



Social behavior and brand devotion among iPhone innovators

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ABSTRACT

Convergence of communication technologies and innovative product features are expanding the markets for technological products and services. Prior literature on technology acceptance and use has focused on utilitarian belief factors as predictors of rational adoption decisions and subsequent user behavior. This presupposes that consumers' intentions to use technology are based on functional or utilitarian needs. Using netnographic evidence on iPhone usage, this study suggests that innovative consumers adopt and use new technology for not just utilitarian but also for experiential outcomes. The study presents an interpretive analysis of the consumption behavior of very early iPhone users. Apple introduced iPhone as a revolutionary mobile handset offering integrated features and converged services—a handheld computer-cum-phone with a touch-screen web browser, a music player, an organizer, a note-taker, and a camera. This revolutionary product opened up new possibilities to meld functional tasks, hedonism, and social signaling. The study suggests that even utilitarian users have hedonic and social factors present in their consumption patterns.

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1. Introduction

In terms of technology adoption and usage, consumers consider both hedonic and utilitarian product attributes. Interactions of these attributes not only provide functional benefits but may also enhance enjoyment, and often provide ways to signal social status (Katz & Sugiyama, 2006). As Katz and Sugiyama (2006) conclude from their studies of mobile technology in USA and Japan, such technologies are increasingly serving multiple functions, ranging from enhancing individual functional utility to making fashion statements to relevant social groups.

Designers of innovative technological products, such as the iPhone, are well aware of the multiple benefits their products could provide to various user segments. For example, some of the design elements may be performance enhancing, resulting in greater productivity, increased profitability, rising sales turnover, and lower production costs for the users; while other design elements may reduce support and service costs, offer a higher degree of customer satisfaction, and create loyal customers (Gemser, Jacobs, & Cate, 2006).

An important and emergent design factor – very evident in iPhone and the imitative products that followed it – pertains to haptic information, or information gained through touch by hands.

Consumers use their hands to explore and evaluate products in terms of material properties before ultimately making a purchase (Peck & Childers, 2003). The haptic aspects of the iPhone were promoted heavily – in seductive and hedonic terms – in the American television commercials preceding the launch of the iPhone.

As an innovative technological product, the iPhone utilized all these factors to trigger consumer frenzy in the launch period—with long lines snaking outside the stores through the night prior to the launch date. In the very early phase, the iPhone reached two general kinds of consumers: (1) devoted consumers (the Apple acolytes), whose loyalty to the brand is so intense that it survives poor product performance, scandal, bad publicity, high prices, and absence of promotional efforts (Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004) and (2) social users who use mobile technologies as tools to create relationships among technology, body, and social roles (Katz & Sugiyama, 2006) and engage in rhetoric and “meaning-making” that occur via social interaction among innovative early users (as well as late users and non-users).

In the case of iPhone, integration of utilitarian and hedonic factors facilitated the seamless delivery of convergent services in ways that had not been possible in the pre-iPhone era. Heath and Soll (1996) found that when a given expense could be assigned to multiple categories, people might have some leeway for assignment of some of their expenditures to hedonic categories. This permits consumption of such items in ways that satisfies short-term hedonic interests and skirts the budget constraints that would generally apply to major purchases.

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Table 1
Primary data for the netnographic research.

Name of website	EverythingiCafe (Apple's web forum about their products)
URL	http://www.everythingiphone.com , changed later to http://www.everythingicafe.com/
Dates during which the website was monitored	From September 08 to September 15, 2007
Total threads checked	5 threads about satisfaction, beauty, fashion and related discussions about the iPhone
Keywords searched	Awesome, fashion, useful, beautiful, pretty, quality

Using the context of Apple's iPhone, this paper focuses on the influence of hedonic versus utilitarian attributes on consumer's choices and brand justification. There are three sections that follow this introduction. First, the method used in this study is described briefly. Next, the ten key themes are extracted from qualitative interpretation of the netnographic data and are presented to explain consumer devotion towards the iPhone and social aspects of iPhone usage. The paper ends with Section 4 on the relevance of social factors in the marketing of technologically innovative, multifunctional, and symbolically powerful products.

