Emotions in the experiential consumption of mobile phones

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Abstract

Although marketers have a strong interest in finding ways to engage with consumers through mobile phones, the everyday experiential, or affective consumption practices surrounding this technology have received limited attention in the literature. To address this limitation, We conducted an experience sampling method study to explore the emotions that individuals experience during their interactions with and through their mobile phones and what situations or events elicit these emotions. The preliminary findings show a number of significant relationships between emotions and specific clusters of situations and events. Additionally, age and gender were also important indicators. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiential nature of mobile information technologies through consumers' everyday-consumption-related emotions and the situations and events that elicit them.

Key words: mobile phones, experiential consumption, emotions theory, ESM

Introduction

The notion of experiential consumption suggests that people may be involved with the "emotive aspects" of their consumption objects (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982, p. 92) . Moreover, they may have affective expectations about how consuming the product may make them feel (Sujan, Bettman and Baumgartner, 1993). The experiential view of consumption further acknowledges that product-usage situations may produce subjective or emotional reactions in consumers. Therefore, a product can be understood in terms of the consumption experiences that surround it. An important contribution in this area is Holt (1995) who used four metaphors of consumption in an interpretive examination of the "structure and purpose" of experiential consumption (Holt, 1995, p.2). The notion of structure suggests that consumers engage directly with the consumption object as well as interacting with other people through the object where the object serves as the resource through which this interaction occurs. The notion of purpose suggests that consumer actions can be both autotelic, that is as an end in themselves, and instrumental - that they are a means to further ends (Holt, 1995). Holt's four metaphors of consumption, *Consuming as: experience*, *integration, classification* and *play* yield a comprehensive typology for describing experiential consumption practices (Holt, 1995).

Despite a wealth of research demonstrating the importance of emotions in consumer behaviour, the application of emotions to information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phones, has been substantially overlooked in the marketing literature (Moisio, 2003). Our paper addresses this limitation through reporting on an empirical study that examines the experiential consumption of mobile phones using appraisal theory. Appraisal theory specifies that

it is how an individual appraises situations or events that gives rise to whether they will experience an emotion or not (Roseman, 1984). This theoretical lens provides an opportunity to not only identify an individual's experiential emotions during their everyday consumption of their mobile phones, but to incorporate Holt's (1995) metaphors of consumption as an organising framework for the everyday situations or events that elicit these affective responses.

In the qualitative interview stage of a prior study, findings suggest that people experience a range of emotions to do with owning and using their mobile phones, for example "*a love/hate relationship*", getting *"frustrated or worried"* if they can't get hold of someone on their mobile, or an individual feeling "*fed up*" because family and friends just want to contact her all the time (Fitzgerald Andrews, Drennan and Bennett, 2005). Moreover, people experience emotions towards marketers' attempts to communicate through the mobile phone, which may annoy or irritate them (Haghirian, Madlberger and Tanuskova, 2005). Research has also shown that positive and negative minor daily events can impact on an individual's emotional wellbeing (e.g.: Fuller, Fisher, Stanton et al., 2003; McCullough, Huebner and Laughlin, 2000). It is therefore hypothesized that:

1. *An individual's daily experiential consumption of his/her mobile phone elicits positive and negative emotions.*
2. *That specific clusters of events may have differential relationships with positive and negative emotions.*

Research Design

An experience sampling method (ESM) was used to gain insights into these important but unexplored phenomena. Where the research is phenomenological in nature, ESM provide ways of capturing the experiential aspects of daily life that are not as easy to access with more traditional research designs (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2003). An ESM study involves alerting participants a number of times each day over a specified period of time. At each alert, participants report on their physical and/or mental activities occurring at or around the time of the interruption, using a structured survey instrument called an experience sampling form (Bolger et al., 2003). In more recent times personal data assistants (PDAs) or hand-held mobile computers have been used for both the alerting system and the data collection (Conner Christensen, Feldman Barrett, Bliss Moreau et al., 2003). We extended the use of mobile communications technology in ESM by developing an innovative research design that used the mobile phone for both the alerting system and for the data collection. The protocol for the research involved participants receiving two SMS alerts at random times each day, for seven consecutive days.

The experience sampling form (ESF) used Richins (1997) Consumption Emotion Set (CES) to measure the experiential consumption emotions with intensity ratings anchored by *0 = not at all* to *7 = extremely* (Bagozzi, Gurhan-Canli and Priester, 2002). Also, we were interested in capturing the types of situations or events surrounding participants' interactions with and through their mobile phones that might elicit these emotions. We developed an inventory of twenty-six situations or events surrounding mobile phone interaction, drawn from our earlier research and anecdotal information from mobile phone users. The ESF was provided to participants in a folded form the size of a credit card that they could carry with them wherever they were. They used this

ESF each time they responded to an SMS alert. One of the benefits of using electronic data collection is that the database receiving the information can be set up to recognise and deal with any number of potential situations in a string of data, such as the participants' incoming SMS responses. Therefore, participants only needed to select those items on the questionnaire that best captured their emotional experiences and the relevant situation or event when responding to their SMS alert each time. All item from the ESF that were not keyed into the SMS response defaulted to zero when the data strings were parsed to the online database.

