“Exploring motives behind Generation Y’s smartphone purchase”

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EXPLORING MOTIVES BEHIND GENERATION Y'S SMARTPHONE PURCHASE

Abstract

Considering the increase in smartphones, it becomes important to understand why people buy them. The purpose of this paper is to examine Generation Y's motives behind smartphone purchases. The study made use of a qualitative research paradigm. Focus group interviews were selected as the method of data collection. Focus group members ranged from seven to ten. A total of 81 (N = 81) South African Generation Y were interviewed. The findings indicate that Generation Y consider quality and technical features when buying smartphones. Additionally, this study also observed that this cohort is status conscious and easily influenced by their friends when making purchase decisions.

Keywords Smartphones, perceived quality, social influence, technical features, Generation Y

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INTRODUCTION

Smartphones have come to play an important role in consumers' daily lives. Today's consumers are preoccupied with owning the latest smartphone. A smartphone is "a mobile phone that integrates features of phone and mobile computing platform, and the models today even combine functions such as digital cameras, media players, high-speed data access via Wi-Fi, GPS navigation, and other applications with option to download application through application market" (Mohan, 2014).

With the proliferation of smartphones, consumers are faced with choices among which smartphones to buy. Although there are a variety of smartphones available out there, reasons why consumers buy certain types and brands of smartphones are somehow not clear. However, it is clear that the reasons go beyond fulfilling utilitarian needs. Research indicates that ordinarily, buying motives are either utilitarian or hedonic. According to Babin, Darden, and Griffin (1994), utilitarian purchase motives are those that concern purchase of products in an efficient and deliberate manner. Contrarily, hedonic buying motives are described as those that are based on emotions, fantasies and focus more on the symbolic elements of the product (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Research further demonstrates that buying behavior motives go beyond utilitarian and hedonic reasons and include other motives. Possible motives include but are not limited to: perceived quality of a product, status associated with the purchase of a product, social influence and technical features of a product.

With the multiplicity of buying motives, marketers need to know why people choose to buy one brand or type of smartphone over another. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore motives behind Generation Y's smartphone purchase.

Generation Y

Generation Y refer to individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 years old (Ahmed, Qazi, & Perji, 2011). Within the context of this study, Generation Y will refer to those individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 years old. This generation is characterized by technologically savviness (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). They have grown up in an environment dominated by computers (Rawlins, Simeon, Ramdath, & Chadee, 2008), and have mastered the use of such technologies for numerous aspects of their lives, especially communications (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). According to Ferguson (2008), Generation Y constitutes 82 percent of mobile phone owners worldwide (Vatikiotis, 1996). In South Africa, Generation Y spend more on mobile phones (Fin24, 2013). Interestingly, this cohort's concern is not on purchasing a mobile phone for its functional purpose, but rather with the intention of using it as an accessory (Fin24, 2013). Venkatesh, Thong, and Xu (2012) also observed a similar behavior, reporting that Generation Y own more than one mobile phone as fashion symbol and they strive to get the smartphones with latest specifications even when they do not have any need for them; thus as observed by Doolittle (2008) makes the phone an accessory.

Based on the foregoing discussions, it is therefore useful to understand what are the reasons driving Generation Y's smartphone purchase. In South Africa, this cohort constitutes 38 percent of the South African population (Statistics South Africa, 2011). The following section overviews previous studies on product buying motives.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Motives have always been identified as influencing consumer buying behavior. One of the noteworthy reasons why many people buy certain products is quality associated with a particular product. Abbott (1955) refers to product quality as the differences in quality amount to differences in the quantity in the desired ingredient or attribute. Garvin (1987) identified multiple dimensions of product quality, namely performance, reliability, serviceability, conformance, durability, features, aesthetics and perceived quality. It appears that consumers may judge a product's quality based on these dimensions which in turn may determine whether or not they buy a product. However, customers' interpretation of quality varies. Such variations are referred to herein as perceived quality.

