

College Students and Smartphone Ownership: Symbolic Meanings and Smartphone Consumption among Nigerian Students

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Abstract: The article aims to understand conception of Smartphones ownership among a sample of 65 Nigerian undergraduates aged 17-27 years; and whether their construction of Smartphone ownership influences them to buy/carry one. A qualitative approach to data collection was adopted to elicit information among students of two federal (public) tertiary institutions in southwest region of Nigeria. The results show that Smartphone is not simply a technology for communication but, to a large extent, a social symbolic object for its carriers. Symbolic meanings are constructed and attached with Smartphone ownership beyond mere functional attributes. For my participants, carrying a Smartphone implies high-taste associated with 'being cool', trendy, wealthy. Many seem to believe only those with expensive taste could own Smartphones. This feeling was so strong that many would rather make friends with other Smartphone owners than be seen with students carrying regular phones. One of the themes that also emerged from participants' narratives is pressure to fitting-in into groups that own Smartphone; which they say influence their purchase decision.

Keywords: Smartphone; meaning; Nigeria; college students; popular pressure

Introduction

As contemporary social existence gravitates toward twenty-four hours on social media, Smartphones have become indispensable and a must-have designed object for many people. For example, the increasing digitalisation of everyday routine makes it a "cultural norm" (Lepp, Barkley, Sanders, Rebold & Gates, 2013) for people to own or want a Smartphone (Agger, 2011). Literature on Smartphone adoption is growing as global mobile ownership trend increasingly shift in this direction. Worldwide, leading in the race for adoption and usage of Smartphones are college students. In both developed and developing countries, there are empirical

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evidences of exponential growth and a corresponding higher rates of Smartphone penetrations among student cohorts than for other generations (Lateefat, 2014; Lay-Yee, Kok-Siew & Yin-Fah, 2014; Nielsen, 2013; Camilia, Ibrahim & Dalhatu, 2013; Walter *et al.*, 2012). The rapid penetration rate among this cohort raises the question of why the growth rate of Smartphone adoption has been so high and what features draw students to the new mobile device (Kim, Chun & Lee, 2014).

The works of Lee, Lee, Ko, Lee, Kim, Yang, Yatani, Gweon, Chung and Song, (2014) in Korea, and Weber and Mitchell (2008) in the United States suggest that students' attraction to Smartphones is fuelled by the ease and convenience offered by the device to access a large amount of online contents (e.g. music, news, games and learning materials), coupled with the availability of networking applications and the opportunity to develop and maintain social relationships. Similar findings have been discussed by Arpit and Anand (2013) in the case of Indian; and Walter *et al* (2012) have described the same issue as related to South African Students. My own research on Smartphone adoption is contextualised among Nigerian university students to explore personal conceptions of Smartphone ownership and whether the views they hold are used to create or obliterate personal interactions with other carriers and non-carriers of Smartphones on campus. The concern is to understand how individual student's conception of Smartphone devices and the pressure to belong to the group that carries Smartphones on campus contribute to the race to own Smartphones.

Smartphone Ownership among Nigerian Students

While official data on Smartphone penetration among Nigerian college students is hard to come by, it is an incontrovertible fact that owning a Smartphone has become a popular culture among Nigerian students. According to Adegbenro (2011) Smartphone such as blackberry is perceived as a must-have accessory to 'up-to-date' and socially inclined students. The ownership of this mobile device seems to have become normative and stands as one of the markers of student identities on campus. It appears fashionable among Nigerian students to be seen with advanced mobile communication device – such as Smartphones – with capacities for advanced features. In this regard, HSPA connectivity, built-in virtual keyboards, high resolution digital still and video camera, pre-installed or downloadable Web 2.0 social software, and a high capacity memory storage (Cochrane & Bateman, 2010) are standard features often looked out for in a Smartphone. As Latifat's (2014)

findings show Nigerian students presently have penchant to acquire Blackberry Z10, iPhone 5 and Galaxy tab 5 suggesting that sophistication and currency are important to Nigerian student buyers of Smartphone.

