



# Stay smart with phones

Angry subscribers complained to the Consumer Council about a mobile network operator flip-flopping over its policy on ‘unlimited’ 3G monthly usage plans. Our reliance on 3G data means smart phones play a big part in our lives, but they can cause physical injuries

THE mobile network operator in question first announced that it would cease to offer **subscriptions** with ‘unlimited’ usage, prompting many existing customers to renew their ‘unlimited’ plans before the deadline.

But when the operator discovered that its major competitors would not follow suit, it reinstated the ‘unlimited’ plans.

Many customers who rushed to buy new phones and signed contracts before the deadline felt like they had been fooled, and made complaints to the Consumer Council as well as the Office of the Telecommunication Authority (OFTA).

After the consumer **watchdog** found the operator’s change of policy created “confusion and dissatisfaction” among customers, the operator allowed customers to withdraw from their newly signed contracts.

The problem in this case centres on the word ‘unlimited’, which turned out to not be as unlimited as the name would suggest. And if you are thoroughly confused about what all this means, you are not alone.

The truth is that when you subscribe to a mobile data service plan that allows ‘unlimited’ 3G usage, in most cases your usage is not really unlimited.

There is, in fact, a limit – when your usage exceeds a certain volume, the operator will slow down your service. You will find your download speeds are much slower and downloading things takes a long time. This kind of control by the operators on high volume usage is called ‘throttling’.

The operators do this to stop a small number of high-volume users from taking up too large a portion of the available bandwidth of the network, and slowing down everybody else.

Operators maintain that this kind of control is necessary and justified as they reported that over 95 percent of the network’s capacity is taken up by just five percent of users.

Why, indeed, should a small number of people who upload and download massive volumes of data **clog up** the network and slow it down for everyone else?

So when an operator discovers that certain users are taking up too much bandwidth, they suppress their internet speeds so the majority of users can still enjoy normal speeds.

## ‘Unlimited’ only in name

THIS kind of control is conducted under a practice called Fair Usage Policy (FUP), which is not limited to mobile data services and is also common in home broadband services.

FUPs have existed for a long time. It is usually spelled out in the **fine print** of service contracts, or posted on the website of the operator.

But since few customers actually read the fine print, they become frustrated when they find their internet speed slowing down to a crawl, and make complaints to the authorities.

To clear up the confusion, OFTA issued a set of guidelines on FUPs, which started to take effect on February 13. This is what triggered the latest round of consumer complaints.

The guidelines do not ban FUPs. Operators are allowed to continue to sell service plans using the word ‘unlimited’, provided the customers know the limit, which must also be reasonable.

For the customer, the important thing to bear in mind is that ‘unlimited’ usage is likely to not really be unlimited. Before signing a contract, you should find out what the usage cap is, be it 2 GB or 5 GB per month, and choose a plan that most suits your usage habits.

## Hong Kong Today

Personal Development & Interpersonal Relationships

Globalisation

Energy, Technology & the Environment

Modern China

Public Health

## Gadget mania

CONSUMERS are, of course, entitled to know what they are buying. When they think they are paying for an unlimited usage plan, they expect to get one. But consumer rights aside, the demand for unlimited usage also reflects how electronic **gadgets** like smartphones and computers have become a big part of our lives.

Has our use of electronic devices become excessive? A recent poll conducted by Microsoft in the Asia Pacific region revealed a worrying situation. It found:

54 percent of Hong Kong respondents state that their immediate family owns more than seven personal gadgets (including computers, mobile phones, MP3 players and more), ranking Hong Kong second highest in the region after Singapore (64 percent).

33 percent own more than ten personal gadgets, ranking Hong Kong third in Asia after the Philippines (36 percent) and Singapore (35 percent).

Over 70 percent of Hong Kong families have no established rules on the use of technology at home.

While the proper use of these modern communication devices can help people keep in touch with each other, unrestricted and excessive use could do the opposite. If someone spends all their time on the computer or their smartphone, it could lead to **isolation**.

## Health hazards

THERE is a rising number of **ailments** associated with the use of electronic gadgets, which some doctors are calling ‘i-injuries’.

A few years ago, people complained of ‘Blackberry thumb’, a muscle pain experienced by some phone users that was caused by repeated use. Doctors are now beginning to see similar repetitive strain injuries caused by using tablet computers like the iPad.

## Excessive tech use

Ms Peggy Liu, Centre Manager of the Hong Kong Council of Early Childhood Education and Services Child Development Centre, said:

“Technology helps children to learn and grow in many ways, but at the same time, parents should pay close attention to their children’s excessive use of technology. To establish better relationships with their children, parents should stay in touch with them via technology and teach them the correct attitude to using technology. This will enable them to enhance family communication, and also prevent children from becoming isolated from their family members.”

Discuss the above comment with your classmates.

When thinking about the issue, consider the following questions:

1. How many hours a day do you spend using your computer or smartphone?
2. What do you use your computer or smartphone for (homework, playing games, casual browsing, answering emails)?
3. Should a limit be set on the number of hours you use your computer or other electronic gadgets?
4. Do you feel that you are talking to your family less because of the long hours you spend using these gadgets?

This article enables students to:

1. understand important issues facing their society, country and the world;
2. assess qualities, phenomena, changes, trends and impacts in relation to various aspects of society and culture.



## Key ideas

The recent consumer dispute over ‘unlimited usage’ mobile data services heightens the need for us to find out restrictions behind service plans due to FUPs. The demand for unlimited data usage also reflects a growing trend towards ‘i-injuries’ due to the excessive use of electronic gadgets.

## Did you know?

“Many people are concerned that mobile phone radiation will cause cancer or other serious health hazards. The weight of scientific evidence has not linked cell phones with any health problems.”

Source: US Food and Drug Administration

## Critical questions

1. Do you think network operators should be allowed to put a cap on ‘unlimited’ usage under an FUP?
2. Do you think the guidelines issued by the OFTA adequately protect the interests of consumers?
3. Should a service be advertised as ‘unlimited usage’ if there is in fact a restriction on usage?
4. Would it be better if operators simply stated the allowed usage volume under their service plans instead of calling the plans ‘unlimited’?

## Reference

1. Microsoft survey on technology use and family life

[www.microsoft.com/hk/presspass/viewpress.aspx?yr=2011&mo=12&dy=06](http://www.microsoft.com/hk/presspass/viewpress.aspx?yr=2011&mo=12&dy=06)

2. Cell phone and cancer risk

[www.fda.gov/Radiation-EmittingProducts/RadiationEmittingProductsandProcedures/HomeBusinessandEntertainment/CellPhones/ucm116282.htm](http://www.fda.gov/Radiation-EmittingProducts/RadiationEmittingProductsandProcedures/HomeBusinessandEntertainment/CellPhones/ucm116282.htm)

3. Injuries

[www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2100414/Go-iPhone-iPad-Now-prepare-injury.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2100414/Go-iPhone-iPad-Now-prepare-injury.html)