Understanding consumer indifference in the context of mobile applications

Authors:

**Sunil George Mathew** (Corresponding author)

Doctoral Scholar

Management Development Institute, Gurgaon, India

Email: fpm14sunil_g@mdi.ac.in

**Dr. Jaideep Mukherjee**

Associate Professor of Marketing

Management Development Institute Gurgaon, India
Abstract: Software applications on mobile devices offer a variety of services and have become an integral part of people’s life in the 21st century. Apps, as they are popularly referred to, are the interactive platform of choice that enhances the service experience of many brands due to their ubiquitous, location-aware and personalized nature. In spite of their popularity and obvious utility, users become indifferent to a large number of native apps that they willingly downloaded and installed on their mobile devices. Academic literature in marketing has addressed acquisition, engagement and exit of consumers. Consumers who have turned indifferent, but could still be actively engaged with appropriate mechanisms, have not yet been adequately addressed. This paper introduces the emerging and contemporary characteristic of consumer behavior in terms of indifference towards mobile apps. The ambiguity of engagement, distinguishes indifferent consumers from non-consumers. Interdisciplinary academic literature is explored and combined with some early stage scoping interviews to arrive at an initial understanding of indifference. Equity, affect and disconfirmation are identified as the main evaluative dimensions of satisfaction. Indifference is understood to be the outcome of a neutral evaluation of satisfaction following an engagement episode, moderated by relevance, alternatives and involvement. Understanding indifference could help brands profitably engage their users on mobile devices.
INTRODUCTION

Consumer use of mobile internet is voluntary (Venkatesh et al., 2012). Yet, mobile phone users regularly use only about 15 of the 40 applications (apps) they download onto their phones (Gupta, 2013). Mobile phones and the apps that make them “smart” have very high penetration levels but a large number of the apps do not see continued engagement (O'Connell, 2016). The voluntary act of downloading and installing an app implies some cognitive or affective justification by the user. Installation of a new app and deletion are neither cumbersome nor technically challenging. The lack of engagement thereafter is a cause of concern for marketers.

This paper looks at this user indifference where a user stops being actively engaged with the app but does not exit the service either. The convenience, utility and hedonic aspects of mobile apps cannot be ignored and they have become an integral part of modern life, yet at times users become indifferent to certain apps while still retaining them on their device.

The next section is a brief review of interdisciplinary literature to understand the neutral state of indifference. Marketing literature on engagement and satisfaction are also examined. The following section clarifies the context for the study, highlighting the types of apps and particularly the peculiarities of mobile device usage. Based on this, and a few preliminary scoping interviews conducted among users, an initial understanding of the consumer evaluation of engagement and the neutral state of indifference among users of apps on mobile devices is introduced.
Neutrality

Kaplan (1972) brought attention to neutral attitudes by distinguishing between “neutral ambivalent” and “neutral indifferent” and characterized indifference as the lack of affect. Caciopo, Gardner and Bernston (1999) describe indifference in term of low positivity and negativity and ambivalence as high positivity and negativity but add that both lead to neither approach nor avoidance. They use the concepts of positivity offset and negativity bias to explain the asymmetrical behavior associated with low levels of positivity and negativity. Leander, Shah and Sanders (2014) suggest that observing indifference in others leads to disruption in goal directed behavior which can be overcome by one’s own goal commitment. They define indifference as “lack of motivation towards a goal and characterized by lack of action”.

Perceiving indifference could be simple much like that of basic emotions but interpreting the indifference is much more challenging.