As it appears, high price that comes with genuine and sophisticated Smartphone seems of less concern to Nigerian Smartphone buyers. Not minding the correctness, price tags of an item is often equated with its quality. Indeed, in the Nigerian social milieu, social valuation of the price tag a Smartphone comes with affects how carriers of the device are assessed (Latifat, 2014). Of course, while there is no denying the fact that cheap made in China Smartphone brands are increasingly found among Nigerian students, students have been found to often prepare to pay as much as N150, 000 (about \$650) for a piece of Smartphone directly imported from Europe or America (Herald News, 2013). Nigerians in general and students in particular would rather 'hustle' to find the means to buy smartphones of their desires than be seen with regular phones or cheap China-made Smartphones.

However, this fixation is not without its implications. For example, Adegbenro's (2011) observation shows that students who are ordinarily financially incapable to own a high-priced smartphones "tend to go extra-miles to possess these devices, there-by resorting themselves to various immoralities and criminalities" in the process. Consequently, across a range of social currents concern has been expressed about the seeming desperation of Nigerian students to acquire smartphones (Anyanwu & Ossai-Onah, 2013; Information Nigeria, 2013; Ajewole & Fashola, 2012). In the editorial of a Nigerian national newspaper "the craze for smartphones among Nigerian students" was described as "frightening" (PMNEWS, 2013). Similarly, on social fora commentators often speak of transition in the Nigerian mobile phone industry and the frenzy that surrounds the diffusion of these communication gadgets among youth. Comments like 'blackberry craze on Nigerian campuses and 'the craze for hi-tech phones among youth' are not uncommon (Uzegbu, 2014; Adegbenro, 2011). A 2011 Nollywood (the Nigerian movie industry) comedy produced by Sylvester Obadigie sufficiently reveals the fascination of Nigerian youth with smartphones and the attendant desperation to add this gadget to their collection of accessories. The question is what factors drive the frenzy for adoption of Smartphones among Nigerian college students?

It is tempting to examine the indicators of smartphone adoption presented in literature (see for example, Awan & Gauntlett, 2013; Chun, Chung & Shin, 2013, Hingorani, Woodard & Askari-Danish, 2012; Licoppe, 2011) and conclude that they are likely the same for young people elsewhere in the world. Yet, it is a social

constant that individuals at early age are socialised into national culture with group values which may influence how information and cultural products are processed and used (Park, Yang & Lehto, 2007; Hofstede, 2001). Thus, while performance expectations shape attitude of new media technology adopters in China (Kim & Cho, 2013; Park, Yang & Lehto, 2007) experience has shown that designed objects such as cars, wristwatches, smartphones, laptops, clothes etc are not always bought and consumed just for their functional attributes in Nigeria. Purchase decisions on technology are not always based on 'rational' concepts such as "perceived ease to use or benefits of a technology" (Kim, Chun & Lee, 2014, Dahlstrom, 2012). Extra-functional interpretations (e.g. social standing and self-image) often intervene in purchase decisions. It is a good guess to suggest a connection between Nigerians' taste for Smartphone and the tendency to project specific image of "prosperity and wealth" (Camilia, Ibrahim & Dalhatu, 2013; Campus Delight, 2013, Ajewole & Fashola, 2012).

It is imperative, therefore, for any scholarly interest in the adoption process of Smartphone technology in Nigeria to start from how users/adopters socially construct the device. My paper aims to do just this by exploring Nigerian students' absorption with Smartphones through an examination of the self-image students create of themselves with these gadgets. Specifically, I explored the way in which ownership of a smartphone is used to activate social meaning of technology, identity and social relations among students. I show how carrying a 'big phone' – the popular alias given to Smartphone in Nigerian parlance – is imagined by students to enhance their social values among peers.

Method

The study was carried out in two publicly funded Universities in South-western Nigeria. The research focused primarily on undergraduate students who were studying for a degree of some kind at the Universities. The participants 40 female and 25 male were purposively selected for the study to understand the symbolic meanings attached to smartphone ownership. Apart from being undergraduates as a characteristic of the respondents, their features cut across socio- economic status, marital status, age, religious inclinations and different ethnic groups. Data used for the article was collected from sixty-five (65) undergraduate students aged 17-27. Data were collected using qualitative methods of data collection. The instrument used in gathering the data is in- depth interview guide developed to elicit information

concerning the symbolic meanings of Smartphone ownership; if ownership of Smartphones makes them popular among their peers; to what extent pressure to fit-in influence adoption of Smartphones. Data were tape-recorded, fully transcribed and analysed using content analysis.

