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The role of aesthetic, cultural, utilitarian and branding factors in young Chinese consumers' repurchase intention of smartphone brands

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ABSTRACT

Despite the exponential growth of smartphone consumption, to date, very few studies have investigated the factors that influence consumers' repurchase intention of smartphone brands. China has become the world's largest consumer markets for smartphones, therefore understanding young Chinese consumers' repurchase intention in the smartphone market is of crucial importance to smartphone companies. A preliminary qualitative study based on 30 face-to-face interviews has led to the development of a new conceptual framework including aesthetic (design appeal), functional (perceived quality), brand value (brand popularity), social (subjective norm) and cultural influences (*mianzi*). The newly developed framework has been tested through partial least squares structural equation modeling with a sample of 321 young Chinese smartphone users. The results show that young Chinese customer's smartphone repurchase intention is mainly determined by *mianzi*, perceived quality, brand popularity, and design appeal. Furthermore, findings also highlight that subjective norm, perceived quality and design appeal affect Chinese people's *mianzi*.

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1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, smartphones appear to be viewed as a necessity for the majority of consumers across all dimensions of age, gender or education level (Persaud & Azhar, 2012). In the last few years, smartphone penetration keeps growing and in many countries time spent using smartphones now exceeds web usage on computers (Nielsen, 2014). Smartphones have become an integral part of the everyday life of many consumers both in developed and emerging countries. China's smartphone user base is already the largest in the world by far (totaling 521.7 million in 2014) and this figure is set to grow further (e-Marketer, 2014). Smartphones have become a life companion for many consumers who use them each day to perform a wide arrange of activities, such as checking emails, chatting with friends, browsing the internet, managing businesses, purchasing products and booking services, and so forth.

Despite the exponential growth of smartphone technology and its rapid adoption by vast numbers of consumers, to date, there is a paucity of research on the factors that influence consumer's

decision regarding smartphones (Kim, Chun, & Lee, 2014; Koo, Chung, & Kim, 2015). Existing theories adopted for explaining consumer behavior in relation to high-technology products such as smartphones mainly focus on consumer decisions to adopt those products (e.g. Joo & Sang, 2013; Kim et al., 2014; Park & Chen, 2007); however, research on continuance intention is still scant. The continuance or repurchase intention model explains usage behavior or continued use after the initial adoption of a technology (Bhattacharjee, 2001).

Smartphone technology seems to have reached a maturity level and the global smartphone market, which was once dominated by Samsung and Apple, is nowadays becoming populated by several competing Chinese brands offering similar smartphone models, such as Huawei, Xiaomi, Oppo, and ZTE. Thus at this stage of the market development it would be interesting to understand the factors driving consumers' intention to continue using the same smartphone brand. Additionally, research has demonstrated that technologies may not be only used to fulfil practical needs such as make a call or surf the internet, but also to satisfy hedonic needs (Melewar, Lim, & Petruzzellis, 2010) or to signal affiliation and timely technology adoption (Kim et al., 2014). Thus, consumer decisions regarding new technology may not only be driven by utilitarian and product considerations as prescribed by technology

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adoption models, but also hedonic factors such as design appeal of a smartphone, or factors such as the capacity of a brand to signal affiliation to specific groups.

The aim of the present study, therefore, is to address this gap in the literature by developing and testing a new conceptual framework which will be effective in explaining the factors that directly influence consumer repurchase intention of smartphone brands. Thus, this paper contributes to continuance intention theory of high-technology products in China with a focus on smartphone brands.

In view of the lack of research on this topic and the need to develop a new theoretical framework to explain consumer repurchase intention of smartphone brands, we employed a preliminary study using qualitative interviews with young Chinese consumers. The emerging framework was tested using Partial Least Square (PLS) with a sample of 321 young Chinese consumers.

There are several reasons to focus on the Chinese market and on young Chinese consumers: the Chinese market is the world's largest smartphone consumer market, in China there are already 500 million smartphone users and this number is expected to rise to 700 million in 2018 (e-Marketer, 2014). Understanding young consumers repurchase intention of smartphone is particularly important as they are considered as early adopters of mobile technology (Leung & Wei, 1999; Vishwanath & Goldhaber, 2003) and as such they are known to act as opinion leaders, which help trigger a critical mass of users of a technology (Rogers, 1995).

The study has important implications for smartphone companies' brand and R&D managers in that it offers important insights as to how to develop and market high-tech products such as smartphones in China and increase consumer's repurchase intentions.

