Smartphone Habits Among Youth: Uses and Gratification Theory

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ABSTRACT

Rapid technological advancements have led to Smartphone revolution of becoming multifunctional personal devices. These smart phones are equipped with new features, including Internet access, cameras (pictures and videos) and MP3 players. The study examines the complex forces that influence and challenge the socio-cultural values among youth. It investigates the extent to which smart phones were used and their implications for youth in a society that is bounded within the Malay Islamic Monarchy concept. The research questions were explored through the use of qualitative research method, specifically, focus groups and in-depth interviews. The framework utilized to examine the data is the Uses & Gratifications theory. A number of significant findings signify firstly, the tendency for owning smart phone is influenced by the family. Parents gave smart phones to their children either as birthday gifts or after having performed well or passed their final Junior School Examination. Secondly, almost all of the respondents perceived smart phone as the most useful communication device as a mean to contact their friends and families. Thirdly, two important factors for smart phone ownership among youth include safety and emergency purposes. Finally, they also perceived smart phones as a status symbol.

KEYWORDS

Brunei, Smartphone Habit, Uses & Gratification, Youth

1. INTRODUCTION

Smart phones have been celebrated for their benefits, such as to strengthen and maintain familial and social relationships (even on a romantic level) as well as to enhance education quality and improve information sharing. Past studies show that smart phones are an essential tool in strengthening and maintaining familial and social relationships, including romantic relationships as well as to enhance education and information sharing. Nonetheless, it was also criticized as a cause for a number of detrimental effects, among others, addiction and distraction caused by smart phone usage, cyber bullying and exposure to explicit contents. With rapid technological advancements, from a mere mobile communication device, smart phones have transformed into multi-purpose medium with progressively improved features. While it features multiple functions and latest applications (e.g. mobile Internet, mobile chat, social networking sites), this research instigates the issue of smart phones’ role in upholding or challenging the religious beliefs and practices among young people.

A number of research findings elucidate widespread usage of smart phone among young people or youths due to its improved accessibility, mobility, and sense of independence. Additionally, smart phones are also seen as a mean to free these youths from regulations they had at younger age. The smart phone usage is associated with the ways youth communicate or micro-coordinate. These youth

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are also have utilized it for various reasons, including entertainment and information sharing (Wu, 2008; Hill-Wood et al., 2009).

In addition, there are concerns about the impact of smart phone use such as poor academic performance (Campbell, 2005), smart phone addiction or dependency (Walsh, 2009), and exposure to pornographic content (Rodzi, 2009; Chew, 2009). All these are associated with the prevalent use of smart phones by young people. This relates to the objective of this research, which is to examine the extent to which smart phones usage uphold or challenge the religious beliefs and practices among youths. This study, therefore, investigates the degree to which smart phones are used and its implications among youth in the Brunei society, which is bounded by the Malay, Islamic Monarchy concept as a way of life.

This study provides additional evidences, which may suggest how smart phones may provide as sense of independence to youth, not only from parents and teachers as authorities, but also from the youth’ own socio-cultural values and religious beliefs and practices. This study demonstrates how the Bruneian youth utilize smart phones ubiquitously, in ways that meet their needs or fascination, which may or may not contradict with the socio-cultural values and religious beliefs and practices.

In order to illustrate the motivations surrounding smart phone use, the theory of Uses & Gratifications theory is first defined. This is followed by the theory’s assumptions analysis. Additionally, the application of Uses & Gratifications theory of past researches is explored followed by criticisms relating to this theory. Uses & Gratifications theory is a theoretical framework that focuses on what people do with media or technologies (including traditional and new media; television, radio, newspaper, Internet, smart phone, Twitter, Facebook), instead of what media do to people (Roy, 2009).

This paper focuses on a topic of that has been widely studied on young people, in order to fill the gap in regard to the context of smartphone use and its implications among young people from social-cultural perspectives. Moreover, if smartphones are socially contextualized, then how does Brunei, a non-western society of a Malay Islamic Monarchy, influence or challenge the smartphone use and its implications for youth? What are the specific procedures or guidelines for smart phone use by youth in Brunei and how effective are these measures? One of the key contributions of the study is that it extends our understanding of the interaction between young people and smartphones. It further addresses previous research on young people and smartphones and the relevant issues surrounding them, in a continuously changing global environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the theoretical framework that underpins the current study. Uses & Gratifications theory states that individuals (users or audiences) use media in order to satisfy certain gratifications, benefits or needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974). Through this perspective, it is possible to study the motives behind the adoption and usage of smart phones among Brunei youths.

2.1. Uses and Gratifications Theory

Blumler and Katz (1974) first formulated the Uses & Gratifications theory and have identified its five important assumptions. These include: 1) users (audiences) actively select from various media; 2) users’ media selection based on own’s fulfillment; 3) the various media compete for users’ choice; 4) personal, social and contextual factors which determine users’ activities; and 5) the interrelation between media usage and its effects (Reinhard & Dervin, 2009). Consequently, the theory explores the social and psychological needs or any other type of gratifications that are met when individuals use media or technologies (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Lin, 1999; Leung & Wei, 2000; Chen, 2011). Finally, Uses & Gratifications theory enables researchers to predict media or technological effects when the types of gratifications are identified (La Rose & Eastin, 2004; Forreger, 2008).

Past researches that adopted Uses & Gratifications theory include investigations relating to the use of different media types or technologies such as television (Lin, 1999), newspapers (Katz,
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