Data and Discussion of Findings

Construction of Smartphone Ownership and the Self-Concept among College Students

The object of this paper is to understand how selected college students in Nigeria construct smartphone ownership. It is also our purpose to examine how the gadget becomes an object of identity projection for these youth. It has been established that youths from “different socio-economic conditions” (Martinez, Perez & Cumsille, 2014) and cultural settings are likely to hold different views with respect to the meanings and usefulness of a media technology such as smartphone. This is why the author thought it imperative to examine how Nigerian college students who are the focus of this study construct ownership of Smartphone.

In interviewees’ views, ownership of Smartphone evokes multiple meanings and definitions. The meaning elicited goes beyond mere technical structure and communicative functions. Participants’ definition of Smartphone ownership show that like houses, clothing and other physical items, Smartphones are material goods which are exposed to people’s general gaze and assessment (Silva & Wright, 2009). Thus, evident in their views of Smartphone ownership are issues related to an individual’s perception of how carrying the media gadget allows them to express perceived social standing, exposure and trendiness more than they are for communication. For instance, a final year male student explained thus: “I believe my iphone 5 gives me a top edge among my peers who do not own one”. Similar view flows profusely in expressions of other participants suggesting a tinge of personal pride in ownership of smartphones:

Smartphone is a sort of technological advancement in communication media. Owning one gives you a kind of status. There is a difference in levels between someone who owns a Smartphone and someone who carries a regular feature phone. It is like this: if I own a Samsung S5 or an iphone my friends will see me as a big boy because it is not easy to own one (IDI/Male Student /200level /19years).

In local parlance, “differences in levels” is indicative of perceived social standing. This interviewee and many others like him view Smartphone as a marker of social standings among his peers because of the general assumptions and sentiments accorded those with expensive Smartphones. Hence, despite the fact that most of the participants were students who receive their upkeeps from either parents or guardians, they seem to express class consciousness – which is not necessarily based on occupational or income context. It is an imaginary divide based on individual students’ perception of where s/he stands among her/his peers as a result of her/his ownership of a mobile gadget more sophisticated and perhaps more costly than the others’. What seems to be emerging from the views of my participants is that Smartphones, to them, is more than a communication gadget. Therefore, an objective effort to understand why they own and carry the gadgets around is not just to communicate.

Furthermore, participants’ representation of Smartphone ownership is clearly expressed through social construction of others students based on the kind of mobile communication gadgets they carry. A female final year students, for example, described her perception of ownership of Smartphones by her colleague as a sign of high socio-economic background of the student:

I see students that own a Smartphone as rich person. The parents must be rich for a student to own a Smartphone like i-phone 5. At least they must be above average (IDI/Female Student/24 years/Final Year).

The obvious implication is that there is an on-going assessment of others by fellow students through a constant introduction of meanings and interpretations based on personal assessment of phones other students carries. Another says:

Students acquire Smartphones mainly to make them feel big. Most do not need it; they just acquire it so that others will see them as carrier of big phones and to show that they belong to a group of those who can afford to own sophisticated gadgets (IDI/Male Student/ 18years/200level).

The above statements direct attention to how a Smartphone becomes a tool in the process of construction and reconstruction of others’ identity. But apart from others’ interpretation of the image of carriers of Smartpones, findings indicate that Smartphone owners themselves conceive specific self-concept and identity as a result of owning the device. Self-concept described by Siibak (2009) as “one’s own perspective on the actual-self” is expressed through impression management. As earlier indicated, most interviewees maintained the claim that acquisition of latest

Smartphones is necessary to achieve and maintain a self-chosen identity. This is not surprising because in today's world of technological-gadget-infused world, young people increasingly take advantage of technology to construct, express, reconstruct and deconstruct personal identities. Among the study group, information and communication technology like Smartphone, apart from its multi-purpose usefulness is appreciated for social-symbolic and non-communicative purpose. The widespread of Smartphone as the preferred mobile media technology among my participants has continued to be reinforced by this extra-functional attribute. Another student carrier explains why she carries an expensive smartphone:

It shows that I am cool and trendy. In my school at the end of the session there is an award night where students give recognitions to the most expensive students. One of the main criteria for this award is the kind of mobile gadget you carry or how expensive your phone is. This shows status and class and I would like to be recognised as someone with class (IDI/Female student/22years/300level).

