The Distinct Psychology of Smartphone Usage

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Abstract

It is estimated that 80% of adults worldwide will own a smartphone within the next few years (The Economist 2015), and consumers are now spending a greater amount of time on their smartphone than any of their other technological devices (Millward Brown 2014). While the marketing implications of mobile platforms are receiving emerging attention in the marketing modeling literature (e.g. Danaher et al. 2015, Ghose et al. 2013, Sultan et al. 2009), still very little is known about the consumption psychology of smartphone usage. Across six studies, including two field studies, I show that consumers form a stronger emotional attachment to their smartphone than they do to comparable devices, and that this attachment has significant downstream consequences for consumer behavior. In the first set of studies I examine how this emotional attachment impacts the type of user-generated content created on the device. Across two field studies and two controlled experiments, I find that smartphone usage drives the creation of content that is more emotional – and more impactful – than content generated on PCs. In a second set of studies, I test the idea that smartphones are unique in that they effectively serve as an “adult pacifier” compared to other technologies. Consistent with this idea, in a controlled lab study I find that consumers who engage with their smartphones feel a greater sense of comfort than consumers who engage with their PCs. In a second lab study, I show that smartphones also provide a greater sense relief following a stressful situation relative to PCs, leading to a faster recovery from stress and significantly higher levels of comfort. Overall, these findings suggest that smartphone usage is changing how consumers feel, and the ways in which they express themselves.