

An Exploratory Study on Consumer-Object Relationship of iPhone in the Telecommunication Industry of UK

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Abstract

Over the years academic studies on consumption has been predominantly in the pre-acquisition phase of consumption of goods and services with less emphasis on post-acquisition phase. This study attempts to explore the consumption and possession phase of consumption circle. It is very important to research on how consumption of possessions have been after purchase, and explore as to how this can further help in understanding the consumption experience of individuals. The consumer behavior of iPhone owners was put into consideration with respect to the kind of relationships they have with their possessions, what identity is being constructed from the owning of an iPhone, the product meanings the possessions have for the acquirer of the mobile device, and to get an understanding of, if the iPhone is considered by possessors as part of self based on existing theories in consumer research studies. The key execution from this research through the findings are that object meanings are firstly obtained from the public and transformed to private as a result of continued interactions. These interactions have been found to elicit emotions that lead to a relationship irrespective of motives behind the consumption of the iPhone.

Keywords: Possessions, Person-Object Attachments, Identity, Objects as Extended Self, Consumption, iPhone.

1. Introduction

The iPhone the object of study for this research was first presented in January, 2007 at the Annual MacWorld Conference and Expo and later launched into the market in June of the same year. Apple iPhone is classified as a smart phone. Apart from being able to make calls there are some outstanding features it has such as the internet wireless access (WiFi), large internal storage, Bluetooth, multi touch screen, iPod functions and runs on its own web browser known as the Safari (Cleary, 2008; Ravi, 2009).

The consumption patterns of individuals have been developed around a circle of acquisition phase, consumption phase, and disposition phase (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). The concept to carry out this study began with an interest in consumer research in the marketing field with the need to under study the behavioural pattern of consumers. Ever since the creation of man, objects have being fundamental to his daily activities and helps in meeting the real and perceived needs and wants (Piron, 2006).

The aforementioned reasons for the study bring to bear the positioning of the study in the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) domain. CCT is not a grand theory but a theoretical view that covers the ever changing relationships that occurs within the consumer actions, the market place and cultural meanings. CCT has helped in shedding more light into the behavioural perspectives of consumers through in-depth study of consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, socio historic modeling of consumption and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretative strategies. These aforementioned perspectives are the key research programs for CCT, however the nature of this study identifies with consumer identity project of CCT. Consumer identity project of CCT correlates to consumers developing symbolic meanings from their consumption of possession with a question of bringing into light consumers' personal narratives and social identities (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

From studies conducted by researchers it has being found out that consumers have relationships with their possession. The level of relationships obtainable however varies depending on individuals and what the possessions in question are. This research is building on the pioneering work of Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) with a purpose to understand how consumers have relationships with their possessions. The essence of this research is to understand, what the dynamics of the person-object relationship are, in the product context of iPhone. This research question is with a view of exploring the meanings consumers attach to possession, and also research the sacred and profane aspects of consumer possessions. Furthermore, to examine the relationships between products and the consumer identity construction projects. This research is of the aim to answer the question of: What are the dynamics of the person-object relationships in the product context of iPhone?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The importance of objects to human is of great significance as it states a lot of the possessor in various forms. The existence and survival of human is dependent on the use of objects to fulfill everyday life. The objects individual possess tell a lot about themselves in relation to our perspectives and attitudes. Acquisition of possessions by individuals is mostly aimed at satisfying the needs and creation of identity for the possessor

(Smith et al., 2008). Most researches on consumer behaviour have been mostly focused on the acquisition phase with less emphasis on the utilization and disposal phase of consumption (Mugge et al., 2008). However, the post acquisition phase of consumption is important as it gives insight as to how objects possessed have helped in developing the self-concept and identities which is vital in marketing (Ball and Tasaki, 1992).

2.1 Possessions

The control of inanimate possessions is solely in the hands of its owners while animate control are not fully controlled by possessors. Various authors have studied possessions in different aspects which includes its value, meaning, source, attachment, loss and identity creation to mention a few (Kleine, 2004).

The purpose of acquisition of possession and involvement in consumption is to boost the self-image and social image of its possessors; people move to secure objects just to have a sense of uniqueness through shying away from commodities that are common to all which is known as counter conformity (Tian and McKenzie, 2001). Counter conformity is formed by making distinct and rare choice that is acceptable by all.

