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Flat-rate tariffs drive mobile networking

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Flat-rate internet tariffs are helping drive take-up of social networking tools on mobile phones, with some users spending more than an hour a day online, according to research.

Singapore-based mobile communities firm BuzzCity polled 875 users of its MyGamma service, which offers discussion groups, photo sharing, calendars, mobile blogging and virtual gifts for around 2 million users in 60 countries.

MyGamma polled its strongest audiences in Thailand and South Africa, as well as India, Romania, the US and the UK. Kenya, Tanzania and Nigeria were also chosen to give a diverse set of results from growth markets.

Users were found to be predominantly male, with only about 26% female, and 64% are under 30 years old. Among MyGamma users, 60% had Nokia phones.

More than 90% of users say they access the service at least once a day and half visit five times or more.

Users in Thailand, who benefit from simplified online billing systems and popular flat-rate data tariffs, were both the most frequent and longest visitors.

Flat-rate data tariffs are often easier for consumers because they can pay a set amount for unlimited internet access, rather than pay for each page they view or item they download.

The same all-you-can-eat tariffs helped push takeup of fixed-line broadband, and mobile operators are increasingly looking to this model to encourage adoption of a new generation of mobile internet services.

Communication was by far the most compelling function of the service, with around 75% saying they were drawn back to the site to check for messages from friends.

Flat-rate data tariffs were also credited for an increase in the sales of virtual gifts in some countries, with Thailand and South Africa top for buying ringtones, wallpapers and games.

Only 8% of MyGamma users access services when they are on the go, with

more than 60% mainly accessing it at home. In most countries, the heaviest usage was in the evening.

The BuzzCity chief executive, KF Lai, said the research confirmed that user behaviour and trends remain consistent between countries.

"What we find really exciting is that members not only use the service to network, but also to buy goods and services," Lai added.

"This augurs well for our advertisers and merchants, who will benefit from the influence of social networks on members, and the power of referral and recommendation."

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