Carrying a sophisticated Smartphone is constructed as personal identity marker differentiating the 'rich' students from the 'poor' students; from 'cool' students from the 'not so cool' students. Ostensibly, the self-perceived image of carriers of "big phone" (Smartphone) has continued to encourage adoption of this communication gadget as its ownership is construed by carriers to enhance social positions. Of course, many students in accordance with the Nigerian social-environment aim to be perceived as "expensive" or "classy" and strive to acquire symbolic objects which will/could help in construction and management of the impression that an individual wants maintained. Most Smartphone carrying students therefore have the self-belief that by owning a Smartphone they appear cool, trendy and classy to others. As claimed by a sophomore student "I own an Iphone 5s and my friends own old Blackberry and Nokia phones. Of course, with my Iphone 5s I feel superior to them and I know they secretly wish they have my phone" (IDI/Female student /18 years/200level). A final year male student supports this impression by suggesting that self-worth is of utmost value to students' when they buy Smartphones:

Of course the gadget does add to my social prestige. It offers me some level of prestige among my peers. I believe when I am in their midst and they see me with a big phone they give me my due respect. You do know that we [students] all strive to create the image of high class. Everyone does everything that will help ginger his/her swagger on campus (IDI/Male student/ 27 years/ final year student).

Thus, smartphones ownership is a real impetus for self-imagery and impression management for Nigerian college students. For instance, the interviewees' perception of coolness, trendiness or social inclination in the age where "the main modes of connection are email and text messages" (Agger, 2011) and increasing existence on social media platforms, is shaped by how up-to-date an individual appears to be in the technological scene. Striving to be counted among the "cool and trendy" students on campus, young people consider acquisition of latest Smartphone one of the most important accessories to own. While owners/carriers of these 'big phones' may continuously underutilize the technical capabilities of these gadgets, owning one is utilized to achieve self-constructed images. In other words, what appears most paramount is the impression the phone help construct and maintain for its student carriers. Indeed, while possession does not automatically translate to adept at optima-utilisation of the gadget, it does appear to serve other important social function. Hence, it is imperative to further capture the social value of Smartphone ownership by examining how students seemingly become attracted to Smartphone carriers and 'reject' or 'neglect' friendship of non-carrier of this device. To this we now turn.

Smartphone Ownership, Making Friends and Peer Pressure among College Students

The second part of our analysis is to understand how Smartphone ownership enables social ties and create social bonding among students. This is to show the inherent power of new media technology to extend the horizon of relational ability of its carrier. According to Yoon (2006) young people's sociality in the globalizing world may not be described properly without addressing the influence of new communication technologies. Many carriers of Smartphone, indeed, have been found to include mostly individuals that own and visit a number of social media platform where other form of social engagements take place. But when it comes to how Smartphone ownership as a symbolic cultural product helps create social ties and networks of friendship among its carriers, a narrative about how carriers of Smartphones become visible and attractive to others is pervasive among participants. A part three female student particularly described how carrying similar Smartphones seemingly attracts them to other carriers, and makes talking at the point of first contact easy:

Smartphones are attractive and enticing objects. The original and expensive ones turn people's heads and make them notice the owners. In fact if you just sit down holding a Samsung galaxy tab, others will be like "can I see your phone", "how much did you buy it" and from there, you will get talking. For instance, I met a guy last two weeks in the school canteen with the latest Samsung Galaxy which incidentally is the phone I carry. We exchanged numbers and before the end of the week, we were already chatting closely like longtime friends (IDI/Female student /300 level/22years).

