

What Does the Mobile Phone Mean to Consumers? A Qualitative Study

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Very few studies have looked what smartphones represent to users. However, most of those studies only focused on the aspect of dependency and on young people (18 – 24) and very few researches have looked at adults. Hence, the purpose of this research is to determine what the mobile phone represents to adult users living in developed countries. To achieve this, this study will be based upon the symbolic representation theory. Results so far have shown that users tend to view their smartphone as a useful tool to communicate with friends. However, some have mentioned that their smartphone hindered their friendships.

Keywords: mobile phone, experience, symbolic representations, qualitative research, adult consumers

INTRODUCTION

The popularity of mobile devices, such as smartphones, have grown quickly since the early 1990s (Gesser, 2004; Van der Meulen & McCall, 2018). This increase in mobile phone ownership has become more pronounced over the last decade. In 2017, annual sales totalled 1,536,535.5 million for all models of smartphones (e.g., Samsung, Apple, Huawei) worldwide (Van der Meulen & McCall, 2018). Certain researchers (e.g., Cefrio, 2017) have emphasized the importance of smartphones in consumers' everyday lives and more particularly in terms of the consumption patterns of adults between 18 and 44 years old who have incomes over \$60,000 and who have college or university education.

Not only is there a significant increase in smartphone owners, but the growth of geolocation location-based advertising on mobile devices (Shieh & Hsieh, 2016) have made overall sales via mobile marketing or m-commerce boom by 40.3% in 2017 to reach \$1,357 billion, which represents 6% of total retail spending (Van der Meulen & McCall, 2018). As a result, mobile devices are constantly with users and are fully integrated into their consumption patterns beyond their personal communications (e.g., calls, texts), notably with younger generations who cannot do without these tools (Persaud & Azhar, 2012; Yudkin, 2012). Because of this omnipresence, in this article, I ask what, specifically, mobile phones mean to these consumers. Indeed, are consumers themselves aware of this?

The mobile phone is part of the daily life of many individuals. In fact, the number of smartphone users has been increasing for several years already (Bues, Steiner, Stafflage & Krafft, 2017; Gazley, Hunt & McLaren, 2015; Van der Meulen & McCall, 2018; Shieh & Hsieh, 2016; Csibi, Griffiths, Demetrovics & Szabo, 2019). In addition, mobile phones have added significant features in recent years, including the addition of GPS, which has made it possible to determine where consumers are geographically located (Gao, Rohm, Sultan, & Pagani, 2013). However, we can ask how consumers perceive the mobile phone which today makes it possible to do so many tasks.

Some studies have looked at the regular use of mobile phones and the consequences that this could have on its users. For instance, some authors have looked at the phenomenon of consumer dependence on mobile phones (Chimatapu, Jadhav, Ajinkya, 2015; Nikopopoulou & Gialamas, 2018; Mei, Chai, Wang, Ng, Ungvari & Xiang, 2018). Nevertheless, these authors looked at the aspect of addiction in their studies simply among students (e.g., high school students between 12 to 18 years old and university students between 19 to 24 years old) and not the entire population (Chimatapu, Jadhav, Ajinkya, 2015; Nikopopoulou & Gialamas, 2018; Mei et al. 2018). Studies have shown that young people use their phones mostly to interact with friends and that they are quite dependent on them (Bues *et al.*, 2017). However, most mobile phone users are people over 25 years old (Csibi *et al.*, 2019) and there are very few studies that have examined what the mobile phone represents for people living in developed countries other than that of undergraduate university students, who are mostly between 18 and 24 years old (Mei et al., 2018). Because of this omnipresence, in this article, I ask what, specifically, mobile phones mean to these consumers. Indeed, are consumers themselves aware of this?

RESEARCH PROBLEM

In an overall sense, my research problem builds on research that relates to marketing with the assistance of mobile devices and consumers' geolocation with the help of their mobile devices. More specifically, I am interested in the perceptions that users have of their mobile phones. For example, do they view mobile phones more as a means of verbal communication, a means of written communication or a combination of the two? Do these consumers think that their mobile phone contains all of the functionality that they need (e.g., calculator, calendar)? To some extent, do consumers see this telephone as a friend, a virtual friend, to be sure, but a friend nevertheless?

According to the literature on this topic (e.g., Ström *et al.*, 2014; Persaud & Azhar, 2012), it does not seem that researchers have yet come to an agreement on this question. In short, various questions have been raised regarding the ways that consumers view this technological tool that, nowadays, allows them to do so many various tasks (e.g., Hameed, Rehman & Awan, 2016; Chee, Yee, Haizam, Saudi, 2018). However, they bear a greater resemblance to consumers' perception of advertisements sent using mobile phones than their perception of the mobile phone as such, which is what interests me more here.