The pilot study was conducted in early January, 2005 with fifteen participants, after which some minor adjustments were made to improve the research design. The main study took place between March and April, 2005. Participants were recruited from undergraduate classes at three Queensland metropolitan universities. The final sample contained 139 participants with 71 females and 68 males. Ages ranged from 18-20 (36%), 21-25 years (39%), 26-30 years (16.5%) and 31-35 years (8.5%). Education ranged from 12 years of schooling to an associate diploma and 71% of the sample had part-time work.

Discussion of findings

Since we were interested in summarizing the data for clusters of positive and negative emotions the data was subjected to a principal components analysis with a Varimax rotation. Three positive emotions and two negative emotions factors were identified with eigenvalues over one. Rather than name these components after a key emotion term contained in the factors as suggested by Richins (1997), we chose to name them based on the overall emotional picture suggested in the factor, an approach taken by Mudie, Cottram and Raeside (2003). Table 1 depicts these factors.

Table 1: Key emotion factors

Positive emotions			Negative emotions		
Engaging	α .71	*Joyful, loving, excited, passionate, fulfilled, sexy, pleased, eager, surprised.*	**Unsettling**	α .53	*Angry, guilty, frustrated, depressed, irritated, embarrassed*
Calming	α .60	*Peaceful, calm, happy, contented*	**Sad**	α .69	*Sad and miserable*
Relating	α .58	*Romantic and thrilled*			

The situations and events were clustered conceptually using the four metaphors of consumption, that is, *consuming as*: *experience, integration, classification* and *play* (Holt, 1995), guided by the authors' earlier qualitative work on experiential value in the consumption of mobile phones (Fitzgerald Andrews et al., 2005). *Consuming as experience* was further developed into four sub-concepts that more closely reflected key consumption practices within this metaphor. These sub-concepts were named *Experience as*: *general possession*, *interaction*, *inability to interact* and *undesirable interaction*. The three m-marketing situations were clustered as a fifth metaphor named *Experience of Marketing Interactions*. Appendix A defines the metaphors and depicts which items from the situations and events inventory clustered under each metaphor.

Results and Discussion

We conducted a bivariate analysis on the data and calculated significant relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variables using Spearman's correlation coefficient. These are zero order correlations, which might change if the pure influence of each independent variable is isolated after controlling for the concurrent influence of all other independent variables. The three positive and two negative emotions were treated as dependent variables and the conceptual clusters of situations and events were used as single independent variables. Other independent variables in the analysis were *marketing*, *age* and *sex*. Table 1 shows the findings.

Table 1: Findings from the bivariate analysis.

	Engaging	Relating	Calming	Sadness	Unsettling	Age
Experience as						
• Interaction	.203**					
• General						
• Unable					.175*	
• Undesirable						-.171*
Integration		.275**			-.193*	
Classification						
Play			.344**			
Marketing			-.189*			
Age				.223*		
Gender				-.190*		

** = p≤ .01   * p< .05

In the study, *Experience as interaction* and *Experience as inability to interact* form sub-categories within the *Consuming as experience* metaphor. This metaphor suggests that consumption objects serve to impart shared definitions of reality, or 'the way things are' and reflect a consumer's subjective, emotional reactions to these objects (Holt 1995). *Experience as interaction* has a positive relationship with *Engaging* (*rho* = .203, p≤ .01). This finding indicates that individuals experience emotions such as *joyful, loving, excited, passionate, fulfilled, sexy, pleased, eager, surprise* during their mobile phone communications with others. Further, it was found that *Experience as inability to interact* has a positive relationship with *Unsettling* (*rho* = .175, p< .05). This finding was anticipated as in qualitative interviews conducted by the principal author, many people reported becoming quite unsettled if they could not contact family or friends on their mobile phones, possibly due to their belief that everyone should be contactable all the time. Therefore, the findings in this current study suggest that mobile phones are now such a part of modern society and the continual psychological demand to be able to contact, and be contacted by friends and family elicits positive and negative emotional responses.

