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Smartphones and young publics: A new challenge for public relations practice and relationship building

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on smartphones and their potential contribution to relationship building, between organizations and young publics. A survey among a representative sample of 550 young, Israelis, aged 21–31, and sixty personal in-depth interviews with undergraduate students were, conducted. The findings reveal that the smartphone satisfies both interaction-related and cognitive-related, needs, but organizations do not utilize the dialogic potential of the smartphone to engage and, to build relationships with young publics.

1. Introduction

The co-creational perspective put organization–public relationship (OPR) at the center of public relations research (Botan & Taylor, 2004). This study embraces the co-creational perspective, since it emphasizes the importance of dialog and two-way communication to organization–public relationship building, while focusing on a new technology: the smartphone. Nowadays, for the first time, mobile technology enables the usage of Web 2.0 and social media ubiquitously, embodied in what is best known as smartphones. As such, the smartphone enables public relations practitioners to implement the co-creational principles in practice, while interacting with various publics 24/7, using diverse content and platforms. According to Portio Research (2013), approximately 46 billion applications were downloaded in 2012 by users around the world. Indeed, mobile phone usage became an integral part of daily-life routine, and what is more, its usage has well eclipsed the standard communication through voice phone calls (Ling, 2004).

The smartphone entered the Israeli market of cellular communications in 2008, and since then the number of users is in a state of a rapidly growing. As for July 2012 there were in Israel approximately 3,105,474 smartphones with an internet connection, an increase of 33% from the previous year (Flurry Analytics, 2012). Patterns of mobile phone usage in Israel position the mobile phone as an instrument of great importance and as an everyday, multi-purpose and interpersonal device (Lemish & Cohen, 2005).

Since young people tend to be early adopters of new technologies (Rogers, 2003) and they serve as strategic publics of various businesses and nonprofit associations, this study tries to map the perceptions, patterns of usage, and profile of the

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typical young smartphone adopter. This is done in order to better understand how organizations can utilize the smartphone to engage and to build relationships with young publics.

Three research questions guide this study:

RQ1. What are the main uses of smartphones among young early adopters?

RQ2. Do young early adopters use the smartphone to communicate with businesses and nonprofit associations?

RQ3. To what extent do young early adopters attribute various gratifications to smartphones?

Revealing the main uses of smartphones among young early adopters may help public relations practitioners to better understand on what platforms and with what type of content they have better chances to successfully engage with these publics. Moreover, it can help practitioners understand the importance of smartphones in satisfying various needs of young publics, among them receiving valuable content, sharing information, and engaging with family, friends, and organizations.

2. Sample and methodology

The data for this study was collected using both a qualitative and a quantitative method. First, a survey was conducted. The survey included a representative sample of 550 young Israelis, aged 21–31 (maximum sample error 4.5%). The survey contained 65 questions that referred to: (a) the profile of the smartphone user; (b) frequency and types of usage; (c) possible gratifications that one may attribute to smartphone usage. Second, 60 personal in-depth interviews were conducted with Israeli undergraduate students. The interviews, each about an hour, explored the perceptions of the students regarding smartphone usage, frequency and type of usage, and the personal experiences of the students with the new device.

3. Findings

The sample was distributed evenly between females (50.2%) and males (49.8%), the age ranged from 21 to 31 with a mean of 25.45 (SD = 2.75).

The findings revealed that the smartphone replicates its function as a medium for voice conversation (performed daily by 85.3%), but it is mainly used for Web surfing (87.3%), and also for text messaging (83.5%). It is important to note that almost half (45.6%) of the respondents had unlimited Internet connection packages, which allowed them to surf and use internet related applications without restriction.

Almost 69% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they use their smartphones to search for information; 54.7% agreed or strongly agreed that they use their smartphones "for fun", 47.1% use a photo application (such as *Instagram*) at least once a day, and 52.4% use gaming applications at least once a day. In addition, 72.0% visit social networks at least once a day, while 62.0% do it several times a day. On the other hand, only 14.1% of the respondents reported that they receive daily messages that include commercial ads, while 37.9% receive such messages at least once a week.