The concept of perceived quality has been studied and has been found to have an influence on consumer buying behavior. According to Ziethaml (1988, p. 3), perceived quality refers to "the consumer judgement about the superiority or excellence of a product or a service". When consumers believe that a product is of high quality, they are willing to pay any amount of money to purchase it (Akyene, 2012).

Another reason why people buy certain products is the status associated with such products (Madinga, Maziriri, & Lose, 2016). These products are not only consumed to satisfy direct needs in the consumption process, but also used to portray social status and show one's position in the community (Brezinova & Vijayakumar, 2012). Specifically, status seekers do not consume products only to satisfy their physiological needs, but to satisfy their psychological needs such as achievement or recognition and appreciation (O'Cass & Frost, 2002). These individuals tend to surround themselves with tangible evidence of their supposed superiority (Eastman & Liu, 2012).

The fact that consumers' buying behavior is influenced by "others" has been noted. It is widely accepted that certain individuals are more susceptible to influence and are likely to buy what the "others" in their social circles buy (Churchill & Moschis, 1979). Marketers across the globe are aware of the influence exerted by "others" during and after the purchasing process as these others are believed to possess relevant purchase information which individuals have to conform to when it comes to purchase decisions (Mangleburg, Doney, & Bristol, 2004). Within the context of Generation Y cohort, research indicates that the "others", in the form of friends, affect their buying behaviors,

because friends' positive appraisals after a purchase are more likely to provide the younger generation with positive self-identities (Mangleburg, Doney, & Bristol, 2004).

Within the mobile phone context, technical features are also considered as one of the reasons why consumers purchase such products (Bukhari, Rizwan, Liaquat, Ashraf, Ali, Azeem, Siddique, & Ali, 2013). In their study, Singh and Goyal (2009) found that their respondents were more interested in technical features of a mobile phone than in its price.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research approach

A qualitative research method was employed to explore Generation Y's smartphone purchase evaluations. In qualitative research approach, respondents are free to voice-out their views and opinions concerning the discussed topic and do not have to be narrowed by limited options (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). This type of research approach offers a relaxed environment to respondents that encourages a free-flowing dialogue between respondents and interviewer, leading to discovery of unanticipated and astonishingly new answers about the topic (Creswell, 2008).

For the purpose of this study, focus groups were used as data collection instrument. According to Neuman (2006), a focus group is a method used by researchers to gather qualitative data through group discussions on a given topic. Focus group members are encouraged to interact with each other and share views. In addition, they are also allowed to respond to each other's comments and go beyond their initial response to a question (Kolb, 2008). The prime reason for selecting focus group interviews was to collect the truthful and straightforward answers that come impulsively and naturally from the respondents and thereby gaining a more detailed information for the study. The interaction between participants could encourage overall level of excitement over the researched topic that may perhaps increase participants' willingness to express their views freely and comfortably. In a case where participants may fail to understand the questions, focus groups create a platform for respondents to seek clarification and, thus, more reliable answers could be generated. With this setting, researchers also have an opportunity to ask follow-up questions to the focus group members whenever necessary. Likewise, focus group interviews make it possible for the researchers to modify the questions already prepared to obtain a more focused insight.

The focus group discussions were thoroughly moderated by the researchers. Each focus group discussion took a maximum of 60 minutes. With the permission of the participants, interviews were audio-recorded. Ethical procedures were carefully followed by the researchers. Before participating in the study, the interviewees were requested to sign a consent letter.

Participants were requested to discuss each topic amongst themselves. The researchers emphasized that honesty is crucial and there were no incorrect answers. The researchers probed for explanation when required and made use of validation comments during the discussions. After each focus group discussion, the researchers noted all the enquiries that needed clarification or resulted in new themes being revealed. Data collection came to an end when no new themes emerged, signifying theoretical saturation had been reached (Morgan, 1998).

