

An Exploratory Study on Consumer-Object Relationship of iPhone

Md Afnan Hossain

Lecturer, Southeast University, House # 64, Road # 18, Block # B, Banani, Dhaka - 1213, Bangladesh

Email: h.mdafnan@gmail.com

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 behavioral 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. 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

Most researches on consumer behavior 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 has it gives insight as to how objects possessed have help 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 animates 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). 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)

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 behavior 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. 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 (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005). 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' behavior 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). 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 & Sampling Method

In conducting this research the long interview method as prescribed by McCracken (1988) will be employed. 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.

4. Data Analysis

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. The emic meanings are

demonstrated in five key thematic concepts of love of aesthetics, liberation, conspicuous consumption, partnership and sacred gifts. These themes will be analysed using the categories earlier identified in the data and with the knowledge of the researcher.

4.1 Love of Aesthetics

The thematic expression explains the researcher's observation of the use of 'love' to qualify the significance of possessions to the possessors. The affectionate qualification by the possessors to their possession is due to the appearance and uses which is a source of satisfaction to the possessors. The things we express as what we love do have a significant impact in our lives and carries varied personal meanings to possessors, hence a need to explore the interpretation of love for aesthetics as expressed by interviewees.

Cherry: I will say I love the iPhone any way because I downloaded some music from the net, I can use the map navigator, I can take pictures at least clear pictures, I can download pictures from the net into the phone and other things..... I like the iPhone, that is the main reason why am using it as my main phone.

Cherry as a person expresses love for the iPhone due to the fact that it can meet basically all the needs she requires the phone to. The word love is an expression of contentment and satisfaction from services enjoyed from the iPhone. Also found during discussions with Cherry is that she loves acquiring gadgets and not ordinary gadgets. Similarly, Ahuvia (2005) found out that love expressed about objects is tied to pleasure and personal value as indicated by Cherry and it is used for the construction of identity, the reason of her not acquiring ordinary gadgets.

Interviewer: That means you more like avid, you love (cuts in)

Cherry: phones

Interviewer: You love phones

Cherry: Yea, good ones (laughs)

Interviewer: What do you consider as good ones?

Cherry: Like the iPhone and the Blackberry that has features you can utilise any where, any time at least with the internet on the iPhone you can check your mail anywhere, you can download things you can do any thing with your iPhone on the go.

The aforementioned extract emanates from curiosity of the interviewer on the essence of having three phones as explained earlier by respondent and from the chat it was found out that Cherry loves gadget especially the sophisticated ones. She laid emphasises on the fact that the phones she must have must be good ones and made it clear the reasons by mentioning the utility as probably a key reason for acquisition. This thematic concept is echoed in another view by another interviewee putting into consideration the appearance of the iPhone.

Sam: First of all, the design is attracting people like us the young generation. It is like a standard for your life. You know it is a fashion you have to follow, what the fashion is going to be it is just like being a fashion follower and it is related to like going out with a computer everywhere. It's just like a PDA for me. I check my email connect to the wireless everywhere and search internet something like that, and music, the most important part (laughs). Relate it to the cell phone and the iPod you might have a Nokia and a Samsung, but they do not have an iPod. It is like having two in one when it comes to the iPhone. It is quite attractive.

The likeness for this phone developed by Sam is basically because of the attractiveness of the phone via the design and appearance. A key thing from the quote above is that as a youth Sam believes it is important to have gadgets that are sophisticated to allow him to be trendy and smart in the eyes of his peers. Although his primary motive of consumption of iPhone based on this statement is not tied on the appearance alone, as it was revealed during the interview but apparently he likes sophistication. The meaning of the phone to Sam seems to have been derived from the public, with him putting emphasis on being a fashion follower, meaning his consumption is tied to what the perception of the public is, concerning his possession. As suggested by Richins (1994a) the value of possessions could be tied to its appearance/beauty which makes possessors have sensory emotions which is beyond the established impression of aesthetics due to the public meaning attached to the possession, affirming the view of the interviewee.

Edward: I actually hate to think I have used another thing apart from the iPhone, seriously, well I have come to have it for more than a year now. I started using mobile phones from about 1995 that was my first engagement with mobile phones the old Ericssons and the old Nokia but I tell you what, all those memories have long being banished ever since I acquired this baby the iPhone. I even hate to think anyone uses any other thing apart from the iPhone those are not phones those are just toys. That is a phone (refers to the iPhone).....I do like my gadgets and I thought I was a gismo fan. That is what they call us gismos small little gadgets here and there.....