2.2 Person-Object Attachments

Consumers have over the time developed relationships with objects in their possession through the various meanings attached to it. Ball and Tasaki (1992) stated that object attachment is a reflection of ownership of an object which helps define the self concept of the individual. However this definition presents attachment as self-concept with less regards for attachment which are not considered to have such intentions. Consequently, Schifferson et al. (cited in Mugge et al., 2008) stated that product attachment is portrayed as the emotional connection an individual have with an object. People do not just attach to objects, possession attachment are spurred by the meanings which are either derived from public or/and private meanings of possessions (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Kleine and Baker (2004) stated that “material possession attachment is a multi-faceted property of the relationships between an individual or group of individuals and a specific material object that has been psychologically appropriated, deco modified, and singularized through person-object interaction”. This is in a way encapsulate the essence of attachment to objects.

The bonds that exist between the possessor and objects is difficult to break, as it causes emotional letdown, even when the object is not of any significant use or has lost its value over time. To be attached to an object the owner is being encapsulated in a special meaning that is more than the utility the objects provide (Mugge et al., 2008). Of significant note is that, product-attachment is clearly different from brand relationships and product category involvement (Ball and Tasaki, 1992; Fournier, 1998, Kleine and Baker, 2004).

Product attachment evolves with time as the development of self changes; it is a complex emotional process (Kleine and Baker, 2004). Kleine et al. (1995) suggested that the various kinds of attachment reflects the possessors desirable connection with other, person individuality, or disconnection from persons and/ or objects and absolutely explains the developmental phases of consumers. In the studies conducted, it showed that age and the life stage of the individual are powerful in person-object attachment, as shown that the elderly are less likely to be attached to objects compared to the young ones (Kleine and Baker, 2004).

2.3 Self

Individuals develop attachment to objects to create a sense of self, through which they can express their thoughts and actions. The meaning of self differs across cultures and individuals; the fact however is that the concept of self is expressed through objects (Hsu, 1985). Keline et al. (1995) pointed out that literature on self has been able to establish the ways of human behaviour that incite the development of self and they are: affiliation versus autonomy seeking, and temporal change versus stability management. The self-concept is imminent, in the sense that the self features are uniquely defined by individuals across cultures and constitute a continuous process in individuals (Ahuvia, 2005).

2.4 Objects as Extended Self

Major classes of extended self are our bodies, values and character, individuals, environment, success and capabilities, and objects (Belk, 1988, Mittal, 2006). Our extended self is signified by “I” during expressions. Our objects with time become a part of us due to continuous interactions with which also helps to bring the inner self of the possessor out (Mittal, 2006). The composition of the extended self vary with the classes of the extended self considered to be of importance to the possessor (Mittal, 2006). To some possessor, the body is of high significance in the definition of extended self while to another, it is possessions that are of paramount importance in the definition of the extended self. According to Mittal (2006) it's not all merchandise that we consume that are called possessions, but could be sold because of its functionality and not all what is classified as possessions end up to be extended self of the possessor, however some merchandise helps to boost our extended self. For instance the love for diligent study to gain an academic certificate is because there is an aim of becoming successful, which is an aspect of the extended self. A possession becomes part of the extended self via the

following: 1) the choice of the possessor to distinct itself or be affiliated to a select few, 2) requires a huge investment to acquire, 3) involves a lot of attention, money and time, 4) emotional ties development through the use and companionship e.g. pets, 5) collections and 6) memories (Mittal, 2006).

2.5 Identity

Schau and Gilly (2003) describes identities as individual or affiliative, with the individual identities reflecting the distinctiveness and uniqueness of an individual from others such as having a distinct haircut while affiliative identities are placing of self within a group in so as to be associated with a social class, for instance belonging to a group of Mini car owners. Thorbjornsen et al. (2007) laid claims that objects are vital in the expression of our identities as shown in the attitude towards and intents of usage of possessions. Arnould and Thompson (2005) argued that the marketplace is the determining place where identity are been constructed and not the individual itself. Operational values of identities are those that are carried out by individuals or class of people without difficulty; however the ideal values are aspirations or difficult to continuously practice by individuals or social class (Schau and Gilly, 2003). Thorbjornsen et al. (2007) pointed out that identity expressiveness is an operational concept of possessions which helps in establishing the role and identity of the possessor in the society.

2.6 Possessions and Identity

Objects ascribe power to its possessor, this power wanes when the identity attached to this object is gradually lost through development. For example to be in possession of a sword and shield in the Roman era depicted status symbol of a warrior and ascribed power to its possessor however in the present time sword will not mean power (except for those in martial art) but weakness considering the level of sophistication in weaponry in the 21st century. Consumers that seek social-image and identification tend to engage in status symbol acquisitions (Xu, 2008).