2.2. Sample

The data were generated from 10 focus groups. Focus group members ranged from seven to ten. The sample of 81 participants was conveniently drawn from Generation Y consumers enrolled at a private college in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. The interviews were conducted in August and September 2016. The Generation Y cohort was chosen due to the fact that they are the major users of smartphones. The demographics of this sample are provided in Table 1 below.

2.3. Data analysis

At the end of each focus group interview, the researchers recorded the audio-tape discussions verbatim. All data were coded to reveal commonalities among the respondents' answers. During the course of the transcription practice, the research-

Table 1. Demographics

Variable	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	13	16
Female	68	84
Total	**81**	**100**
Age		
20	16	19.75
21	18	22.22
22	43	53.08
23	2	2.5
24	1	1.23
25	1	1.23
Total	**81**	**100**
Race		
White	79	97.53
Black African	1	1.23
Asian	1	1.23
Total	**81**	**100**
Mobile phone model		
Apple iPhone	65	80.25
Samsung	11	13.58
Huawei	4	4.94
Sony	1	1.23
Total		**100**

ers noted factors that were constantly discussed across the groups, permitting for the identification of common factors influencing luxury usage by buyers of smartphones. After the transcription process was completed, common concepts which emerged in the focusing questions across the focus groups were identified as themes. An iterative process was utilized in this study to ensure reliability of results. The researchers coded and recoded the transcripts until no new themes emerged. Furthermore, commonalities and dissimilarities between participants' opinions were noted so that they could be classified (Miles & Huberman, 1994). By checking previous coding throughout analysis and developing themes from common data, it is believed that a thorough analysis was conducted and the data comprehensively and accurately represent participants' perspectives.

3. CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

To enhance the reliability and validity of this study, the researchers made use of situated methodology, reflexivity, prolonged engagement, member checks and inter-rater reliability. Situated methodology ensures that the reliability and validity is achieved by certifying compatibility between the research techniques and data analysis procedures (Kielhofner, 1982). This was accomplished by making use of a purposive sampling technique that improved the richness of collected data. Engaging the principle of reflexivity, the researchers were able to stay emotionally neutral throughout interviews and to approach the interviewing process with an open mind by bracketing all inherent preconceptions about the subject under investigation (Fitzpatrick & Olson, 2015). The researchers also practiced "prolonged engagement" with interviewees. According to Kirk and Miller (1986), prolonged engagement is employed to produce a comprehensive data set and to enrich the "thickness" of data, with the main aim of enlightening the full picture of the phenomenon under study. As stated by Guba and Lincoln (1989), affirmation that member checks are "the single most critical technique for establishing credibility", contributors were offered a full record of the coded interviews, with a summary of the emerging categories, in order to determine whether the codes and categories appropriately explained their experiences. The analyzed records were revealed to five respondents who were available at

that moment and they all confidently stated that the interpretations represented a true reflection of their views.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to reduce repetition of information and enhance consistency, the findings in this study are integrated, as proposed by Gustafsson, Hassmen, Kentta, and Johansson (2008). In the following section, researchers discussed the important themes that emerged from the study. In addition, relevant quotes from the interview records are utilized to clarify the emerged themes.

4.1. Quality

The current study established that, when assessing which smartphone to buy, respondents are influenced by perceived quality. The succeeding excerpt encapsulates this interpretation:

"You get a lot from smartphones. Like this Apple iPhone 6, quality is on a highest level".

According to Aaker (1991), consumers are likely to associate certain products with quality. As such, consumers usually purchase products like smartphones for the superior quality reflected in the brand name (Gentry, Putrevu, Shultz, & Commuri, 2001). The study conducted by Zhou and Wong (2008) revealed that high-quality is an essential purchase drive for certain products.

4.2. Status symbol

The findings of this study reveal that consumers purchase smartphone to symbolize their social standing. The need for status expressed by the respondents is encapsulated in the following citation:

"I bought an iPhone because of the brand, it makes me feel superior to those who don't have".