Other studies (e.g., Chimatapu, Jadhav, Ajinkya, 2015; Nikopopoulou & Gialamas, 2018; Monden, Kubo & Morimoto, 2006; Mei, Chai, Wang, Ng, Ungvari & Xiang, 2018) have taken an interest in the regular use of mobile phones and in the resulting consequences, including consumers' addiction to their mobile phones, but especially among people under 25 and only using a quantitative methodology. Moreover, there are no studies that have examined what mobile phones mean for their users who are in age brackets beyond undergraduate university students (i.e., older than 24) and using a qualitative methodology (Mei *et al.*, 2018).

Finally, this study seeks to make an original academic contribution to what is found in the literature on mobile phones as concerns consumers' symbolic representations of them in two different ways. Firstly, no study has examined this phenomenon from a qualitative point of view. Secondly, no study has examined this phenomenon in age brackets beyond 24.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research is anchored in the theory of symbolic representation. Regarding symbolic representations, the production and the circulation are central phenomena in research in the social sciences. In particular, social psychologists have studied the processes by which meaning is built, reinforced and transformed in social life. For example, according to Jovchelovitch and Orfali (2005), a symbol is "roughly" a meaningful representation of something produced by someone else, because the power of a symbol lies in its capacity to make meaning and communicate this meaning. Furthermore, according to Jovchelovitch and Orfali (2005), the meaning refers to an object that is outside the self and which becomes important because of its interpersonal relationship with the human being.

I will dwell on the power of symbols to make meaning for a mobile phone user and to communicate this meaning to him or her. For example, can the mobile phone be a symbol of security or of commodity for a user? Thus, I hope to make a contribution not only to the field of marketing, but also, more specifically, to consumer behaviour by studying what mobile phones represent for adult users using a qualitative approach that focuses on an age bracket older than 24 and in developed countries. In this case, I carried out interviews with professors and students at Université Laval, taking into account the confidentiality of certain data about smartphones as well as the necessity of having them sign documents relating to their consent to this study. Moreover, I used the NVivo software program to analyze the interviews and focused on certain keywords and recurring themes in the interviews I conducted. By using a qualitative approach, I will especially emphasize fieldwork immersion and semi-structured interviews that allowed me to understand how the stakeholders viewed important aspects of their relationship to the topic under study.

METHODOLOGY

Given that my research objectives were to understand how consumers define their experience with their smartphone and what it represents to them, I adopted a qualitative methodological approach rather than quantitative one in order to better understand this phenomenon. The general objectives of qualitative research are to understand how people derive meaning from their lives, define the process (rather than the outcome of the product) of defining meaning, and describe how people interact with what they experience (Tisdell & Merriam, 2016). Qualitative research is characterized by its interpretative nature in the sense that the researcher must give meaning to the materials collected by anchoring themselves to a research strategy previously identified (Gaudet & Robert, 2018).

In order to validate the elements mentioned by the participants during the interviews, I used two qualitative research methods identified by Tisdell and Merriam (2016), namely the semi-structured interview, to highlight stakeholders' conscious use of their mobile phones, and immersion in the field, to highlight behaviours that are more unconscious and perhaps not explicitly discussed during the interviews. In this article, given the various time and availability restrictions in play, I used a convenience sample and conducted five interviews.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Using the NVivo software several themes were identified over the course of these interviews. Analysis is simultaneously an exciting and a frightening moment in the process of qualitative research. It faces major challenges that are important to be reminded of in order to then be able to correctly judge the importance of having guidelines, formalizing and systematizing analytical work, on the one hand, and the contributions of the growth of technology in data processing. Firstly, in qualitative analysis, the researcher is dealing with a significant amount of data that are organized in a sequential and pragmatic pattern rather than a thematic one. This can run counter to the analysis, which seeks to divide up and organize data and so on. Furthermore, we most often work with words, attitudes, intentions and pictures whose meaning is often multiple depending on the stakeholders' contexts and stories. Finally, the demarcation of the themes examined during the study that will be analyzed in-depth in the written text is another, equally important challenge which, without taking any action, can lead to misunderstanding the phenomenon studied. We can therefore see how important it is to set guidelines for qualitative research so that it is efficient beyond methodological rigour and the systematization of the analysis process that are also called for at the same time.

As concerns this analysis more specifically, I will proceed in discussing each of the nodes and sub-nodes. That way, participants' responses will be grouped together in the appropriate nodes and sub-nodes so as to create greater logic as regards the information provided. Firstly, some participants mentioned the ability to "communicate," whether in writing or orally, as the first criterion for buying a mobile phone. For example, someone mentioned that "communicating with other people" was "my first reason to buy one."

