and consolidates the class structure.

While a section of advertising professionals considers this new language as a 'pollution', linking it with cultural aggression, another section sees it as a 'revolution' that accommodates youth from diverse backgrounds. The following section discusses the theoretical implications of this study.

Discussion

The examination of discursive construction of youth friendship in Bangladeshi advertising through an integrated lens of postcolonial and cultural studies approach generates two themes—*new form of relationship* and *metropolitan colloquial language*—and offers opportunities to understand how global telecommunication companies advance cultural narratives to penetrate and survive in a Third World market. It provides an opportunity to understand how an emerging cultural production, such as friendship, is reconfigured in the global South through an interaction of advertising, youth culture, and neoliberal economy in the context of globalization. The impact of cultural globalization in Bangladesh needs to be understood from two broad aspects: first, how it changes the traditional cultural practices in a post-colony, namely, Bangladesh and second, how these cultural changes contribute to forming a shared space comprising elements from different socio-economic backgrounds. The production-based analysis of this study indicates how a new space is created for a new consumer class in the cultural context of Bangladesh that reshapes and rearticulates existing languages, relations, and aspirations of the country's youth.

Telco is a service-oriented company. It promotes shared consumption by highlighting connectivity, networking, and sharing. Friendship ensures connectivity, and thus, goes with the business logic of Telco. The group activities of young people help in speeding out the services of Telco. The demographic reality of Bangladesh is also in favor of youth-based mobile operators. Thus, while advertising is critiqued for advancing individualism, it helps marketers with additional selling by dividing family products (O'Boyle, 2006b). Telco does the opposite by campaigning 'life is not possible without a group of friends' (*bondhu chara life impossible*) or demonstrating 'stay close, whatever the distance is' (*durotto jotoi hok, kachei thakun*). Friendship is a profitable venture, particularly in the South-Asian market, as the dominant family structure in South-Asian societies is still large and extended. The emotional bonding of friends, peer groups, family members, and acquaintances also makes an anthropological ground of a friendship network. However, the market cannot provide the real sources of happiness, love, and friendship (Jhally, 2000), which is reflected in my conversation with Tarek (July 5, 2023). He interprets, "Telco friendship is another kind of individualism; it gives us a perception of making a pseudo community which is good in the sense that keeps us happy for a while". Telco has little interest in friendship; instead, it forms a relational discourse that helps it advance a cultural product that is profitable to them. Telco friendship is a cultural construction of advertisers that helps them expand the youth market in a postcolonial nation-state.

Telco commercials impose a projected relationship on Bangladeshi youth. The affluent, private university, and English medium background youth are the target group of friendship networks, as they have comparatively more disposable money.

This section of youth lives in urban spaces and is considered trendsetters. Hansen (2008) suggests that cities in developing countries are significant places because they are the gateways to the global world. Some of the Telco officials express explicitly that they aim to create a 'global youth' through friendship networks. The business model of Telco replaces Bangla medium, public university, and rural background youth with the youth of English medium, private university, and urban orientation. As part of the brand specification, Arabic medium and working-class youth are set aside from this friendship narrative. Telco excludes a larger part of Bangladeshi youth from its model of consumers. It only targets a very small part of youth, those who have purchasing power, considered as the vanguard of consumer culture, and are directly linked with the formation of middle-class consumers. In a post-liberal society, advertising becomes a "laboratory for manufacturing the 'new middle class's dreams of affluent lifestyles and its aspiration" (Orsini, 2015, p. 203). Thus, Bangladeshi advertising reflects the post-liberalization of middle-class aspirations in their friendship discourse.

Too much focus on youth in the friendship commercials often demeans older people. For instance, a recent Airtel commercial appeals to young people to come out of the *chachuder network* (uncles' network) if they want to be 'cool'. It clearly shows negligence towards senior citizens. O'Boyle (2006b) rightly pointed out that older people feel "alienated from the youthful aesthetics of commercialised media" (p.55). Besides, Telco advertisement is repetitive, monotonous, and circular, which recurrently provides the same information about how far the coverage of the network is extended. To establish the strength of a network, Telco youth travel to the remotest parts of the country—the deep forests, mountains, and underground. By doing so, Telco presents a visual of a remote and backward Bangladesh where apart from their own network, communication networks are poor. Besides, Telco reproduces a stereotypical notion that the older generation is not skilled in technology, and thus, responsibility goes to the young generation to teach them. This reinforces a feeling of disempowerment among older adults. The construction of Telco youth is exaggerated to show that the youth are fast, industrious, creative, active, progressive, and judicious. This one-sided construction of youth culture is troublesome for elderly people because anything that goes against the said culture is branded as the character of older people. Therefore, a binary of youth vs. age becomes prominent, where elderly people are reduced, ignored, and demeaned through Telco friendship commercials.

