ABSTRACT

Propelled by the great opportunity in marketing and branding in mobile apps, the apps market is attracting more and more big companies with well-known brand names. However, factors that influence consumers’ use of branded apps are still unclear. This study integrates consumer-brand relationship literature and the theory of consumption values and develops a research model to uncover important antecedents of branded apps use intention. This study also sheds new light on branded app marketing and development.

KEYWORDS: Branded apps, Brand relationship, Perceived value, Use intention

INTRODUCTION

Mobile apps marketplaces are booming. By offering great opportunities in marketing and branding in mobile apps, the apps market is now attracting more and more big companies with well-known brand names to launch their own branded apps. We call an app as a branded app when an app carries the brand name of a well-known company, and is developed and distributed by the company.

Past research has mainly studied the adoption of mobile service (e.g. Guo et al. 2013; Yang 2013). The actual effects of brand-consumer relationship and value perceptions of the brand on consumers’ app adoption (the channel adoption) are still unclear. As such, marketers can only rely on their imaginations to implement functionalities and to provide information over their branded apps without much theoretical guidance and empirical support. To fill this gap, our study develops a research model by integrating the theory of consumer-brand relationship (Blackston 1992; Fournier 1998) and the theory of consumption values (Sheth et al. 1991). The research model attempts to uncover influential factors on consumers’ branded apps use intention.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Research on Mobile Applications (Apps) Adoption
As mobile apps have been proliferating on various mobile platforms, both researchers and practitioners have begun paying close attention to various adoption behaviors on mobile platforms. Past research has studied the adoption of mobile services (Guo et al. 2013; Yang 2013). The major theories adopted by past studies in this area are the well-established technology acceptance models (TAM) along with its variants and the influential factors posited in those models (e.g. Yang 2013).

However, factors related to the adoption of apps (the channel to access mobile service and commerce), particularly branded apps, are not well addressed in past studies, though more recently, the adoption of mobile apps themselves has drawn more attention due to the proliferation of mobile app development. For example, Yang (2013) studied the influential factors on young American consumers’ attitude and intention to use mobile apps. Mahatanankoon et al. (2005) examined the value proposition of mobile apps among consumers. Little research has focused on the effects of brand-consumer relationship and value perceptions of the brand on consumers’ app adoption with a few exceptions. The study of Bellman et al. (2011) tried to determine the effect of using branded apps on brand attitude and purchase intention (Bellman et al. 2011). Kim et al. (2013) examined the effects of attachment to smartphone apps on brand supportive behaviors. However, branded apps are not the particular focus of these studies.

**Brand Relationship**

Brand relationship theory argues that a brand is the consumer’s total idea and perceptions of a product (Blackston 1992). A brand develops its personality via various humanized contacts with consumers, such as products animation, brand characters, spokespeople and celebrity endorsement (Blackston 1992; Fournier 1998). As such, a brand relationship is a dyad relationship in which the brand has “attitudes” towards the consumer and the consumer develops complex emotions and feelings towards the brand through various aspects of his/her experience with the brand (Blackston 1992). Brand relationship theory also argues that “while brands can be animated through brand characters or are somehow possessed by the spirit of past or present others, complete anthropomorphisation of the brand involves imbuing it with human qualities such as emotion, thought and volition” (Patterson and O’Malley 2006, 12). Fournier (1998) also pointed out that psychological, sociocultural, and relational contexts are the important sources for shaping brand relationships. As a result, consumer-brand relationships are complex and multiplex, take on many forms, and provide multiple benefits for the relationship partners. Extant research on brand relationship suggests a myriad of concepts and constructs based on different contexts. Among various constructs studied in literature, brand attachment and brand identification have emerged and become two major salient factors in studying brand relationship.

Brand attachment is defined as the strength of the emotional bond between a consumer and a brand (Thomson et al. 2005). Like a child forms a close bond with his/her caregiver, consumers develop attachments to the brand through repeated interaction. Thus, a key feature of brand attachment is familiarity and responsiveness of the brand (Patwardhan and Balasubramanian 2013). Brand attachment not only facilitates cultivation of customer loyalty but also motivates customers to interact more with the brand. A branded app provides an additional, very interactive channel between the consumers and the brand. Thus, we argue that the existing band attachment built through other channels can be enhanced via this new channel. Based on the above logic, we develop H1 as below:
H1. Consumers’ brand attachment is positively related to consumers’ intention to use the branded app.