With regard to the "online shopping" node, this aspect emerged in two interviews. The participants revealed that having constant access to a mobile phone contributed to increasing the chances of visiting

websites to buy goods online. They didn't mention that they necessary bought, but that it tempted them more. It also came out that the mobile phone was not their favourite device for buying online. In this respect, the participants seemed resistant. It appears that desktop computers are still the device that is most often used to make online purchases. Secondly, we can find symbolic representation of friendship, which was raised on three occasions. Certain participants saw their mobile device as a facilitator of friendship, whereas others saw it as an enemy of friendship or even as a way to lose friends. In this regard, to quote a participant, "I think that it contributed to creating others. On the other hand, we see people who have lots of friends on Facebook, but we can wonder if these are real friends. In general, it's not the same thing. I don't think this creates real friendships. Sometimes, it's almost like a competition of who has the most friends on Facebook." Another participant, originally from France, but living in Quebec for a relatively short time, had a negative assessment of what the mobile phone provided in terms of friendship. There was a gap between keeping in touch by this means and the emotion depth of such a contact: "Keeping in touch via social media is one thing, but, in fact, you often don't share anything with those people. You become friends with someone because you lived through things together. To have a friendship, you have to have a physical link. For example, you had problems or good experiences with someone and this will stay forever. Friendship does not amount to following someone's feed on a social network. You connect with someone, but you no longer share anything with him or her. After all, it's an illusion. You feel you live with people and you know what is happening in their lives, but, as it turns out, there is none of that." In short, I understand from all of the participants that the mobile phone is not well regarded in itself as concerns friendship. The participants were unanimous as concerns the mobile phone's convenience. The mobile phone is seen as accommodating and making many circumstances in everyday life easier. For example, it allows users to be reachable at any moment and has many features that make it so they have access to a wealth of information quickly. Participants summarized the situation as follows: "a practical device", "it provides a lot of services" and "we have access to our email quickly." This aspect of convenience came up among the vast majority of participants. Subsequently, I noticed many references to the control aspect. Several participants mentioned that they thought or had the impression that they were in control, but at the same moment, they were conscious that this was not the case. The aspect of control, or rather, of lack of control was notably associated with the "fear of missing out." I noted that several participants had this fear. A participant even mentioned the following: "It's a bit like the idea that you are afraid of missing something and that's why you come back to Facebook."

In the course of carrying out the interviews, the theme of cost (or of the economic aspect) of the mobile phone emerged as a research theme. NVivo identified three references to this. The participants were unanimous. They found that mobile phones were too expensive, and they did not feel that they got enough benefits for the money they invested. According to a participant in this study, "It goes from about \$150 to several million dollars." The aspect of addiction was raised in no less than 14 references. The majority of the participants mentioned the aspect of addiction in relation to their mobile phone in many aspects of their lives, both personal and professional. They mentioned that they constantly looked at social networks using their mobile phone whether they were alone, with their family or even at work. A participant also raised the aspect of "e-anxiety." As she put it, "we talk about 'e-anxiety' today in the scientific literature. Yes, people are more and more attached to their phones and it's the disease of the [21st] century." It is possible to link this aspect of users' having their mobile phone with them all the time and the aspect of practicality. For the participants, always having their mobile phone near them allow them to absorb lots of information in little time. A participant cited the following as an example: "I often have problems with connecting flights, finding transport, finding a restaurant or converting money. It's obvious that the mobile phone becomes valuable in these circumstances." The aspect of practicality can be linked with the "speed" node. A participant mentioned this point that he found interesting, "The Facebook content feed is based on being continuously fuelled with Facebook content all the time." This "speed" node can be linked with the "time" node. This aspect of time is very interesting, because some participants raised the fact that the mobile phone could make them save time! At the same time, they felt that it was not time well spent. Finally, as concerns the "time" node, it emerged from the NVivo analysis that the mobile phone was used for personal purposes

and not for work. For example, a participant raised the following: “I work as a secretary. So, for my work, I use my desktop computer this most.”