2.7 Loss of Possessions

The possessor of a possession may no longer be in possession of their valued object as result of theft, disaster, loss and sale. The possessions of high significance to the possessor when lost have a great impact on its owner. According to Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) loss of object can affect the essence of life to its possessor as (s)he has grown an attachment with the object. The loss of a possession leads to the loss of the uniqueness it provides for the possessor, and brings about sadness and dejection (Belk, 1988). Some possessions are lost when there is a need to shed the unwanted self and memories that don't want to be remembered, detachment from a possession that was formerly "me" but no longer "me" involves an emotional process but best done by physical detachment through sale to a stranger (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005).

Possessions are acquired by individuals at different points has various meanings, which could be either public or private. These meanings are developed and frequently modified at different developmental stage of the possessor. As humans we develop relationships with our possession to reflect who we are either publicly or privately. Of note, is that no individual is left out of the attachment to possessions as it is a reflection of our self or serves as an identity which is carried out knowingly or unknowingly. Attachments to possessions are spurred as a result of its utility, appearance or features of the possession. Possessions help in determining the self concept and identity creation of its possessor. The loss of possession brings about emotional trauma to the owner, however the voluntary loss of possessions are as a reason of trying to cut ties with the past or memories.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approaches

When embarking on a research, the approach taken is very important in order to validate subsequent results from such a research. Research approaches are generally classified into positivism and interpretive with each having dissimilar philosophical suppositions (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). In the view of a positivist, the reality of a position is single, and objective is framed from distinct elements, in contrast to this, the interpretivists view reality as a multiple construct which is developed from unique and shared cultural encounters (Pachauri, 2002). This research on object person relationships with the iPhone will take the form of interpretivism since it is an exploratory study of consumers' behaviour that requires the deep involvement of the researcher.

Quantitative methods are basically reported in numeric values, while qualitative methods of research are reported in rich descriptive form (White, 2000, Saunders, 2009, Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The most prominent difference between qualitative and quantitative method of research is the treatment of its analysis, as quantitative formulates and determine the hypothesis, it also tries to find out relationships between hypothesis before actual research is carried out, while qualitative is more of finding and formulating the hypothesis during the process of research (McCracken, 1988). This research of person-object relationships with the iPhone, a qualitative research method will be employed as this will enable an exploration of the research.

3.2 Interviews

Qualitative interview could be in the form of a structured, non-structured, semi-structured interview aimed at research objectives (Mason, 2002). In conducting this research the long interview method as prescribed by McCracken (1988) will be employed.

Interview method was implemented because it gives the participant the opportunity to fully express themselves in their own words. The interview procedure entails face-to-face interaction that gives the interviewee the opportunity to express his/her feelings in a unique way without the influence of other interviewees, with the interviewer taking note of expressions and gestures during the interview. The interview was an in-depth unstructured interview with the process taking between forty-five to sixty minutes of interaction. In conducting this interview, fifty individuals of different backgrounds were interviewed.

3.3 Sampling Method

The sampling approach adopted for this research is that of convenience. Convenience sample takes the form in which informants are selected haphazardly according to research interest and availability (Gelo, 2008). The sample population ranged from academicians, students and professionals with different age ranges. The sampling populations used in the design of this research were all users of the iPhone and have been in possession of it for the past six months as they will have been able to develop a relationship with their possessions over this period.

3.4 Data Collection and Storage

The interview was recorded in audio tapes via the use of a tape recorder. Verbatim transcription of the recorded tapes of interview were saved in a word document on the computer and used as the primary data for this consumer research. Primary data are data collected purposefully for the research being conducted (Saunders, 2009). The interviews were conducted at place of study of the various interviewees with a prior appointment booked earlier.

4. Data Analysis & Discussions

Data collected was analyzed according to McCracken (1988) analytic proposition. The transcripts of each interview were categorized. Categorization entails the classification of data in relation to the known concepts/theories. The data collected will be analyzed using the hermeneutic approach. Hermeneutic involves the interpretation of findings in the understanding of the researcher through the pre-understanding developed as a result of literature read relating to the topic of research. The interviews conducted were related to the consumption narratives of possessors of Apple iPhone to help explore the research objectives. The structure of analyzing this data spurs from categorization of data through themes identified from interviews conducted. The analysis starts from the emic analysis of data i.e. the categorized phrases/statements of the interviewees relating to identified themes and further analyzed using the etic understanding of a researcher, a concept that reveals what the researcher understands by phrases/statements made by the interviewees and gives it a meaning according to his knowledge and perception of the statements of interviewees.