2. Method

Using the Bass (1969) framework for analyzing adoption of new products in the technology sector, the iPhone was selected in this study because of its unique combination of innovative attributes and characteristics: a highly sought mobile technology device, new and cutting-edge technology, high degree of pre-launch anticipation, the great success in the market immediately after introduction, the high initial price point that signaled unique and high techno-social status of early adopters, and the intense media buzz around this technological innovation. The second half of 2007 offered a rare opportunity to track some of the post-adoption processes of this major multifunctional and symbolically powerful technological innovation.

The data for this study consisted of selected user postings from the web forum titled Everythingicafe.com, a website that offers iPhone/iPod fans a platform to communicate with others consumers who are passionate about such products (see Table 1). The researchers found that this forum was the central web for discussions for iPhone users, as confirmed by discussions with technology enthusiasts and the nearly 60,000 postings about the iPhone in less than three months after the product hit the market. About 30 pages of written postings about the iPhone – containing consumers' decisions, sentiments, expressions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and other expressions – formed the basis for the interpretations.

The data for this study came from five threads that contained keywords such as awesome, fashion, useful, beautiful, pretty and quality. The 155 comments were downloaded between September 8 and September 15, 2007. As shown in Table 2, the threads were chosen for their relevant content and unique postings of variously ranked members. Using social and hedonic literature (Katz & Sugiyama, 2006; Okada, 2005) the relevant threads chosen were based on preferences connected with consumers' desire.

Non-participant netnography was employed because it allows the researchers to capture the spontaneous flow of communication

among consumers, which contain “sufficient descriptive richness” (Kozinets, 2002).

Indirect member checks – off-the-forum communication with some members and perusing of their available profiles – provided some indicators of the type of posters at this forum. Posters to these threads were estimated to be approximately 70% men and 30% women, with ages from 16 to 50, and were very likely to be students or business people that like technology in their daily life.

Three researches made their contributions by analyzing the dataset individually, coding each important behavior presented in the text and creating a first categorization of technological consumer behavior by group to this specific technological product (Kozinets, 2002). After this first analysis the categorizations were compared and the main interpretations were separated to be defined by researches which different groups it had – like group themes – and how these groups were justifying their preferences for the product with different features but with same bundled need (Harris & Blair, 2006).

3. Key emergent themes

While the 30 pages of textual data offered multiple interpretative possibilities, for the purpose of this writing it was decided to extract from the dataset ten key themes based on their representative and repetitive response for different discussions. Using the entire text, no matter the threads, ten key themes were created analyzing which representative behavior was presented, and each one was inserted – along with the associated evidence – in a “Top-10 List” format. The idea behind such an approach was to blend consumer behavior insights with managerially relevant learning available from the early iPhone usage experience captured in the unique 2007 post-launch and still-euphoric setting. While the themes presented in this section are specific to the iPhone context, and even more narrowly to the forum and the threads studied, in later conceptual discussions connections and extensions are offered to the larger issues relating to the adoption processes for technologically innovative, multifunctional, and symbolically powerful products.

The article proposes that the influence of use increases with the hedonism and social aspect of usage from each new technology launched in the market. How much hedonic or social can be the product more used will be, because it will receive a new consumer target and it will excite users with multiple hedonic features. Fig. 1 shows the proposition based on hedonism and social user.

The identified themes present different iPhone usage experiences. The above matrix shows the behavior exhibited by the new iPhone users based on hedonistic appeal and devotion. Utilitarian users switched from other brands of mobile phones due to little

Table 2
Details of discussion threads about iPhone.

Serial number	Name of thread	Subject line	No. of unique posters	Total of postings	Word count
1	Fashion statement	So it's a great phone, but is it a 'fashion' phone?	4	4	242
2	Evaluating the iPhone	What's makin' you keep your iPhone?	27	38	3721
3	Bored with the features	A month and a half later. Anyone else bored of the iPhone?	48	64	4755
4	Utility vs. beautifulness	The iPhone is just a mediocre phone, albeit a pretty one	19	37	4707
5	Surprised with this device	This phone is friggin' awesome!!!!	10	12	339
Total			108	155	13764

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