The depiction of men-women relationships in friendship commercials ruptures the existing gender dynamics of Bangladeshi society. Mobile communication is projected in a way that it helps with addressing the sexual repression of Bangladeshi youth, where sexual activities are controlled and suppressed due to its Muslim heritage. Sexuality outside marriage is considered socially unacceptable in Islam. This approach to modernize Bangladeshi youth, offering them sexual freedom,

perpetuates an oriental media representation of Bangladesh as a repressive society, particularly of the identity markers associated with its Muslim identity. The portrayal of free mixing of men and women in friendship commercials can be read metaphorically as the 'free market' economy where privileged youth have access to endless consumption, fun, *furti* (enjoyment), and sexual pleasure. Such a construction of friendship that encourages hedonistic pleasures through hiking, fishing, cycling, traveling, hanging out, surfing, eating out, and so on is profitable for neoliberal consumption. However, neoliberal markets tailor and reshape themselves according to the needs and desires of the consumers. While the Bangladeshi advertising industry enhances a 'free-mixing' atmosphere through Telco commercials, it also publicizes a '*hijabi* culture' for a different set of consumers, which Alam (2020) showed in his study. Advertisers attempt to reconfigure the desire of youth according to the needs of the market, and thus, free-mixing and hijab are both reflected in Bangladeshi commercials like two sides of the same coin.

The hybrid language, a mixture of Bangla and English, becomes a symbol of Telco youth in contemporary Bangladeshi advertising. English is directly connected with the ambitious lifestyle of the country's youth and reflects their class aspiration. English is associated with a wealthy, spontaneous, open, broad, productive, prosperous, rich, smart, ambitious lifestyle; in contrast, Bangla is associated with a poor, weak, shabby, backward, confined lifestyle (Bhattacharya, 2018). Therefore, Bhattacharya (2018) argues, a hybrid language where Bangla is pronounced with an English accent is consciously produced to highlight the supremacy of the product/service. Advertisers produce a 'pure' Bangla for the down-market youth, and a 'broken' Bangla or *Banglish* language for the upmarket youth. From a global context, Coca-Cola produces English advertisements for many non-English countries, highlighting Coke as a 'high-status symbol of modernity' (Ger & Belk, 1996). Historically, English was directly linked with the civilizing mission of the British Empire as Lord Macaulay proposed English education for Indian people in 1835 for making a ''class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect'' (cited by Parameswaran, 2008, p. 118). Thus, in many postcolonial countries, such as the Philippines, Kenya, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and India, English becomes a cause of social division between the social elite and the 'Englishless masses' (Sultana, 2012). Telco language enhances a sense of inferiority complex that Bangla is not 'smart' and contains the ideas of global consumerism. Thus, the youth are encouraged to insert English words in every sentence and follow an Anglicized Bangla in Telco commercials, which can be termed as a neo-colonial linguistic practice in a post-colony.

However, Telco language reflects an established debate regarding the Bangla language. Bangladeshi culture industry was previously oriented with standard