Ambivalence is also a neutral consumer state. Ambivalence has been examined in studies that explore affect and attitude (Thompson Zanna & Griffin, 1995); and from a political science perspective in exploring voter behavior (Lavine et al., 1998; Rudolph & Popp, 2007; Thornton, 2014, Yoo, 2010). The implications of indifference are very different from ambivalence. Gasper & Hackenbracht’s (2015) research suggests that neutral affect is not the same as ambivalence. Neutral affect as per them is not affectless and requires cognitive resources for the neutrality to be sustained. Gasper and Danube (2016) argue that neutral affect should not be defined as the absence of positive or negative affect but as the presence of neutral affect. They go on to aptly explain the working of neutral and ambivalent affect. The presence of strong positive and negative feelings does not result in a neutral judgment since there are strong conflicting emotions, while on the other hand feeling neutral about something may give rise to ambivalent
judgments since the person does not care about either feeling. Olsen, Wilcox & Olsson (2005) observed that ambivalence did not moderate the satisfaction-loyalty relationship.

The comprehensive definition suggested by Otnes et al. (1997) for consumer ambivalence is:

“Consumer ambivalence is the simultaneous or sequential experience of multiple emotional states, as a result of the interaction between internal factors and external objects, people, institutions, and/or cultural phenomena in market oriented contexts, that can have direct and/or indirect ramifications on pre-purchase, purchase or post-purchase attitudes and behavior.”

Thus, ambivalence is an affect laden state with opposing positive and negative assessment in which the user is not able to take a definite position regarding approach or avoidance.

Consumer indifference on the other hand has the key distinction of the absence of strong and realized emotional states. White (1961) describes that an indifferent person “need not be doing or failing to do anything, mental or physical”. The ambiguity of the attitude of indifference (Kaplan, 1972) affects the intention-behavior basis of most consumer behavior theories. The Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975), its successor the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and Triandis’ (1979) Theory of Interpersonal Behavior, all have attitude as a starting point leading to intention and then behavior. Indifference has been often referred to as the absence of affect and motivation (Leander et al. 2014) or the presence of neutral affect (Gasper and Danube 2016).

A neutral state of mind is sometimes described in terms of apathy but the state of indifference is distinct from apathy also. Apathy is described in psychology literature as a clinical condition with a lack of goal-directed behavior in terms of its cognitive, affective and behavioral components (Marin, Biedrzycki & Firinciogullari, 1991).
Indifference finds very little mention in marketing literature. Oliver (1997) had referred to the zone of indifference which he said is “bound by an unspecified range of a lack of evaluative differences”. Building on Oliver’s (1997) model, Santos & Boote (2003) had suggested four post purchase affective states based on the expectation-disconfirmation paradigm. These states are delight, positive indifference, negative indifference and dissatisfaction. Simple confirmation of expectations need not lead to satisfaction but instead could lead to indifference or a neutral state (Erevelles and Leavitt, 1992). These are narrow formulations of the neutral state of indifference. Brands aim to engage the consumers in a relationship so that consumers relate to the brand, engage in repurchase and spread positive word of mouth. Satisfaction is one of the key concepts leading to continued engagement. User indifference on the other hand suppresses engagement. Relevant marketing literature, especially related to mobile apps, is examined and inter-disciplinary literature reviewed in the case of indifference where sparse marketing literature exists.

**Consumer Engagement**

Consumer engagement has been an area of emphasis over the past few years. The Marketing Science Institute’s research priorities at least from 2010 have always emphasized the importance of the study of customer experiences (MSI, 2014; MSI, 2016) which includes an emphasis on consumer engagement. There are articles in the leading marketing journals that deal with engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2010; Higgins, 2006; Higgins & Scholer, 2009; Hseih & Chang(2016); Sprott et al., 2009; Van Doorn et al., 2012; Verhoef et al., 2010; Vivek et al 2014). Journal articles have just started reflecting the importance of the mobile device as a means of engagement (Bellman et al., 2011; Dinner et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2013; Shankar et al 2016; Ström et al 2014).
One common factor across conceptualizations of customer engagement is that it is not restricted to just transactions between the customer and the brand (Kumar et al., 2010; Van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2014). It is viewed as behavioral (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2012), an attitude or state (Higgins & Scholer, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011) or multi-dimensional (Brodie et al., 2011; Gambetti et al., 2012; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Both academic and practitioner literature confirm the benefits of engagement leading to loyalty and future revenues (Higgins & Scholer, 2009; Kumar et al. 2010; Schadler & McCarthy, 2012). Vivek et al. (2014) had collated many of the existing definitions of customer engagement and used extensive qualitative enquiry to further arrive at their definition of customer engagement.