The likeness developed for iPhone by Edward is resulting from a comparison of all other phones it has consumed in the past which shows a great disparity in what those phones can do compared to iPhone. He even tagged the

other phones as ‘toys’ showing that its worth cannot be comparable with the iPhone which he tagged as ‘baby’ giving it a caring worth and with a feeling of banishing thoughts of being in possession of any other thing from the iPhone and similar to Patterson and O’Malley (2006) findings that consumers anthropomorphise possessions as an indication that they have a relationship with their possessions from the meanings they project on the objects. This indicates that he likes the iPhone more than any other phones he might have used or is still using basically.

Paul: I love gadgets, I love gadgets that have functionalities that other phones do not have. The former phone I was using was the Nokia 5800 but then when I compared the features iPhone has and there are some Nokia didn’t have I now said let me give iPhone, a trial.

Paul’s love for gadget is out of the interest of functionalities the phone is able to provide when considered to what the initial phone in his possession had. Functionality is a key motivating factor for the acquisition of gadget when it relates to Paul’s love of iPhone. Evident during interactions with Paul revealed that its consumption is based on what the phone can do and its appearance is of importance also.

4.2 Liberation

Technology has brought about the opportunity to be free from the hassles of life. The iPhone has been able to create an air of liberty, control and efficiency for the interviewees (Mick and Fournier, 1998). Liberation is expressed from all the testimonies of the interviewees, however not all are expressed in the same fashion, as how it functions as a liberating factor differ with respondents depending on the level of interactions engaged with the iPhone.

Edward: Put it this way it is cheating life iPhone cheats life.....It cheats life, you are supposed to go through things and then you get your finger burned but with the iPhone you do not need to actually get burned, it tells you that there is fire there. You do not really need to get your hands burned, so as for me it makes life a hundreds times far easy.....

“.....all that social stress, carrying work load from work to home you do not settle because you are literally carrying the burden from work to home because you have not completed your tasks but with the iPhone it brings everything into one simplistic world you can do things as to when you are free or when you have the opportunity. It sort of like you again, you become a free bird you can do things everywhere, anywhere and whatever you feel like.”

From the above statements iPhone has being classified as an instrument that helps in the everyday completion of tasks with ease. Edward use a metaphor of it being ‘a cheater of life’ to qualify what the functions of iPhone can do by its possessors. It has made what seems to be impossible task before now possible and what was considered as a burden has been made easy just by the touch of a finger. The iPhone features have contributed immensely to the simplicity of life of its owners. Other interviewees also support the view of it easing the stress out of life.

Charles: I think it is a very good assistant if you know how to use it. It carries the main role of anything you want to do; there is an application for you to do it. It is a top notch assistant.

For this respondent he classifies the iPhone as the possession that helps in carrying out the day to day activities, a supporter of human activity that allows the smooth running of life. The iPhone to all the interviewees has made what seemed to be difficult tasks simple and for this mere fact all the respondents appreciate the liberation it has provided them. Mick and Fournier (1998) stated that technology offered freedom and skilfulness with respect to time and task management, which supports the views of all respondents of interviews conducted.

Richard: Now I have a particular application here where by any where I am in the UK all I just need to do is to put where am I starting from where am I ending and click on it and it tells me how to navigate my way to the place of which the same thing is on the TFL by then you can be able to see your departure time and your arrival time. It makes things convenient for you.....

The life of ease is described by the using the word ‘convenient’. To this interviewee being able to get directions on travels and finding out what routes to take to get to his destination has brought ease to life. He needs not fret and stress about wherever he is going so far the iPhone is on him. Another view term life without the iPhone has ‘hardship’.

Edward: I mean look at it this way, back thousands years ago there where no cars can you imagine now travelling from UEL to Stratford on a horse or camel how long will it take you even worse still walking you can’t imagine. It is too hard so now, much as the cars where not there you can imagine how they managed, life must have been too hard it is not a luxury any more it is a necessity. How will you survive it, you will survive but through hardship but I don’t see you living in any kind of advantage.

All the views of the interviewees sums up to be that the iPhone has been an instrument of making somewhat difficult activities and tasks simple to achieve through the power of the device. Even the one that felt it was somehow complex in its operations accept that life is made a lot easier through what the iPhone can achieve and it was referred to as ‘small but mighty’. It has made the incompetence of man in achieving target and meeting

demands to be reduced through its functionality.