First, there is an extended enthusiasm among participants regarding the visibility of and attraction of others towards carriers of latest Smartphone. Although, a few participants expressed cautious association between owning a Smartphone and being friendly, a general positive social effect on carriers of Smartphones is expressed by most, suggesting that the gadget seemingly direct attention towards owners of Smartphones. With an offer of a comparison between regular phone and Smartphone, one interviewee expressed how an ordinary individual student could suddenly become the centre of attention just by owning and carrying a smartphone:

Let us assume you were using a small phone, e.g. Nokia torchlight, people will not really give you attention. But when you are using a Smartphone and you are on social media, people will want to get to talk with you, exchange gists and pictures. So Smartphone kind of make people notice you because if you are not noticeable before, you will be noticeable when you own a 'big phone' (Smartphone) and you can bet that people will want to be your friends (IDI/ female student/ 200level/20 years).

Meeting new people and making friends with other carriers of Smartphones as described by interviewees illustrate the importance attached to being on the same wave length in terms of social media technology. The feeling of connectedness is attached to possession of this media gadget and the possibility of becoming friends for my participants is at higher height when they own communication gadgets which make hooking-up on social media platforms (one of the relational enhancing apps on Smartphones) a reality. Although, regular phones retain the communication attributes with which people can still keep contact, participants acknowledged and appreciated the present virtual reality which brings about far more relational possibilities beyond voice calls. The narrative of a final year student in this wise is worth considering for he notes thus: "Smartphone keeps you social with your friends; chatting on Smartphones help keep the tie of your friendship fresh and strong". Consequently, much of young peoples' sense of interconnectedness is inclined towards techno-social object such as Smartphones which keeps them in constant

connection with one another twenty-four seven. It has thus become unimaginable for young college students to understanding how others experience lives without a Smartphone and making friends with these 'others' is a slim possibility:

Well a popular expression says "birds of same feather flock together". I am not being proud but it is not possible for me to make friends with someone with a regular phone. How do we keep in contact? By calling? No way. We got to meet on whatsapp or facebook and others (IDI/ Female student/21years/300level).

Second, aside meeting and making friends, maintaining close ties with friends has also become imperative for carriers of Smartphones. The experience of close connections is expressed in terms of bonding capacity, experience of nearness and non-physical social interaction. A participant said interaction and bonding with close friends and relatives may be limited "if you do not own a Smartphone" (Male student/22year/300level), leading one other interviewee to retort in response to a probing question on relational capacity of Smartphone thus: "if you do not have that kind of phone, you cannot really communicate because I cannot always buy call cards each time I would like to relate with my friends" (IDI/ male student/17 years/100 level). And a part two (sophomore) female student add this expression:

It is not like it is the phone that makes the friendship stronger, but the on-going relationship and communication it enables. Through BBM, Instagram and Facebook – it (Smartphone) helps me and my friends bond better and makes us wax stronger. Minus calling, it really makes keeping touch, sharing of picture, gisting and others really easy (IDI/ female/19years200level).

This may indicate that students carrying regular feature phones may find making and sustaining close social relations with carriers of Smartphones hard to come-by. This is because participants now believe closeness and tie of friendship degenerate without owning a Smartphone. To say this differently, while the above might lead one to suggest that Smartphone ownership is a positive enhancer of individual carriers' sociability, other ideas in participants' responses indicate the possibility of at least one other social consequence: neglect and rejection of non-carriers' (of Smartphones) friendship:

Although smartphone may attract you to people it can also make you neglect other people. For instance, we are three friends and two of us own Smartphones and the third person does not own one. We will talk more through social networking sites and the third person will be left out. It will make other two friends closer while leaving the third person out (IDI/ male student/ 200 level/ 19 years).

Is the device then an object of fragmentation among young people? There is no evidence to suggest this is so at least not among my participants. However, there is evidence to suggest that participants believe that students assess themselves based on the type of phones they carry thereby creating subtle pressure on non-carriers. In other words, students with “cool” Smartphones seem considerably popular and fit into their circle of friends easily than those with regular phone. While there was no discussion about bullying as a result of non-ownership, interviewees seem to perceive preference for cool Smartphones as a good marker of identity and a way to gauge the worth of allowing an individual to join their groups. This pressure appeared to lead almost all my participants to express preference for a Smartphone over regular phones as their mobile phone of choice. For example, a final year student recalled how he first came to buy his first Smartphone about three years back:

I got my first Smartphone in my second year at the university. At that time few students had one and anyone with a Smartphone was like the bomb. At that time Smartphone was becoming the in-thing; everyone wants one. My friends kept pestering me about when I was going to get around to buy mine. The pressure was much and I had no choice but find means to buy mine because everybody that was somebody on campus had one (IDI/male student/21 years/300level).