“Consumer engagement goes beyond purchase and is the level of the customer’s (or potential customer’s) interactions and connections with the brand or firm’s offerings or activities, often involving others in the social network created around the brand/offering/activity.”

The discussion regarding engagement is important since customer indifference is an obstacle that reduces the impact of engagement efforts by brands.

**Satisfaction**

Satisfaction is usually the first emotion examined in marketing literature related to post-purchase behavior though other emotions may also have an important role (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Customer satisfaction influences retention or loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994) which in turn influences profitability (Anderson et al., 1994; Oliver, 1980; Rust & Zahorik, 1993). A majority of literature on satisfaction has referred to it in terms of the difference between expectations and perceived quality or performance (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993). Oliver (1993) identified the satisfaction response as consisting of the affective, disconfirmation (cognitive) and attribute-
based satisfaction judgments. Szymanski & Henard (2001), in their meta-analysis of satisfaction literature, found equity, disconfirmation, performance, expectations and affect to be the major antecedents of satisfaction. Equity and disconfirmation were found to be the most strongly related to satisfaction. Interestingly, the study by Mittal and Kamakura (2001) shows that the relation between satisfaction and loyalty may be moderated by customer characteristics to the extent that satisfaction may be weakly correlated with repurchase intentions. Thus, the relationship between engagement, satisfaction and loyalty as part of the overall consumer experience construct needs to be understood in terms of its components and moderators.

The context

This section sets the context and relevance of the inquiry into user indifference with mobile apps. The different types of apps are identified and frame of reference for this study clarified, followed by a brief section distinguishing mobile app based internet access and traditional media avenues. The introduction of the Apple iPhone and the proliferation of Android phones due to the platform support from Google, drastically changed the means of communication available to the average user. From being a device to make calls, mobile phones transformed into mobile computers that also make calls (Hall & Anderson, 2009). The mobile phone is no longer restricted to telephonic conversations but facilitates a number of services. The convergence of multiple technologies like high speed internet, a GPS sensor, gyroscope, accelerometer, Bluetooth, high-definition and capacitive touch screens, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) etc., have made the mobile device an integral part of the modern day life. Because of these technologies, mobile use has transcended into services like chat, email, interactive video games, social networking, e-commerce, cab hailing, navigation, entertainment and productivity among a host of newer services getting developed. The consumers interact with their phones
through specialized software called apps which utilize the hardware capabilities to give users an experience which was unprecedented.

Apps have emerged as an important technological medium that allow users to utilize the functionalities of their smart phones. Branded mobile phone apps are a persuasive force and their usage result in increase in interest in the brand and the product category (Bellman et al., 2011). User behavior varies depending on whether consumers browse the internet on mobile devices or on personal computers. Ghose, Goldfarb and Han (2012) indicated that the higher search costs due to smaller screen size and a preference for geographically closer businesses differentiate mobile browsing. There are several peculiarities of the mobile ecosystem that differentiate it from other marketing, interaction or communication channels that were previously available like television, radio, print or even desktop-based internet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mobile platform</th>
<th>Traditional platforms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pull based marketing</td>
<td>Push based marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always on</td>
<td>Effort required to access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always connected</td>
<td>Dependent on subscriptions etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Usually public or publically viewable usage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalized/customized</td>
<td>Standardized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short, intense interactions</td>
<td>Interactions are not intense and are usually passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>Limited interactivity, when possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location awareness</td>
<td>Users access these media mostly at non-retail locations</td>
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The app driven mobile ecosystem is largely a pull based platform (Ström, 2014) with the user deciding what brands and communications are interesting and worth engaging in. Traditional
platforms have been push based advertising platforms with the advertisers and content providers deciding the type, duration and frequency of exposure.