4.3 Conspicuous Consumption

Consumption has different motives behind it and it is all dependent on the possessors' motive on what significance the possession hold in their everyday activity. During the conduct of the interview conspicuous reasons for consuming was a significant theme that emerged. Conspicuous consumption in the first place is tied to showing the prowess and exclusive right of human dignity most especially when the possessions are worth having. The most important reason of consuming for the purpose of conspicuousness is to show the public that we are able to belong to a certain class.

Cherry: The major reason for in fact let me say the truth was for the 'effizy' (a Nigerian slang for 'showing off') not for the calling sake it is just for the 'effizy' of which its like this girl is using an iPhone. Do you know what it means for her to use an iPhone do you know how much it costs and everything people were like saying, that you of all people, you must be a rich girl you must be [that] but the secondary is to make calls

Interviewer: the use for it back then was just for like (cuts in).....

Cherry: the initial reason why I wanted iPhone why I really wanted the iPhone was for effizy.

Interviewer: you wanted to be in a class

Cherry: I wanted people to know that she is using an iPhone because back then iPhone was very costly unlike now and you could count the number of people that was using iPhone back then in Nigeria.

The interviewee's purpose of acquisition of the iPhone was to use it has status symbol construction, a feeling of being ascribed as a 'rich' individual since the public is aware of the fact that it is an expensive possession. Veblen (2000) described conspicuous consumption as an attempt where reputations of individuals are evaluated by symbolic consumption of goods. Although the status the interviewee is reflecting to the public might not be the true status of her identity but to the public a social class of belonging to the elite is been portrayed by being in possession of an iPhone as also suggested Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) in their submission of status symbol creation. Same interviewee was able to point out that, consumption was not based on the affordability of the possession but purely for identity construction which is also supported by some of the interviewees and reflective of Xu (2008) findings on materialism and public self-consciousness.

Cherry: I was just a student I cant afford to use my pocket money to buy an iphone and back then in Nigeria it was very costly so except may be you are working and you are earning a good salary that is when you can afford the iPhone, left for me even up till now I wont have dreamt of having an iPhone.

"I have being guiding the iPhone because I know I cannot afford it on my own expect when I start working"

The iPhone as a possession, based on the respondent's view is classified as an expensive item but which is needed for a social status construction by the interviewee, the main reason for acquisition by the respondent. The main reason for the choice of the iPhone was based on trying to form a counter conformity in her acquisition similar to Tian and McKenzie (2001) findings on the purpose of acquisition of possessions.

Sam: You know it is expensive I need to use it as long as it is expensive.

Even though Sam feels the use of the possession that it could be a difficult item to navigate through, his consumption is based on reasons beyond the capabilities of the possession but rather on social status consumption. The statements ascribed to Sam in the thematic illustration of love of aesthetics, also carries a meaning of consumption based on the fact the he follows brands that gives him class and he is not willing to relinquish his possession so far it meets that obligation of status creation.

4.4 Partnership

This thematic view is concerned with the relationship developed by owners of the iPhone over time as a consequence of its familiarity with their iPhones. The relationship helps to define the self concept of the possessors, through the attachment of possessor with their iPhone. Observed from the interviewees is that, the relationship occurs gradually and with varying degree with the reasons for relationship formation is developed from the meaning possessors have for their possession.

Edward: If I forget it I make sure that am not without it any thing longer than 10 hours because you basically impaired apart from it being a mobile phone everything I do is on the iPhone. I set my reminders my tasks so the moment I forget it at home the next day am lost because I don't have a log of what to do it sorts have brainwashed me it has impaired my think straight mode, where by I used to think independently and I used to think on the go and some of the things I used to remember and some I used to forget. The I phone gives you that capacity to sort of like use its brain to sort of like store everything in there so just keeps on flashing on every now and then with notifies that says call this and

that and comes up with time and prompts you at that time. It has functionalities that are second to none without this it I will feel lost or I will be crawling through the day. There has being occasion I forgot it that I paid a hard price for it and I have done all possible to be united with my baby.

Edward like every other interviewee shows that he has a kind of relationship with his possession. In his terms, he described the feelings of not being with the iPhone as he being 'lost', 'impaired', 'brainwashed' and 'crawling'. These terms are strong idioms of expressing passion for one's possession, a feeling of being out of this world if not with the iPhone.