The potential of smartphones for commercial purposes is still in its early stages. While only 16.9% reported that they use their smartphones regularly to purchase services or goods, almost 80% had been involved in such activity with their smartphone at least once. Usage of the smartphone for purchase is closely related to the intensity of general usages of the smartphone, thus we found a significant difference of general usages among purchasers and non-purchasers of services or goods ($t_{(548)}$ = 7.6, p < .01). Users who never bought any services or goods through their smartphone use smartphone applications less (M = 3.6, SD = .98) than users who bought through their smartphone at least once (M = 4.4, SD = .72).

Finally, only 14.9% of the respondents reported that they use their smartphones to contact businesses or other organizations, a quarter (25.1%) never uses location-based services (LBS), and 31% use LBSs once a week or less.

When asked about their usage habits during the in-depth interviews, similar answers were given. All participants indicated that they use their smartphones for interpersonal and social interactions, as well as for information "mining" (especially news). In addition, escapism-oriented activities, such as watching clips, movies, and sports games, listening to music or playing games, were much less popular among interviewees. Although many said that they use their smartphones for routine errands (like checking their bank accounts, results of medical tests or college grades), only few said that they use their mobile phones for shopping. Among those who did, using eBay and similar other applications seemed to be very popular. Other usages included checking for coupons in designated sites or applications, and checking for up-to-date products, and sometimes even purchasing, especially through applications of popular fashion brands. Nevertheless, none of the interviewees said that he/she uses the smartphone to interact or communicate with nonprofit associations.

In order to analyze the findings, five indexes of gratification clusters were computed: (1) *Cognitive index* – news updating, information quest and management of information; (2) *Human integrative index* – staying in touch with friends and family, transference of personal message, acknowledging others (3) *Environmental integrative index* – participation in local events, feeling of belongings to local and global; (4) *Emotional index* – amusement, games, having fun, self-stimulation; (5) *Diversion index* – relaxation, time passing, fight one's boredom.

The results indicate that the highest gratification index is *Human integrative index* with a mean of 5.04 (SD = 1.06), following the *Cognitive index* with a mean of 4.39 (SD = 1.18); *Diversion index* with a mean of 4.26 (SD = 1.33); *Emotional index* with a mean of 3.8 (SD = 1.19) and least the *Environmental integrative index* with a mean of 2.84 (SD = 1.26).

4. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study clearly indicate that smartphones have become an indispensable medium among young publics, being used in various ways and for multiple reasons. Some of the traditional internet activities, such as sending and receiving electronic mail and surfing the Web are being replicated. However, the findings reveal that *interaction* is the keyword for smartphone usage, as the most popular applications are those of sending and receiving messages and e-mails, or in other words, interacting with other users. Most users use the smartphone to satisfy both interaction-related and cognitive-related gratifications; they interact with friends and family, but also search for news, interesting content and manage their personal information. In other words, the smartphone offers many new communication channels that a savvy public relations practitioner can utilize for interaction and engagement 24/7 almost everywhere. For example, a public relations practitioner may satisfy the cognitive and interaction-related needs of his publics by posting relevant, interesting and valuable content on the organizational application, by using a conversational style and an open human voice in his online dialog with users, and by combining useful information (important events, sales or calls for action) with playfulness (games, competition) and local based services. Furthermore, the interviews indicated that in the eyes of young publics a smartphone-based application is a "must have", since Web sites, although accessible, are perceived as less attractive and more time-consuming than an organizational application.

The findings also indicate that from a public relations perspective much work still has to be done. Although most young adopters use their smartphones during all day and for various purposes, only a small group of young early adopters use their smartphones to interact with businesses and nonprofit associations, to read organizational messages, to purchase products, services or goods and to utilize location-based services. In other words, public relations practitioners still do not utilize the dialogic potential of the smartphone to better engage and interact with young strategic publics.

Given that smartphones have many unique properties and features, and providing the constantly increasing adoption rate of this innovative technology, it is important that public relations practitioners understand the role of contemporary communication technologies in OPR building. The multiple uses and applications that are offered by smartphones make it, at least potential, a generator of significant change in terms of current patterns of thinking, communication, behavior and socialization among everyday users.

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