Mobile phones are always kept on and are connected to the internet, which may have negative implications for users (Dobele and Beverland, 2012), but it avoids user effort to access and switch on the device for use. Traditional media like TV needed to be switched on and the particular channel to be selected. Even computers needed to be switched on and connected to the internet thus denying the instant accessibility and connectedness that smartphones provide. Mobile phones are personal devices and users generally develop close and intimate relationships with their mobile devices (Shankar et al., 2010). The portability and screen size require proximity for use which enhances the private nature of these devices. Other media like the TV and print media are generally consumed publically and shared. Other than just being personal devices, the login and user profiles required for the complete app experience ensure that engagement through mobile phones are deeply personal and customized. The unique phone number, GPS based location information, usage and browsing history are important data points that can be used to customize the experience for a user. Traditional media had no way of profiling the user in real-time.

Consumers, increasingly, are using their mobile phones in short intense bursts and these bursts could be happening anywhere and at anytime and they expect the brands and the apps to be responsive and relevant at these moments (Bernoff, 2014; Google, 2015).

Interactivity is an important construct that influences loyalty and in the context of mobile, interactivity becomes all the more important (Fourner, Racherla & Babb, 2014). Traditional mass media like newspapers and TV due to their limitations could not provide consumers with a sense of interactivity.
Location awareness is distinct to the mobile medium and an integral differentiator that affects consumer behavior (Ghose et al., 2012). Users have a preference for geographically close businesses and in turn businesses can be aware of the consumers’ location to adapt marketing messages accordingly. Traditional media is typically consumed at home or office and usually not geographically relevant to business.

The distinct characteristics of mobile based services can be understood from the previous discussion but there are different categorizations of apps which need to be distinguished to understand the context of this paper. Heitkötter et al. (2012) compare different types of apps and differentiate between native apps, web apps and hybrid apps. Native apps (like Truecaller, Angry Birds) are developed using the software development kits (SDK) of the specific platforms, most common being Apple’s iOS and Google’s Android. They need to be downloaded from the respective App/Play Store, reside on the phone memory and are able to access the functionalities of the smartphone like location sensors, camera, accelerometers etc. Web apps (like Mercedes Benz International, Financial Times) use the browser to deliver a mobile optimized web site. Since they are browser based they are not able to access the full functionality of the device and need to be accessed via a URL. Hybrid apps (like Khan Academy, Instagram) combine functionality similar to native apps with web based technology. These are based on cross platform approaches, like Adobe’s Phonegap, to building apps. They can be installed onto the device like the native apps but lack their speed and power.

The scope of this paper is restricted to these native apps which need to be downloaded onto the mobile device and the user grants permissions for it to access components and data on the device for full functionality.
At a different level apps are distinguished based on cost of acquisition. Paid apps, which require an upfront payment, are becoming less relevant and free or “freemium” apps which depend on in-app purchase, for revenues, are becoming more popular (Clancy, 2015). The financial cost at the time of download maybe zero for the user, but there are other costs such as privacy, effort, data download fees etc. Thus, users are interchangeably referred to as customers and consumers in this paper.

**Understanding engagement among consumers**

To understand user engagement with mobile apps 10 in-depth interviews were undertaken. These interviews were undertaken as preliminary scoping interviews and lasted 40-45 minutes and followed a semi-structured approach. They were intended to aid the researchers to get an initial understanding about app usage from a diverse range of users. The main motivation to carry out such a phase was to allow the research team to incorporate informed adjustments to the interview schedule before a more comprehensive data collection phase. These interviews helped identify possible customer journeys on mobile and particularly the 5 post-engagement states of users. This paper incorporates this initial user understanding along with support from literature to suggest a basic model to understand customer indifference.

The topics that were covered in these interviews and some important responses are mentioned here. The gender (M/F) and age (years) are used to uniquely identify the respondents.