Brand identification captures the characteristic overlap or similarity between oneself and the brand. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003, 77) argued that such capture is based on “an active, selective, cognitive and volitional act motivated by the satisfaction of one or more self-definitional needs.” Branded apps are often offered to customers for free while embedding many favorable brand features carried by the brand. We expect that brand identification in apps would exert the same positive effect on consumers’ use behaviors. Thus we hypothesize:

H2: Consumers’ brand identification is positively related to consumers’ intention to use the branded app.

Theory of Consumption Values

The theory of consumption values defines perceived value as “the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given” (Zeithaml 1988, 14). Mobile apps often provide additional functions and services upon other e-commerce platforms. For example, mobile banking apps allow customers to access their bank accounts anywhere, anytime. Thus we argue that mobile apps add additional values to customers and thus consumers form a positive value assessment of mobile apps. Such a positive value assessment will give users strong intention to use mobile apps.

Moreover, perceived value is defined as a formative second-order construct with different value dimensions depending on the context of a study (Turel et al. 2007; Sheth et al. 1991). Through intensive literature review, this study identified four component-level value dimensions including quality value, acquisition value, efficiency value, and emotion value. Quality value is a key to long-term success and manifests consumers’ trust in the brand (Sweeney and Soutar 2001). Acquisition value is the net benefits of the transaction compared to the costs (Parasuraman and Grewal 2000; Sweeney and Soutar 2001). Efficiency value deals with time resources for getting the service (Mathwick et al. 2002). Emotion value is the degree of pleasure obtained by customers during their use of the service/product. A branded app carries the brand name of the company, provides additional, instant functions/services, save consumers time, and allows consumers to transfer their “love affair” with the brand to the app. Following the above rationale, we hypothesize:

H3: The overall perceived value of the branded app is positively related to consumers’ intention to use the branded app.

H4a. Consumers’ perceived quality value of the branded app is positively related to their overall perceived value of the app.

H4b. Consumers’ perceived acquisition value of the branded app is positively related to their overall perceived value of the app.

H4c. Consumers’ perceived efficiency value of the branded app is positively related to their overall perceived value of the app.
**H4d. Consumers’ perceived emotion value of the branded app is positively related to their overall perceived value of the app.**

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

We will use survey methodology to empirically test the research model and hypotheses. To this end, we have developed a survey instrument based on an extensive literature review and the guidelines suggested by the IS literature. Most measures were adopted from the literature and adapted to fit the current context of the study. The items to measure brand attachment and brand identification were adapted from Park et al. (2010). The items for the consumer value constructs were adapted from Sheth et al. (1991), Parasuraman and Grewal (2000) and Mathwick et al. (2002). Perceived value is a formative construct and indirectly measured by the four consumer value constructs (Turel et al. 2007). Demographic items were also added to the survey questionnaire. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’ was used for each item in the instrument except for those demographic items.

A pilot test was conducted among several scholars, practice professionals, and app users, and the feedback was used to refine the instrument. The apps that will be used in the survey were launched by three well-known banks in Taiwan. Online app forums and communities will be used to distribute the survey and solicit survey respondents.

**CONCLUSION**

Drawing upon brand relationship literature (Blackston 1992; Fournier 1998) and the theory of consumption values (Sheth et al. 1991; Zeithaml 1988), we developed an integrated research model in which the effects of brand relationship and perceived consumption value on use intention of branded apps were investigated. To empirically test the model, we will survey users via online app market forums and communities. Our research will make both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this research integrates brand relationship literature and the theory of consumer values into the research model which will advance our understanding of the antecedents of branded app use behavior if the model is confirmed by empirical data. The model also points out that consumers’ overall value perceptions may depend on various functional and non-functional value components related to the context of the study. Practically, this study sheds new light on branded app marketing and development.

**REFERENCES**