This research is of the aim to understand the dynamics of person-object relationships. In the ensuing data collected for this research various horizon was connected through the themes developed in analysing the data. The relationships with objects do not start all of a sudden; it is a gradual process as this will be made clearer during the discussion. The purpose of acquisition of the iPhone varies across the respondents but they all agree on the initial meaning the iPhone had to them. The meaning was first constructed from a public meaning as a result of advertisement and the society as a whole (Richins, 1994b). However the purpose of acquisition is developed from appearance, utility and status symbol consumption (Tian and McKenzie, 2001). The thematic view of love of aesthetic is used to express the reasons for which the iPhone is being consumed as the various views of the respondents tried to express this. The value placed on the possessions is tied to its functionality and uses it provides to its possessor (Mittal, 2006). Most respondents valued the iPhone based on what it can help them achieve and uses it provides their owners. The uses were of different level and all respondent at least belong to one of the level considering their purpose of acquisition. The three levels observed from the interviews include the basic use of making calls and sending text messages, and a next step of browsing using the internet connection. Subsequent is the creation of a lifestyle from the use through the organisation of life activities such as paying bills and checking of bank statements. However this is not to say that it was solely based on uses as it was found out that some were for conspicuous consumption. The iPhone is available to all, based on the motive of consumption, could it be ostentatiousness or functionality or the mix of both. From the uses and functionality of the iPhone the various meaning of the interviewees have being formed (Mittal, 2006). As pointed out initially the consumption is formed from public meaning but for all it further goes on to have a private meaning after several encounters with the possession (Richins, 1994a). These private meaning have either being sacred in their expression by the interviewees or profane (Belk, 1988). Most of the respondents hold the possession as a scared object due to how they became an owner or as a result of the attachment developed through constant use. The

attachment is basically spurred by the feelings derived from owning the iPhone. It serves as a source of joy and excitement to their possessors. A relationship is formed as a result of the functions it can perform, the meanings it hold for the possessor especially when it is private and the satisfaction it can derive from owning this possession. Possessors through interviews are of the view that the possession are a reflection of their self or helps to create an identity, with emphasis on the possessors that were concerned in using the possession as a social class symbol which is just to cause an affiliative identity for owners (Keline et al., 1995).

4.1 The iPhone and Person Object Relationships

4.1.1 Meanings

This research has supported existing authors that have written about the consumer-object relationships. The study have been able to point out that the various meanings and uses possessors of the iPhone attach to their possessions. The meanings derived from the consumption of the iPhone are public meanings people have attached to the products via advertisements and the word of mouth. The public meanings are however taken a step further by possessors after they have had encounters with their iPhones, and then converted to a private meaning. Private meanings are spurred as a result of experience with and uses of the phone overtime. From the study it was found out that the source of this meanings are from the pleasure derived from the utility and appearance of the iPhone. During the research it was also found out that the purpose of consumption by individuals were essentially because of the need to create a social image or self enhancement which also supports Tian and McKenzie (2001) submissions on the purpose of acquiring possessions.

4.1.2 Sacred Meanings

Private meanings are either profane or sacred when it relates to objects; iPhone as the object of investigation in this research came out to be a sacred object to all respondents for some core reasons which support Belk (1988) reasons for attaching sacred meanings to objects. How it was acquired, the expensive nature of the item and the functionalities it provides to possessors contributes to the sacred meaning ascribed to it by possessors. The how of acquisition in this context refers to when the iPhone is given to possessors has gifts. The iPhone as gifts to recipients do carry a lot of weight and it is treasured for the kindness and love bestowed on them by donors which affirms the work of Belk (1988) on how objects are sacralised through gift giving. Sacred meaning attached to the iPhone is also brought about from the nature of the functions it provides for the possessors. The iPhone being a liberating object from the stress of life has made the owners to cherish it more and hold it in high esteem.

4.1.3 Object Attachments

The meanings attached to the possession have led to the developments of relationships with the iPhone. Sacred meanings have led to emotional ties between possessors and possession. Emotions of the iPhone of being a gift have made the users to be attached with it and developed relationships with it. The iPhone kind of reminds them of how precious they are to some people and how precious also some individuals are to them, hence there is a bond between the possessor and the iPhone. Private meanings of iPhone to its users have led to it being attached to by possessors. This clearly supports Mugge et al. (2008) which explains that emotions are sources of attachment to products due to the pleasure derived from having the possession and the point of pleasure derived from the iPhone been a gift is altruistic as pointed out in the aims of gift giving by donors in Sherry (1983). A relationship starts to evolve from continuous interactions with the device based on the functionality and services it provides. The liberating effect of the iPhone to the possessors cannot but lead to a relationship as it reduces stress and makes life much easier for possessors. On the overall, the reasons for attachment are based on the utility/functionality, appearance and sacredness of the possession which is synonymous with the findings of Mugge et al. (2008).