Edward: Yea I call it my baby this is my baby.

Interviewer: Baby in the sense of?

Edward: I tell you what to show you that it doesn't cry But I think the only thing Apple has failed to do is to enable the iPhone to give birth or to conceive it is a woman, it's man, it's a child, it's a baby, it's an old woman, it's an old man. It's a best friend in so many ways its basically it's a non living, living thing put it that was yea the only thing Apple failed to do is to make the iPhone give birth to babies. It is a baby.

The overarching word for the expression of his passion is the term 'best friend'. The iPhone is ascribed a relationship of a living thing and friendship. The possession in the view of this respondent is that it is a companion that they can not do away with. There is a sense of partnership with 'the possessor' and 'the possession' which is supported by Fournier (1998) that consumers form partners with their brands. There is a relationship of it being a part of the possessor as it kind of shows a reflection of who the possessor is and what qualities he attributes the to iPhone as a possession (Belk, 1988). The possessors attach a sacred meaning to their phones as it carries a special meaning to them considering the statements made above.

Cherry: I don't want it to get lost I don't want any scratch on it that is why I have this transparent casing at least it protect it even if it falls down it protects the glass from breaking and everything and I don't give it out any how.

"we are inseparable I can not go out without my iPhone..... I can never ever forget it, I will not any way if am going out my iPhone is the first thing, if I am coming to the library I can forget my ID card but I will never forget my phone....."

Basically from her point of view, the possession needs protection due to the attachment she derives from it. She has established a relationship with the iPhone and it is of important value to its possessor. This possession through its possessor is shown a caring attitude via protection and seen as a precious item that needs preservation from destruction and damage. The companionship is generated from attitudes of care for the possession, a show of concern for its well being. Every other thing is less important so far the possession is with her it has become a part of her that she feels incomplete when not in her possession. Cherry in her view sees the iPhone as a part of her that can not be forgotten.

Charles: uhn every time it keeps dropping it like it damages my soul man

Interviewer: damages your soul

Response: damages my soul, when you have a fine phone and the phone is now looking ugly because it has all these scratches I think it devalues the phone.....

For Charles, the relationship is emotional it hurts in his feelings whenever the phone falls or is being impinged on, because of the fear that it might lose its value and capabilities (Mugge et al., 2008). The 'soul' part of his reaction to damages that could threaten the phone is subsequent to the fact that a relationship has been established over the course of the period of acquisition and a sacred value has been placed on the product.

Edward: I will call it my outer ego meaning my other self. Its so attached to me I think when for when I cry it cries because I can't do without it I am always in touch with it you know I cant live without it basically it just makes life a lot easy a lot easy so I am really attached to it on a personal level I think its just sort of like a small little remote control to my world I mean the iPhone I literally look at the world in front me.

This above response is closely related to Cherry's response of her being attached to her possession. He sees a reflection of who he is, what he wants to be and what he would like to achieve, in what could be termed his self being exhibited in the iPhone, which further strengthens the findings of Belk (1988). Edward feels that him and the iPhone are indiscrete in their relationship and acted it in his enthusiasm when he was describing his relationship with it as a close, to the extent of taking it along to the bathroom with him. He seems to be obsessed in his consumption of the iPhone from his enthusiasm.

Charles: No I wont say it is a part of me but it enhances but I will say it enhances what is already in me take for example I know I have to spend time with God so I want to read my bible and help my spiritual growth.....

Charles in his view sees the iPhone as an instrument of improving his inner being helping to show his capability and skills (Belk 1988). The iPhone gives his life a more defined meaning, a meaning special to him alone that

cannot be understood by other people. In Charles' view he tries to use religion as a context not to show tendency of materialism but the overall submission is that in a way he feels there is a self concept development from the ownership of the iPhone.

4.5 Sacred Gifts

Gifts are either profane or sacred to the possessor depending on the experience. The sacred meanings attached to gifts are not same, as the degree is dependent on the circumstance of acquisition. Sacred objects are not treated as ordinary, but rather given special handling and care. Possessions/gifts ascribed sacredness are expressed via the rituals and emotions subscribed to the objects. The testimonies of some of the respondents brought out the sacredness of their iPhone most especially when it was presented to them as gifts.