Bangla (*promito Bangla*), as discussed earlier, which failed to connect with the country's mass audiences. The modern Bangla language was formed and structured in the 19th century's colonial center, in Calcutta, by the British rulers with close supervision of upper-caste Hindu Sanskrit Pandits (Azam, 2014). Identifying that moment as the colonization of the Bangla language, Azam writes that Arabic and Persian words were replaced by Sanskrit words, considering those as the symbols of Muslim regimes of pre-British India. Therefore, the majority of Bengali Muslims, broadly Bangladeshi, remain disconnected from that modern linguistic practice. Nevertheless, the cultural elites of Bangladesh continued with that language, fueled by Bengali nationalism, till the end of the 20th century. However, after the advent of new capital in the 1990s, a consumer class started rising in Bangladesh that forced marketers to reconsider the existing language structure. Advertisers pay attention to the efficacy of prevailing language so that it can communicate with a greater audience. Their effort brings forth an oral language that is hybrid (a mixture of Bangla, English, and Hindi) in place of previously used *promito* (standard) Bangla. The Bangladeshi cultural elites critique this effort as 'language pollution' because it challenges their linguistic superiority. Conversely, it is interpreted as a revolutionary step by the opposite camp, as it challenges the language-based power structure. While it is true that this new linguistic formation breaks a long-standing cultural hegemony, it also brings forth a corporate dominance where most youth have no access. Though it challenges linguistic standardization, it does not ensure linguistic democratization by accommodating diverse dialects of the society. Through this process, the feudalistic colonial language structure is replaced by the capitalistic neo-colonial language system. Language is the raw material of capitalistic production; therefore, this new language can be interpreted as an appropriation of neoliberal economic expansion in the context of postcolonial Bangladesh.

The cultural influence of India and the West is more active on Bangladeshi youth. Bangladeshi advertisers get new lifestyles largely from Hollywood and Bollywood. Therefore, a two-step flow of cultural influence can be identified in the construction of 'cool/global' aspiration –from the USA to the Indian culture industry, and from India to the Bangladeshi culture industry—rearticulating the notion of youth friendship and their lifestyle in the urban space of Bangladesh. Tarek, an ad-filmmaker, interprets (personal communication, July 5, 2023) how this cultural flow works in the Bangladeshi advertisement industry: "We consider India as a testing ground! If something becomes popular in the Indian market, we reproduce it blindly for the Bangladesh market as our audiences have almost similar cultural orientations". Postcolonial scholars are more concerned with Western dominance; conversely, least bothered about the regional cultural dynamics. Thus, decolonization does not always mean de-westernization (Shome, 2009, 2019). Integrating a postcolonial and cultural studies framework, Shome urges: "The issue of decolonization is to be understood not just in relation to Western power

structures but also in relation to inequalities within a nation/region then merely performing non-eurocentric moves in cultural studies" (p. 714). Consistent with Shome (2009, 2019), this study advocates considering the hegemonic gesture of emerging Asian powers like India and China in the discussion of global South cultural studies.

Friendship networks are solely dedicated to promoting a 'fun youth' that lacks the gravity of a relationship by trivializing human bonding. The motto of this friendship is built on the idea of the shortness of human life. Life is short, so make it colorful, because you will not get this life again. Such a concept of friendship is often depicted in Hindi movies, such as *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (You Won't Get Life Twice), which keeps having an impact on Bangladeshi friendship commercials. Friendship is like opium that helps youth forget the brevity of this world. Friendship is thus apolitical. Youth do not engage with societal issues. They only want to fulfill their illusions by maintaining a friend circle. This depoliticization of friendship culture works according to the so-called apolitical market logic of neoliberal discourse. Mobile technology serves the purpose of youth by supplying commodified fun, freedom, and friendship. Hence, the construction of friendship in Telco ads is embedded in consumerism and neoliberal aspirations. The relationships among youth are multi-layered and more complex, but are depicted linearly in Bangladeshi Telco commercials, fostering a neoliberal desire in global South space.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Bangladeshi telecommunication advertising reconfigures youth friendship from a socially embedded bond into a commodified, technologically mediated practice. These narratives normalize neoliberal values—such as individualism and hedonism—while privileging urban, affluent identities and marginalizing rural and working-class identities, thereby reinforcing existing social and linguistic hierarchies. The research significantly contributes to postcolonial media studies by illustrating how global capital penetrates the global South by reshaping local aspirations to align with market logic, effectively replacing traditional colonial hierarchies with neocolonial corporate dominance. Furthermore, it exposes the intentional depoliticization of youth through 'fun' culture. Future research should move beyond Western-centric frameworks to critically examine the growing regional influence of Indian and Chinese media industries on South Asian consumer culture. Additionally, future research may extend this inquiry by examining audience reception, comparative advertising practices across South Asian markets, and the role of digital and social media platforms in shaping contemporary youth cultures and friendship narratives. Besides, this study is limited by its focus on heterosexual (male-female) friendship relations. Future research should explore diverse forms of friendship (e.g., cross-cultural, non-binary, and same-sex) as depicted in global south advertising.

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