From the “family” standpoint, both positive and negative aspects came to light. In most cases, I was able to establish from these interview that the mobile phone was well regarded in order to share good times with family. As a participant whose family did not live close to her mentioned, “It always had a positive impact because I live far away from my family. Therefore, it’s really a way for me to feel closer. So that’s the biggest advantage for me, being able to experience marriages and ceremonies ‘live.’” Another aspect that left its mark on me while analyzing these interview results was the “lifestyle” aspect or the lifestyle change that the mobile phone caused for these consumers. Some participants now made purchases using their mobile phone. Others mentioned more negative aspects. A participant even mentioned, “I read a lot less. It’s a disaster!” After that, several references that emerged from the “independence” node. We can bring together this information with the “security” and “freedom” nodes to a certain extent. The important point that came out of this is that the users felt some sense of independence in relation to others and external events because they felt safe having their phone near them. As this participant said, “When I go somewhere, it’s going to be in my bag, but I’m not necessarily going to use it....” On the other hand, to this end, several participants mentioned that they felt less “freedom” because their mobile phone was constantly in their hand. A participant made the point that “it’s like cigarettes or alcohol. You’d like to be able to say that you can use it when you want and with limits, but you can’t! The fact is that you use it a lot more. It’s very strongly addictive!”

In conclusion, by using NVivo, I established that consumers’ addiction to their mobile phone was the main highlight that strongly emerged from the interviews. This addiction to the mobile device took several forms. For example, it is not necessarily that they are addicted to the mobile phone as such, but to the features and the applications that are found on it. The accounts showed that some participants were very addicted to Facebook. However, we can draw other important conclusions from a marketing perspective, including assessments that could interest marketing specialists from the perspective of practical managerial contributions. One example that comes to mind concerns advertising. As we concluded that participants liked the mobile phone for time with family, especially when people were far apart, it could be interesting to develop advertisements that targeted these people and highlighted people who spent time with their families, from whom they were separated by a significant geographic distance, through their mobile devices using videos.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Over the course of this research, it would be difficult to overlook its limitations, which any research has. Firstly, it would be appropriate to highlight the sample used in order to select the participants in this study. Given the time constraints in which this work had to be carried out, i.e., as part of a term paper, the participants were selected according to their geographic proximity. I therefore made a sample based on convenience. The number of participants is also a limitation that should be taken into context. I had a cumulative total of five participants, which is not close to the saturation point. Because I study at a university, the vast majority of the selected participants for my study, with the exception of one, are university professors. This is a fairly obvious limitation in the sense that the data collected could be biased because of these people’s experiences, their education level and the way they responded to questions. The fact is that they are themselves researchers and some of them have a solid grounding in qualitative research! The time allotted to this research as such is also a limitation. Moreover, it is impossible to generalize my results from my data since this is qualitative research and not quantitative research. It would be appropriate to also take the geographic aspect into account. I strictly questioned people who lived in the city of Québec in the Canadian province of Quebec. This could potentially be a bias. It would be interesting to have participants from other cities or regions and who did not live in the city of Québec.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As discussed in the “analysis of results” section, we can find some measure of symbolic representations. Several of my research findings are very interesting. As alluded to above, the majority of the participants mentioned the addiction aspect with respect to their mobile phone and the extent to which they felt dependent on this device. This addiction aspect came out in many aspects of their lives, both professional and personal. They mentioned that they constantly checked social media from their mobile phone, whether they were alone, with their family or even at work. This is what one of the participants calls “e-anxiety.”

This scientific study makes a very relevant contribution to the current scientific literature on the mobile phone and especially concerning addiction. Moreover, it confirms certain results concerning addiction that were carried out in quantitative studies. I identified 14 references that related to addiction in my analysis of the results. A recent study by Nikolopoulou and Gialamas (2018) showed that secondary school students were not aware that they had an addiction to their mobile phones, despite the existence of some of these same factors, particularly “loss of control” towards their smart mobile phone (Leung, 2008; Choliz, 2012; Foerster *et al.* 2015). As such, one of the participants in my study mentioned very interesting factors relating to the loss of control, “There are many. You lose the ability to create. You lose the ability to connect socially with others. You lose the ability to be independent. I think you have a mistaken view of the world. The mobile phone gives you what you’re looking for and you think that’s the world! You don’t have the same possibility. We hear the same projects and the same themes. People repeat their reality of the world like parrots and think behind closed doors.” Another participant added the follow with respect to the loss of control and addiction, “It’s like cigarettes or alcohol. You’d like to be able to say that you can use it when you want and with limits, but you can’t! The fact is that you use it a lot more. It’s very strongly addictive! Therefore, we’re not free. I’m objective and I don’t feel free. As soon as you are addicted to something, you’re not free!” Choliz (2012) has also shown that consumers also use the smart mobile phone as a means of temporarily feeling better. Some of the results presented here go in this direction. In this respect, one of the participants mentioned that “you dream your life through your phone.” The most striking result of my study is that, unlike other studies done on addiction to mobile phones (Chimatapu, Jadhav, Ajinkya, 2015; Nikopopoulou & Gialamas, 2018; Monden, Kubo & Morimoto, 2006; Mei, Chai, Wang, Ng, Ungvari & Xiang, 2018), mine shows that users are aware of their addiction to this device. This difference may stem from an important variable mentioned above, namely that the participants in this study were older than those in the aforementioned ones at a stage of life when such an age difference may well correspond to a significant difference in terms of maturity. Furthermore, this difference is partly attributable to the portion of users’ lives that corresponds to the time when smartphones were widespread in the West. Only more detailed fieldwork will provide the opportunity for further analysis of these lines of analysis in the future.