Cherry: uhn because I saw it with my brother any way, he watches movies, he listen to songs with it so I was like I want the iPhone initially he refused but when I persisted he now gave it to me I was like wow I am having an iPhone now so I can watch movies (smiles), listen to music with it and everything. I was happy owning an iPhone

"It reminds me of my brother since he travelled I have not seen him that is why I have being guiding the iPhone....."

Cherry's testimony of sacredness have to be shown by explaining how she became the owner of an iPhone so as to give it a clear picture of its conversion from profane to sacred object as the gift became a connection between the giver and the receiver (Belk 1988). The consumption started as a public meaning of the phone and the moment it was acquired the meaning changed with time because of the circumstances that surrounded the acquisition. The possession has come to be a reminder of memories and it now holds a sacred meaning to the possessor, the more reason it is being guarded jealously. This gift is a source of joy that the possessor will forever want to keep the memories of (Richins, 1994a).

Paul: I saw a documentary on it and the features it has though this iPhone was a gift by my dad? He travelled out and he said what should I buy for you when am coming and I said an iPhone and he asked what an iPhone was and I told him he should go to any store and ask for the iPhone and he told me he will call me back he went and called back and said it was dam expensive and that he was not going to buy the iPhone that I should pick something else after pressurising and convincing him he now said he was going to buy me the iPhone and because of that I love the phone because it is a gift. Because it is not a gift on my birthday or something but because I wanted it and he bought it for me

"the memories are just like oh my dad is caring, because I know other fathers or mothers will say it is expensive and why should I go to that far to go and buy it and I feel he his caring and he also new I wanted it and he came back with it"

The gift of iPhone to this respondent generates memories of being loved by his dad. The possession is held in high esteem as a respect for the care shown to him. Like the others the meaning started from a public meaning before it became sacred to the respondent. But to some it is not because it was a gift but it is compared as memories encountered when a gift is bought on a trip.

Charles: yes I had this em it's a basketball plague by a guy called Cobby Bryant who is my favourite basketballer when I was like 12 or 11 I save a lot of my pocket money when we went on holiday to buy it like \$300 to by it by then it was like a lot of money so when I eventually bought it I carried it around until like two years ago I placed it in the storage I thought it was safe in that storage all of a sudden I couldn't find it again it really pissed me off. That is the kind of thing I see my iPhone as.

The iPhone carries a sacred meaning to this possessor considering the comparison of it with a revered gift that he bought on a trip to the US. It holds a place in his heart that no one but the possessor only understands and he feels sense of dejection when is revered possessions are lost. This is a pointer that there is a person-object relationship with the possession. Sherry (1983) described that relationship formed with gifts are sequel to the value placed on such gifts, and like all the donors of the gift in this case attempted the altruistic exchange of gifts with their recipients.

5. Discussion

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 sacred 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).

5.1 The iPhone and Person object Relationships

5.1.1 Meanings

This research has supported existing authors that have written about the consumer-object relationships. The study has 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.

5.1.2 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.

5.1.3 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).

5.1.4 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.

6. 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.

The product uniqueness is a key point which marketers of the iPhone should leverage on since there seems to be no product in its category that can beat it to its sophistication, hence a key reasons for identity seekers to sort after. Marketers should also explore the sacredness of the iPhone to consumers and use it during gift giving seasons, by illustrating the altruistic pleasure derived by recipients to potential donors. By painting a picture of the iPhone as the ultimate gift that any one can ever wish for to cement relationship due to its expensive nature, utility and appearance. iPhone leadership has to be continually maintained in the world smart phones hence a need for Apple Inc. to continually improve on its functionality and aesthetics of the product so that competitor would not be able to take away its market share. The more pleasure derived the more relationship it will garner from possessors of the iPhone. Apple Inc. should continually update users on the developments on the products using personalised mediums of communication to the possessors. This boosts the self esteem of users and strengthens loyalty to products

References

- Ahuvia, A.C. (2005) 'Beyond the extended self: love objects and consumers' identity narratives'. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 32(1), pp. 171- 184.
- Arnould, E. J. and Thompson, C.J. (2005) 'Consumer culture theory (CCT): twenty years of research'. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 23(4), pp.868- 882.
- Ball, A.D. and Tasaki, L.H. (1992) 'The role and the measurement of attachment in consumer behaviour'. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. 1(2), pp.155-172.
- Belk, R.W. (1988) 'Possession and the extended self'. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 15(2), pp.139-168.
- Cleary, P.J. (2008) 'The Apple cat and the fanboy Mouse: Unlocking the Apple iPhone'.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. and Rochberg-Halton, E. (1981) *The meaning of things: domestic symbols and self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (2000) *Handbook of qualitative research* 2nd ed. London: Sage.