4.1.4 Motives

From findings in this research, the purposes of acquisition of the Apple iPhone were basically because of either utility and/ or identity construction. Acquisitions tied to utility were just on the functions iPhone can provide and how it could make tasks of life easier. The other purpose is for conspicuous consumption; because of the expensive nature of the iPhone possessors use it to create an elite social class status for themselves which supports Holt's (1998) view of objects being used as positional markers that distinguish people from the crowd. The status symbol nature of the possession is primarily for affiliation reasons in other to improve their social identity. The creation of elite social class from the consumption of the iPhone, however may not be a true status of the owners as possessors do acquire possessions that they are not qualified to be affiliated with due to their financial and economical circumstances. This group of class tends not to utilise the full benefits of the possession as they do not have the economic and financial power to do so. The research work has been able to establish that consumers form relationships with their products by virtue of the meanings tied to iPhone. The attachment is as a

result of the meanings they have been able to develop from the consumption of their possessions. Also possessions of the exquisite and costly nature are possessed for the construction of social identity by possessors. This finding supports the theories of extended self and identity as proposed by Belk (1988) and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981). The consumer-object relationship is a vital topic that needs further insight into as it sheds light on the post acquisition phase of possession acquisition. The post acquisition reasons of product have been found out from this study to change as the acquirer of possessions become conversant with its possession.

5. Conclusion & Recommendation

This study has been able to affirm with other authors in the consumer research that the meaning of a possession is constructed from the public. Public meaning develop as a result of affiliation or the utility it can provide or a mix of both reasons. The public meaning is taken a step further through the continuous interactions with the possessions to form a private meaning. Private meanings are developed as a result of the sacred ascriptions and pleasures derived from utility of the possessions. Relationships with the iPhone are formed from this private meanings constructed for the possession and it is seen as a part of self for the possessor. The purpose of acquisition iPhone is tied with identity construction and self concept development as identified from the study. It is of note to state that relationships with possessions with objects such as the iPhone gradually builds and it is not an immediate thing as it takes some time for acquirer to be accustomed to their possession. The key conclusions from this research through the findings are that object meanings are firstly obtained from the public and transformed to private as a result of continued interactions. These interactions have been found to elicit emotions that lead to a relationship irrespective of motives behind the consumption of the iPhone.

Existing theory states that not all objects are valued for the functional utility alone but other reasons beyond it. In the case of iPhone as a possession its value to owners is based on monetary values, utilities and memories that it provides. As found out in this study that all users of the iPhone are conscious of its expensive nature but may not want to portray it as a key reason of acquisition but it remains a fact that it is treasured because of its expensive nature. From the findings in this research it could serve as the bedrock for exploration of relationships, private and public meanings of object sphere of consumption. Also the public and private meaning is a significant factor in the development of consumption patterns of consumers and must be strongly considered in consumption behaviours.

This study has been able to support existing theories of various meanings of possession to possessors. Possessions are classified as either profane or sacred however the study discovered that for the iPhone it is considered sacred by all. This brings out a slight shift from the view of profanity and sacredness of possessions. Some possessions will be sacred to consumer possibly because of value and utility of such objects. This gives an insight to the fact that consumption behaviours of human are not stagnant and affected by societal and personal factors of consumers.

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Appendix

Sample of Prompts Used For the Conduct of Interviews

Theme 1: Consumer Possession

- Tell me about the possessions you own
- Tell me about the possessions you consider favourite
- Can you explain why you consider these possessions favourite?

Theme 2: iPhone

- Discuss with me your past experience with mobile phones
- Tell me about your mobile phone
- Tell me the reasons for acquiring the iPhone
- Discuss how you care for the iPhone

Theme 3: Uses

- Discuss the things you do on your phone
- Tell me what things you like about the iPhone
- Discuss with me your favourite apps on the iPhone
- What can you tell me about your experience with the iPhone since you have acquired it

Theme 4: Meanings

- What role does the iPhone have for you?
- Tell me the feelings you derive from owning an iPhone

Theme 5: Relationships

- How would you describe your use of the iPhone
- How would you describe your relationship with your iPhone
- Discuss how you engage with your iPhone
- Tell me about instances you forgot your phone

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