FIELDWORK IMMERSION

As concerns my fieldwork, more specifically, I carried out “fieldwork immersion” on May 2, 2019 in the Walmart and La vie en Rose stores in the Place Laurier shopping centre. The goal of this fieldwork immersion was to deny or confirm the analysis of the results obtained from interviews with participants. I was in these stores from 12:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. My first stop was at the Walmart. I stayed there until 4:30 p.m. The objective of this immersion was to try to highlight smartphone users’ behaviours that are more unconscious and that they would not have consciously discussed during the interviews. I saw many similar behaviours during my fieldwork, several of which did indeed confirm what emerged from participants during my interviews. Firstly, people often used their smartphone to ask their advice to know what item or what clothing item they should buy for their child. I was able to overhear pieces of different couples’ conversations relating to these questions. To a lesser extent, I observed people using their mobile phone to search for information about (I’m assuming here because I wasn’t right next to them) the item or the food product they were coveting. I say this because they looked at their phone and then at the coveted item immediately afterwards. These are the main behaviours that I was able to notice in this store during this time.

Afterwards, I headed for the La vie en Rose store to look at the “hedonistic” aspect instead, whereas my observations at the Walmart supermarket were concerned with more “utilitarian” products. I stayed there from 4:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Given the time constraints, I only stayed an hour in the La vie en Rose store. However, I was able to once again notice mobile phone users’ rather “addictive” behaviour within the store. I did not witness calls, but I saw people looking at their mobile device on several occasions. These people seemed to look at their mobile device in order to see if one or another of their friends had sent them a text message. At first glance, these are not behaviours as closely linked to consumption practices as the ones I observed in the Walmart. However, I did not notice behaviours where the mobile phone was used to learn more about a product. This fieldwork immersion allowed me to carry out a triangulation effect (see Mathison, 1988). Observing two stores and noticing two different types of behaviour among consumers also opened the door to a comparative approach within the same study. This is according to the types of stores and also of consumer behaviours observed in the respective stores. The issue is whether there is a link between the store, the behaviour and the typical profile of the consumer who buy their products there. It is also a question of comparing the behaviours I noticed during my firsthand observations with the accounts gathered during semi-structured interviews to have complementary perspectives on the same set of facts. This is the case in at least two senses. Firstly, between the comments of the observed and interviewed stakeholders and those of the researcher who is the author of this article. Secondly, there is a temporal relationship between the observations carried out in real time and the after-the-fact remarks by participants taking part in the study.

CONCLUSION AND PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides useful elements concerning consumers’ regular use of the smart mobile phone. It was instructive to notice that some results of this study were relevant to what we find in the literature and bring a new and interesting perspective. This primarily shows that users are conscient of their addiction, which is not the case with the other studies at which I looked. It was also beneficial to notice that fieldwork immersion, mainly that carried out in the Walmart store in the Place Laurier shopping centre confirmed the elements raised by the participants during the interviews. On the other hand, the immersion carried out in the La vie en Rose store did not allow me to validate the results of my analyses of the participants’ answers. Admittedly, it was shorter in duration. It would be desirable to carry out another, longer immersion in another hedonistic store in order to verify this information. Regarding prospects for future research, it could be interesting to focus only on people 55 and older in order to see if this “addiction” aspect also occurs among them as among younger people.

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APPENDIX

FIGURE 1
APPENDIX OF WORDS USED FOR ANALYSIS



FIGURE 2
SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS OF NODES AND SUB-NODES IN THE NVIVO 12
PRO SOFTWARE

Représentations symboliques

Nom	Fichiers	Références
achat en ligne	2	2
amitié	3	3
commodité	3	6
Aspect pratique	3	6
Non-commode	1	2
Contrôle	2	4
Coût économique	1	3
dépendance	3	14
Effectivité	1	2
famille	3	8
Habitudes de vie	1	5
indépendance	2	7
information	0	0
communication	1	4
liberté	1	3
rapidité	2	3
sécurité	3	4
solitude	2	2
temps	1	1
travail	3	4

Faites glisser la sélection ici pour encoder vers un nouveau nœud