**App discovery:** Questions included sources of awareness, process of installation and role of social network in the decision to adopt apps.

M 29 - “….. newspaper articles and blogs that recommend the best apps for certain functions. I also check reviews on the app store to see what users have to say”.
Opinions on paid apps: Most of the users interviewed had never paid for an app. Expectations were higher from paid apps. The functionality and number of free apps available deterred users from investing upfront on an app.

F 35 – “I had once paid for an app that let me watch TV on my mobile since there was no free app for it. I do not use that app now.”

M 29- “There are usually many free apps available. If I have a very specific need, I might consider a paid app. I haven’t bought any app till now.”

App deletion: Users did not delete apps on a whim. They usually deleted all redundant apps when they either needed space or had the free time to optimize their device. The choice of apps to delete is based on a visual scan and recall of its cognitive-affective utility.

M 26- “I usually use my free time, maybe once a month or lesser, to delete all the apps that I am dissatisfied with and don’t need.”

App dependence: There are some apps that users feel they are dependent on, like Facebook and messaging apps to stay connected with friends and family. Some apps have a specific purpose and when the user’s context changes, the app no longer remains relevant

M 29: “In my previous job I used to use this app that let me take the dimensions of a room. Now I don’t need it so I deleted it.”

F 35: “I use Apple’s iMessenger because my sister and relatives abroad use it. It is my connection with them. I would not delete it unless all of them switched to Android/”
Dormant/low recall of downloaded apps: Users are able to easily recall many of the apps that they use regularly. The ones that are not easily recalled typically have lesser user involvement, low current relevance to the user or multiple competitive alternatives.

F 30: “When my baby was younger, I had installed a screen locking app so that I could play videos without being interrupted by my baby’s touch. Now I do not need that app so it is difficult to recall its name.”

M 36: “I forgot to mention Viber. It is a messaging app that I downloaded to chat with someone who had gone overseas. I don’t use it now because there are many other options that are there which are as good, if not better.”

App dissatisfaction: Dissatisfaction occurs when an app fails to deliver to its promise. It does not arise out of just one failing but is a state of cumulative inconsistencies.

M 40: “I had ordered for furniture to be delivered to my new house but a defective unit got delivered. Though they replaced the defective unit, it required repeated interactions over an ill-designed interface.”

THE PRELIMINARY UNDERSTANDING OF INDIFFERENCE

This initial model of the customer’s engagement cycle on mobile apps is developed based on user interviews and a review of literature (shown in Figure 1). After initial engagement with a mobile app, the consumer may evaluate the app for possible future use. A positive assessment along with a recurring need for the service would lead to continued engagement with the app. This cycle of engagement has been well covered in most marketing literature on engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2010; Van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010; Vivek et
al., 2014). If the user has a very strong dissatisfactory experience then the consumer would cognitively disengage from that service/app and become a lost customer (De Matos et al., 2007; Homburg et al., 2007; Kumar et al., 2015; Stauss & Friege, 1999; Thomas et al., 2004). This arm of post consumption dissonance is covered in the service recovery and “lost customer” aspects of marketing literature. The interviews of apps users suggested three possible situations that remain. The customer may be dissatisfied but continues to use the service while not cognitively committing to the relationship; or the customer may be satisfied but still does not cognitively engage with the service. These two cases find theoretical support in the construct of anticipation of conflicting reactions (Priester et al. 2007). The third case is of neutrality.

Here, the affect neutral state of “indifference” is important, since the focus of this paper is on the cognitively unengaged state with low affect.

Figure 1: Evaluation of consumer experiences.
User indifference is the affect neutral state where pre-engagement expectations are neither strongly negatively disconfirmed nor strongly positively confirmed and thus is the zone of indifference (Santos & Boote, 2003). When the perceived app performance is marginally better than expected app performance then the user may be satisfied (yet indifferent) but not delighted (and thus not cognitively engaged). Thus, future engagement would depend on other app attribute based factors. When the perceived app performance is marginally inferior to the expected performance, the user might consider other app attributes and competitive options instead of disengaging immediately. In both these cases the anticipation of conflicting reactions (Priester et al., 2007) prevents users from indulging in reengagement or exit.