Based on the preceding excerpt, it is clear that certain consumers are more interested in status-directed symbolism compared to utilitarian functions (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982). The importance of obtaining status is confirmed by the study conducted by Eastman et al. (1999) who reported that consumers purchase products to symbolize social status and are mainly driven by the symbolic meaning attached to these products (Dholakia & Talukdar, 2004). Thus, Dubois and Duquesne (2003) concluded that the main reason why certain people consume goods is primarily for their symbolic value, as people tend to judge others based on possessions and such judgments often impact on an individual's social ranking (Wattanasuwan, 2005).

4.3. Social influence

The findings of the study also revealed that Generation Y consumers are mostly influenced by their friends to purchase smartphones. The following quotations from the interviews encapsulate this view:

"It's *a trend, I wanted to be part of the cool kids".*

"When I first came here, I didn't have an iPhone and it felt wrong. I felt inclined to keep-up".

In social psychology theory, individuals are viewed as social creatures that conform to social norms whose behavior is powerfully directed by their group memberships (Kotler, 1965). Therefore, consumers find it natural to conform to the opinion of groups they associate with, thereby owning products because of group member influence (Solomon, 1983). Conformity in the context of buyer behavior refers to individuals purchasing products due to interpersonal influence, particularly, to be accepted by a specific social group by those around them (Mason, 1992). In their study, Zhou and Wong (2008) agreed that individuals purchase certain products to adhere to a particular social group making them more susceptible to reference group influence (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989).

4.4.Technical features

The results of the interview also revealed that consumers buy smartphones because of features and applications. The following excerpts originating from the interviews highlight new technical properties as one of the major drivers for Generation Y consumers to buy smartphones:

"If your friend has an expensive smartphone and you don't. You see all these cool things that phone can do and you'll also like to do that".

"Smartphone are crucial in our lives. They simply have better features. My phone is like a mini-computer that I can access anywhere. I'm able to check my e-mails on my phone".

"With smartphones you can watch movies and videos more clear as they have bigger screen".

The majority of respondents of this study bought smartphones, because they claim that their previous mobile phones had outdated technological features and applications. These respondents needed new and advanced technological applications such as cameras, long battery timing, advanced games apps, more developed messaging services, large and more colorful screen. Research also indicates that new and advanced applications encourage consumers to buy new models of smartphones (Liu, 2002).

The results of the study also revealed that one of the features respondents evaluate when purchasing a smartphone was the size. This finding contradicts Liu's (2002) study who found that the size of the mobile phone has no influence on the purchasing decision and choice of mobile phones. However, Lui's finding might have been based on the fact that all the competing brands in the market he studied were small-sized phones making him or her to conclude that the trend is actually not towards smaller phones but towards phones with better capability and larger screens.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Generation Y consumers are the biggest generation cohort and a profitable segment in South Africa. It is very important for organizations targeting these consumers to understand their purchasing behavior and product selection criteria. Based on the study's findings, marketers for smartphones should pay more attention to developing phones with high quality and improved and advanced technical features, because Generation Y consumers are digital natives who enjoy having the latest technology with up-to-date features.

CONCLUSION

This study utilizes qualitative techniques to explore motives behind Generation Y's purchase of smartphones. Results show that perceived quality, social influence, status symbol, and technical features are the reasons why this cohort buy smartphones. One of the reasons why Generation Y purchase smartphones is that they are status-conscious – often looking at demonstrating their social standing, exclusivity and uniqueness to others. We encourage further research in other factors that may assist in understanding Generation Y's purchase motives of smartphones.

Limitations and future research

The study focused on Generation Y in South Africa. Therefore, generalizability of the current findings is limited to this particular segment. Future research could investigate other segments and other cultures. Also, a cross-cultural research to compare the different countries' Generation Y's smartphone purchase motives is recommended for further studies. Research on this topic will assist marketers and academics to have a better understanding of what cultural factors may influence consumers' smartphone purchase decisions. The study also used only qualitative techniques to collect data. Future studies could look at using a mixed-method approach.

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