When I asked why buying such a phone had to be predicated on pressure from the others, another interviewee simply retorted “to meet up with my friends” (IDI/Male student/20years/300level). Yet this is what a female final year student has to say about peer pressure and Smartphone ownership in her school:

Nobody really ask you to go get a Smartphone before you become their friends. But you kind of get negative reactions to your presence if you carry Nokia torchlight (*the local alas for regular phone such as Nokia 310 in Nigeria* – my comment) with you around. They are likely to snub you or not even reply to your greetings (IDI/ Female student/24years/400level).

This finding strongly supports Hewitt (1995) and Cullingford and Morrison’s (1997) views that the influence of peer groups among college students is strong both within and outside school and within and outside academic work classrooms. Peer group is another word for committee of friends who are more or less support base to one another. But more importantly, it serves as an avenue for individual’s sense of identity by reflecting, reinforcing and reciprocating valued aspects of the self (Cullingford and Morrison, 1997). Thus, when it comes to the question of adoption of Smartphones, participants also articulate a dialogue reflexive of peer pressure, as

many interviewees recognise the subtle or indirect force to “meet up” with their friends’ level. Therefore, ubiquitous in interviewees’ conversation is the fact that people who were important to them nudge them towards buying one:

Friends tend to adopt their friends’ fashion senses and if one of my friends buys a designer like channel or Dolce she will introduce it to others (friends) and encourage us to shop where she shopped. The same thing goes for Smartphones, my friends use my kind of phone too, and it is a group thing (female student / 18years/200level).

In the case of my interviewees, the approval of committee of friends and significant others of the type of Smartphones they carry/own comes out as an important factor in explaining the reasons why the gadget seems irresistible for most of them. Like other young people from other climes, fitting-in into the real and imagined group identity is vital to most of my participants. In fact, some of my subject described themselves as the “happening babes” on campus, and that all their members can only be seen with the latest Smartphones. Off course, this is akin to what Cullingford and Morrison (1997) refer to as trying to gain “social acceptability” and which, indeed is a strong human need.

Conclusion

The study explored the social construction of meaning attached to acquisition of Smartphone among undergraduates in Nigeria. All the students interviewed owned latest Smartphone mobile communication gadgets. Majority of the students indicated that their Smartphones mean more to them than just communication object; suggesting that Smartphones are symbolic objects to them. Although, the students interviewed were of different socio-economic background, they more or less interpreted ownership of Smartphone in similar manner. Their interpretation of someone with a Smartphone included being a cool, trendy and or wealthy personality. These interpretations however influenced their attitude towards carriers and non-carriers of Smartphones. The students interviewed seem to have a very strong attraction for owners of similar or more sophisticated Smartphones. They tend to believe that those that own Smartphones are popular and others would simply want to speak and relate with them. By extension, subtle pressure from friends and significant others were declared as part of the influence on why they have to adopt Smartphones. Invariably, most of the interviewees implied that indirect peer pressure is a significant factor in adoption of Smartphone.

The article has thus demonstrated that smartphone is today part of popular culture as well as a system of symbolic interpretation among Nigerian students. This is more so as most of my participants appear to share similar meanings of the technology, and race to adopt it to either maintain self-image or create an identity for themselves. Consequently, social construction of Smartphone ownership is an important, though neglected, factor in adoption decision of Smartphones among the students.

Nevertheless, the author recognizes several important limitations of this article. One, due to the purposive selection technique used to recruit the participants, the students in the study cannot be said to be representative of all Nigerian students and the conclusions therefore would not easily be amenable to generalizations. Two, Smartphones have been recognized as important educational technology in other climes. My article did not explore this important problematic because of its potential to extend the scope and purpose of the article. With this said, further research that examine how much Nigerian students use Smartphones for educational and research purposes in their academic pursuit would be of scholarly benefits.

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