The preliminary conceptual model developed from a review of literature and early stage scoping interviews is shown in Figure 2. Application discoverability has been addressed by researchers from various perspectives and is not the emphasis of this paper. Some researchers point to assessment of satisfaction starting from the app discovery phase at the application store itself (Song et al., 2014). The focus of this paper is the post-download phase when the user interacts with the app. Consumers start engaging with an application when they download an application on to their mobile devices. The act of downloading (or installing) an app is a voluntary action by users. Venkatesh, Thong and Xu’s (2012) extended Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT2) proposes constructs that affect behavioral intention to use technology in the context of mobile internet. The constructs suggested in UTAUT2 such as social influence, performance expectancy, effort expectancy, facilitating conditions, price value, habit and hedonic motivations hold relevance in the case of mobile apps also which are a particular case of mobile internet use.
Various scholars have observed a relationship between satisfaction and loyalty in the online space (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Bansal et al., 2004; Srinivasan, Anderson & Ponnavolu, 2002; Szymanski & Hise, 2000). There has been a lot of debate about the definition of satisfaction and at a conceptual level about whether it is a process or an outcome and the dominant theories have treated it as the response to an evaluation process (Giese & Cote, 2000).

Oliver’s work (1980, 1983, 1997) produced one of the most popular and verified models of satisfaction. Satisfaction has been often modeled in terms of disconfirmation of expectations across many researches with a theoretical basis similar to Oliver’s works (Erevelles & Leavitt, 1992; Santos & Boote, 2003). In this customers are satisfied when their expectations are exceeded by actual performance; and dissatisfied when their actual performance is lesser than their expectations. This is a simple and intuitive conceptualization. Satisfaction is also seen as being more than just a cognitive assessment of performance and expectations. Affect influences satisfaction judgments beyond that understood in the disconfirmation of expectations model (Mano & Oliver, 1993; Westbrook & Oliver 1991). Satisfaction has also been seen in terms of equity when consumers compare themselves with others (Oliver & Swan, 1989; Swan & Oliver, 1991). Affect is indicated to be a enhancement to the over emphasized cognitive derivation of satisfaction.

Disconfirmation of expectations, equity and affect were among the constructs that were found significant in a meta analysis of satisfactions studies by Szymanski & Henard (2001). The preliminary conceptual model proposed in this paper thus uses these three aspects to evaluate satisfaction. In the domain of mobile apps also these hold true. Disconfirmation of expectations is an important dimension of satisfaction on mobile apps. If a person is a regular Uber user, then expecting a lower price, availability and decent drivers are a given but situations like surge-
pricing could lead to disconfirmation and therefore dissatisfaction. Gamification and user interface designs enhance the role of affect in mobile app satisfaction assessment. The equity expectation of a Dunkin’ Donuts app user would be for shortcuts to regular orders and to be rewarded for loyalty with special offers on the app.

The scoping interviews indicated that user assessment of the app experience and therefore motivation to stay engaged depended on certain other factors also. The user interviews showed that considerations of relevance, alternatives and involvement moderated the evaluations of the app experience.

Apps which are installed for a particular purpose might lose relevance once the task is completed. A working professional might install the edX app to stay updated while pursuing a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) but once the course gets completed, the user becomes indifferent to the app maybe even after a satisfactory experience since it lacks relevance.

Relevance has received a lot of attention in information retrieval literature (Borlund 2003) and in instructional design as part of Keller’s (1987) Attention Relevance Confidence Satisfaction (ARCS) model of motivation design theory.