The paper is structured as follows: the following section critically evaluates the theories used to investigate consumer's adoption of a smartphone. Next, the paper reviews the extant literature on continuance intention. Following this, we discuss the results of the preliminary study, which inform the hypothesis development. We then discussed the methods adopted for the main study, and then present the findings together with our analysis and discussion of the findings. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the study and future research directions are proposed while the limitations of the study are also recognized.

2. Literature review

2.1. Smartphones and technology adoption theories

A smartphone is more than a simple mobile phone in that it can also send and receive emails, connect to the internet and offer additional features such as a camera and substantial data storage capacity (Pitt, Parent, Junglas, Chan, & Spyropoulou, 2011). Smartphones are also able to process tactile information in the form of touch screens, are equipped with positioning systems such as GPS, and have created the market for downloadable mobile applications (Pitt et al., 2011). Overall, smartphones integrate mobile and computing technologies so that consumers can check and send emails, browse the internet, write documents, purchase products and services, engage in social media activities and much more.

Research has started to analyze several phenomena in the mobile phone industry such as the determinants of loyalty towards mobile communications service providers (Lai, Griffin, & Babin, 2009), the antecedents of consumer purchase intentions for mobile value-added services (Wang & Li, 2012), and consumer attitudes towards and acceptance of mobile advertising (Gao, Rohm, Sultan, & Pagani, 2013). Specifically, Lai et al. (2009) revealed that the major loyalty factors among Chinese customers of a

telecommunications firm are service quality, value, image, satisfaction; Wang and Li (2012) identified that mobile services personalization, identifiability, and perceived enjoyment are the major antecedents of purchase intentions for mobile value-added services. With regards to mobile advertising, Gao et al. (2013) showed that individual characteristics, namely innovativeness (positive relationship), risk avoidance (negative relationship), and personal attachment (marginally significant, positive relationship) influence customer attitude towards and acceptance of mobile advertising; while Jun and Lee (2007) indicated that mobility, convenience and multimedia service were positively related to attitudes toward mobile advertising.

Existing theories for explaining consumer behavior with high technology products mainly focus on consumer motivations to adopt a new technology. Examples of these theories include the TAM (Davis, 1989), the TRA (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), or the IDT (Rogers, 1995). These theories have been used extensively by scholars to predict consumer technology adoption behavior even in the context of smartphones (e.g. Chen, Yen, & Chen, 2009; Joo & Sang, 2013; Kim et al., 2014; Park & Chen, 2007). For instance, Park and Chen (2007) integrate IDT and TAM to explain the determinants of smartphone adoption by medical doctors and nurses, similarly Chen, Yen, and Chen (2009) use the same framework to investigate employee adoption of smartphones in a delivery service company, highlighting the importance of factors like self-efficacy and perceived ease of use on behavioral intention to use the technology. Joo and Sang (2013) also use TAM to measure the impact of factors such as perceived ease of use and usefulness (and their antecedents) on Korean consumers' intentions to use a smartphone.

TAM has been widely adopted to explain new technologies adoption through the influence of key factors such as ease of use and usefulness. However, Kim et al. (2014) research on smartphone adoption behavior among American college students found that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, namely the two pillars of TAM, did not predict smartphone adoption.

2.2. Continuance/repurchase intention theory

Continuance intention theory explains continued use or repurchase behavior after the initial adoption of a technology (Bhattacharjee, 2001). Continuance intention and repurchase intentions refer to the same concept (Bhattacharjee, 2001; Limayem, Hirt, & Cheung, 2007). Bhattacharjee (2001) introduced the Model of Information Systems (IS) Continuance by adapting Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) from marketing to the IS field to explain post-adoption behavior. The model assumes that the success of IS depends on continued use rather than first-time use and that "current acceptance models provide a limited explanation of, and may sometimes contradict, observed continuance behavior" (Bhattacharjee, 2001, p. 352). It is argued that after initial use, cognitive beliefs such as individual perceptions of system usefulness and satisfaction with it may change, leading to repeated behaviors or discontinued usage (Bhattacharjee, 2001; Koo et al., 2015; Limayem et al., 2007). These decisions are presumed to involve two inputs: expectations of benefits from future usage, such as the *usefulness* of the IT in task performance, and summative judgments of the outcomes of prior usage, namely the *user satisfaction* construct (Bhattacharjee, 2001).

Recently, the notion of continuance intention has gained increasing attention in a variety of research settings such as online banking (Bhattacharjee, 2001; Vatanasombut, Igbaria, Stylianou, & Rodgers, 2008), e-learning (Chiu, Chiu, & Chang, 2007; Lee, 2010; Roca & Gagné, 2008), blogging (Lu & Lee, 2012; Shiau & Luo, 2013; Tang, Tang, & Chiang, 2014), website (Chen & Lin, 2015; Lin,

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