- Fournier, S. (1998) 'Consumers and their brand: developing relationship theory in consumer researcher' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24(4), pp.343-373.
- Gelo, O. (2008) 'Quantitative and qualitative research: beyond the debate' *Integrative Psychology and Behavioural Science*. 42(3), pp.266-290.
- Holt, D.B. (1998) 'Does cultural capital structure American consumption?' *Journal of Consumer Research*. 25(1), pp.1-25.
- Hsu, F.L.K (1985) 'The self in cross-cultural perspective', in Marsella, K. et al. (eds) *Culture and self: Asian and Western Perspectives*. New York: Tavistock, pp.24-55.
- Hudson, L.A. and Ozanne, J.L. (1988) 'Alternative ways of seeking knowledge in consumer research' *Journal of Consumer Research*. 14(4), pp.508-512.
- Kleine, S.S. and Baker, S.M. (2004) 'An integrative review of possession attachment', *Academy of Marketing Science Review*, 2004(1), pp.1-35.
- Kleine, S.S. et al. (1995) 'How is a possession "me" or not "me"? characterising types and antecedents of material possession attachment' *Journal of Consumer Research*. 22(3), pp.327- 343.
- Lastovicka, J.L. and Fernandez, K.V. (2005) 'Three paths to disposition: the movement of meaningful possession to strangers' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), pp.813-824.
- Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative researching* 2nd ed. London: SAGE.
- McCracken, G. (1988) *The long interview* London: SAGE.
- Mick, D.G. and Fournier, S. (1998) 'Paradoxes of technology: consumer cognisance, emotions, and coping strategies' *Journal of Consumer Research*. 25(), pp. 123-143.
- Mittal, B. (2006) 'I, me and mine – how products become consumers' extended-selves' *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 5(6), pp.550-562.
- Mugge, R. et al. (2008) 'Product attachment and satisfaction: the effects of pleasure and memories' *European Advances in Consumer Research*, 8, pp.325- 331.
- Pachauri, M. (2002) 'Consumer behaviour literature review' *Marketing Review*. 2(3), pp.319-355.
- Patterson, M. and O'Malley, L. (2006) 'Brands, consumers and relationships: a review' *Irish Marketing Review*. 18(2), pp.10-20.
- Piron, F. (2006) 'China's changing culture: rural and urban consumers' favourite things'.
- Ravi, L. (2009) 'Apple iPhone price cut: is it a right strategy?' *ICFAI Journal of International Business*. 4(1), pp.46-58.
- Richins, M.L. (1994a) 'Valuing things: the public and private meanings of possessions' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(3), pp.504-521.
- Richins, M.L. (1994b) 'Special possessions and the expression of material values' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(3), pp.522-533.
- Saunders, M. (2009) *Researcher methods for business students*. 5th ed. London: Prentice Hall.
- Schau, H.J and Gilly, M.C. (2003) 'We are what we post ? self-presentation in personal web space' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(3), pp.385- 403.
- Sherry, J.F., Jr. (1983) 'Gift giving in anthropological perspective' *Journal of Consumer Research*. 10(2), pp. 157-168.
- Smith, J.R. et al. (2008) 'The attitude-behaviour relationship in consumer conduct: the role of norms, past behaviour, and self-identity' *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 148(3), pp.311-333.
- Thorbjornsen, H. et al. (2007) ' "This is who I am": identity expressiveness and the theory of planned behaviour' *Psychology and Marketing*, 24 (9), pp.763-785.
- Tian, K.T. and McKenzie, K. (2001) 'The long-term predictive validity of the consumers' needs for uniqueness scale' *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 10(3), pp.171-193.
- Wallendorf, M and Arnould, E.J. (1988) ' "My favourite things": a cross-cultural inquiry into objects attachment, possessiveness, and social linkage' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14(4), pp. 531-546.
- White, B. (2000) *Dissertation skills: for business and management students*. London: Thomson.
- Xu, Y. (2008) 'The influence of public self-consciousness and materialism on young consumers' compulsive buying'. *Young Consumers*. 9(1), pp.37-48.

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

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Academic conference: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/upcoming-conferences-call-for-paper/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