Availability of alternatives affects the satisfaction from choice with an inverted U-shaped distribution (Reutskaja & Hogarth, 2009). Even when dissatisfied, a lack of viable alternatives (Sung & Choi, 2010) may nudge a user to continue with an app. A retail consumer interested in cheap Chinese products would have to continue using the AliExpress app even though the delivery lead times might have lead to dissatisfaction in prior occasions. Iyengar and Lepper (2000) explored the too-much choice effect and suggested that the presence of fewer options were more motivating and the choice more satisfactory.
Traditionally, involvement has been seen as an important construct in consumer behavior. Highly involved consumers tend to take more time and put more effort into product choice (Assael, 1981). In Information Systems (IS) literature user involvement has been seen as “a subjective psychological state reflecting the importance and personal relevance of a system for a user” (Barki & Hartwick, 1989). Users might be very involved with certain social networking apps or even travel related apps. The high affective involvement would moderate the evaluation of the app experience. Other apps like news apps or the weather app might show lower involvement levels.

One of the simplest yet effective descriptions of indifference is in terms of lack of motivation towards a goal and characterized by lack of action (Leander, Shah and Sanders, 2014). While both indifference and ambivalence are neutral states, indifference can be more unpredictable in its consequences. An ambivalent user who has both strongly favorable and strongly unfavorable assessments of an app would reengage with the app at the next opportunity if the situation changes even slightly favorably. An indifferent user on the other hand has to be first motivated to acknowledge any change in the app or the service.

Indifference towards mobile apps is a particularly complicated case of indifference since this attitude is towards a highly personalized and interactive service. The always on – always connected nature of mobile apps increase the cognitive load on consumers leading to dynamic consumption contexts. Consumers switch across various app services based on their context. In the rush of morning commute the user intuitively accesses the Google Maps app to check traffic and route conditions. While waiting for a meeting or at a checkout line, a quick round of social networking is facilitated on the Facebook app or on some Whatsapp groups. An interesting dish or thing quickly gains a digital avatar on Instagram. A piece of news overheard at work is
confirmed on a local news app. These short intense interactions that consumers have with their mobile apps are moments-of-truth for the apps, in which the customer evaluates the app for the value it provides. When an app moves out of this automaticity of use, it starts its journey towards indifference.

Figure 2: A preliminary model indicating consumer indifference

Further research

The complexity with the construct of indifference is that it can be “felt” but not “used” or exercised (White 1961). It may be empirically difficult for focal firms to measure some engagement behaviors (Van Doorn et al., 2010) and it is going to be all the more tougher for a construct like indifference. While measurement of indifference is one of the major areas for future research, the conceptualization could be further enhanced with other constructs not examined within the scope of this paper. Time could be one such variable. Van Doorn et al.
(2010) concede that extended periods of dormancy complicate the measurement of engagement behaviors.

The paper presents the authors' conceptualization of consumer experience on apps leading to indifference based on theoretical concepts. The user data collected is limited and in the form of early stage scoping interviews to guide the authors. The research is developing on lines of a grounded theory approach in formulating the conception of indifference. The lack of direct theoretical support but the presence of similar conceptualizations suggest a grounded theory approach based on the method suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1994).

A more empirical phase of research would follow once the concepts are fully refined.

**Implications for academia and practitioners**

The construct of user indifference has not been studied in marketing literature, particularly in the context of mobile technology and apps. The present study is work in progress for a more detailed conceptualization of indifference, its antecedents and its consequences, to address this gap in the literature.

Practitioners need to increase engagement and control indifference. Van Doorn et al. (2010) contend that engagement behaviors may be demonstrated by only a small number of customers. Thus a realization of the situation of the majority of other customers is important for business success.

**Limitation**

Gupta (2013) clarifies that launching mobile apps may not be the right engagement strategy for all types of brands. This research has value for the kind of apps that can sustain user engagement.
The research is at an initial state and constructs and relations are getting developed in parallel from both supporting theory and consumer interviews. The process would be iterative and requires multiple rounds of integration of theory and user experiences.
References