The findings also show a positive correlation (*rho* = .275, p ≤ .01) between *Consuming as Integration* and *Relating,* however, *Integration* was also found to be negatively related to *unsettling* emotions (*rho* = -.195, p< .05). Sociological literature suggests that mobile phones are social artifacts (Palen, Salzman and Youngs, 2001) that embody emotional aspects of ownership and usage. *Consuming as integration* describes how consumers acquire and manipulate the

meanings of their consumption objects (Holt, 1995), which may act as social artifacts. Holt (1995) identifies personalizing and assimilating consumption practices that may explain these findings. The finding that *Integration* elicits *Relating* type emotions, such as *romantic* and *thrilled*, may be explained through the personalising practices where the consumption object is modified in some way either symbolically or physically (Holt, 1995). Personalising mobile phones may include having special ring tones, screen logos, or screen backgrounds that reflect the individual's perceived image. As identified in prior qualitative interviews, these personalising items are often given as gifts from significant others, which may in turn elicit romantic emotions from ongoing reminders during the daily use of the mobile phone. In terms of the negative emotions elicited, assimilating suggests that the consumer becomes a competent participant in the social world of the consumption object. Therefore, individuals may become proficient in using their mobile phone, not only as their primary communication mode, but for the other purposes, such as a daily organiser, for example address book, appointment diary or an alarm clock. This aspect of *Consuming as integration* reflects how the individual participates in the production of the consumption experience, particularly where the institutional configurations of that practice permits the consumer a degree of control (Holt, 1995). It may be this notion of control that elicits the unsettled emotions identified in the findings if individuals are not able to satisfactorily master some of the functions on their mobile phones.

While *Marketing* was found to be negatively associated with *Calming* ($rho = -.189$, $p < .05$), *Play* was also found to be positively associated with this emotion ($rho = .344$, $p \leq .01$). These results are not surprising as findings from our qualitative interviews suggest that using the mobile phone for playful purposes is associated with relaxation or time-filling and should therefore lead to *peaceful, calm, happy, contented* emotions. On the other hand, *Marketing* such as receiving marketing communications on mobile phones could disrupt that calm state.

The findings indicate that *Age* is negatively associated with *Experience as undesirable interaction* ($rho = -.171$, $p < .05$). Moreover, both *Age* ($rho = -.223$, $p \leq .01$) and *Gender* ($rho = -.190$, $p \leq .01$) were also found to be negatively related to *sadness*. These findings indicate that younger mobile phone users may experience more undesirable interactions through their mobile phones, such as bullying or harassment through voice calls or SMS. Moreover, the findings suggest that females experience more sadness relating to their mobile phone use. Because mobile phones act as facilitators for social inclusion or exclusion (Wilska 2003), this sadness may be elicited by undesirable interactions or from social isolation by lack of interactions.

Contributions and conclusion

While tentative due to the exploratory nature of the research, the findings support the two hypotheses put forward. Individuals experience both positive and negative emotions during their everyday consumption of mobile phones in response to specific clusters of situations and events. Additional findings suggest that age and gender are also important factors in the experiential consumption of mobile phones. The research makes a contribution to the identified gap in the marketing literature by integrating emotions research and experiential consumption practices to examine emotions in the experiential consumption of mobile phones. The research design developed in this study also make a contribution to the literature on using mobile communication technology in experience sampling methods.

**Appendix A: Metaphors of Consumption as an organizing framework
for situations and events**

Consumption as Experience: *Consumption objects are embedded in the consumers' social worlds and serve to impart shared definitions of reality, or "the way things are" within that socially constructed world.*	
Experience as general possession	• I received my mobile phone bill. • I thought I might receive some calls or SMSs on my mobile phone but there was none.
Experience as interaction	• I was using my mobile phone in an emergency. • I was having a conversation with my significant partner on my mobile phone. • I was having a conversation with a friend or family member on my mobile phone. • I received an unexpected call. • I received an unexpected SMS.
Experience as inability to interact	• I forgot to take my mobile with me. • I can't contact someone on their mobile phone. • I did not receive an anticipated call. • I did not receive an anticipated reply.
Experience as undesirable interaction	• I received a bullying or harassing call on my mobile phone. • I received a bullying or harassing SMS.
Consumption as Integration: *how consumers acquire and manipulate the meanings of their consumption objects*	
• I was personalising my mobile phone to reflect my personal style (getting new ring tones, logos, cases or key pads, etc.) • I was setting/using the functions on my mobile phone (diary, alarm, address book, etc.)	
Consumption as Classification: *the way, the object classifies the consumer through possession and social display*	
• I was accessing the Internet on my mobile phone. • I was sending/receiving emails on my mobile phone. • I was using a mobile phone service (e.g.: horoscopes, share prices, sports results etc.)	
Consumption as Play: *using the consumption object as a resource to interact with fellow consumers through not only instrumental actions, but autotelic actions where the interaction is for interaction's sake*	
• I was using my mobile phone for playful social interaction with others (sending SMS jokes and or brief greetings etc.) • I was playing games on my mobile phone.	
Experience of Marketing Interactions (not part of Holt's metaphors of consumption) • I was entering an SMS competition • I received a marketing/advertising offer by voice call on my mobile phone. • I received an SMS marketing/advertising offer on my mobile phone.	

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