



Consumer attitudes towards mobile marketing in the smart phone era



Catherine Watson^a, Jeff McCarthy^b, Jennifer Rowley^{c,*}

^a Ignis Asset Management, 50 Bothwell Street, Glasgow G2 6HR, UK

^b Business School, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M15 6BH, UK

^c Department of Languages, Information and Communications, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M15 6LL, UK

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory online questionnaire-based study confirms the findings from earlier studies in the pre-smart phone era regarding consumers' negative attitudes towards mobile marketing communications. This study shows that these attitudes persist despite increasing frequency of use and increased functionality of mobile phones in the smart phone era. Consumers perceive their mobile device to be for personal communication, and prefer to be able to exercise control over their interaction with organisations. Findings suggest that acceptance can be enhanced by permission marketing, trust-building, creating a sense of being in control, and useful and entertaining website content. Accordingly, pull technologies seem to hold particular promise for mobile marketing communications. This study, therefore, proceeds to explore use of and attitudes towards an important pull technology, QR codes. QR codes, two-dimensional bar codes, can be scanned to provide access to websites, information and applications. Despite their potential, uptake is low. Users in this study who had scanned a QR code had used them to access a variety of different content on different types of items and in different locations. The most frequently accessed type of content was information on a web site, the two most common locations for a scanned QR code were a newspaper or magazine advert, or outdoor advert or poster, and the two most common locations at which scanning was performed were in the street and at home. Ease of use, utility and incentives are drivers to continued use whilst lack of knowledge about how-to scan or of the benefits of QR codes may hinder adoption. Recommendations are offered for practice and for further research.

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1. Introduction

Mobile media are compelling channels for digital marketers and advertisers due to their potential to support one-to-one, one-to-many and mass communication both cheaply and effectively. In addition, the reach of mobile marketing is large and growing. Access to mobile networks is available to 90% of the world's population (ITU, 2010) and web-enabled mobile handsets now make up 20% of the 3bn mobile devices worldwide, with market share heading towards 50% over the next three to five years (ComScore, 2010). Global Industry Analysts Inc. has predicted that the worldwide mobile advertising market will reach \$18.5 billion by 2015 while the total global mobile applications market will be worth \$25 billion (Marketandmarkets, 2010). Varnali and Toker (2010) suggest that 'the mobile channel has morphed into an ultimate marketing vehicle' (p.144), but they also acknowledge that research in mobile marketing is still in its early stages.

Mobile marketing can be used to build customer engagement with a brand, through text messages, mobile advertising, permission based marketing, the delivery of mobile content, user-generated content, and mobile commerce. However, mobile technology presents companies with challenges as well as opportunities. In particular, earlier studies in the pre-smart phone era, where the main means of marketing communication was via text or SMS messages have shown that consumers perceive mobile marketing communications to be variously irritating (Muk, 2007), an invasion of privacy (Windham and Orton, 2002) and intrusive (Monk, Carroll, Parker, & Blythe, 2004). This, in turn, calls into question their effectiveness as a marketing channel (Grant & O'Donohoe, 2007). This has led some commentators to suggest that the way forward is through the adoption of permission based marketing, in which, for example, customers have control over the number and type of messages (Blomqvist, Hurmelinna, & Seppanen, 2005) or over the timing, location, and information content of messages (Stewart & Pavlou, 2002; Watson, Pitt, Berthon, & Zinkhan, 2002).

The increasing adoption of smartphone technology opens up even more possibilities for mobile marketing. As Persaud and Azhar point out 'the increased capabilities of smartphones have presented marketers with a substantially expanded set of possibilities to research and service consumers' (p.1). Accordingly, it is important

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 0161 247 6137.

E-mail addresses: Catherine.Watson@ignisasset.com (C. Watson), jeff.mccarthy@mmu.ac.uk (J. McCarthy), j.rowley@mmu.ac.uk (J. Rowley).

to understand whether negative attitudes towards marketing communication persist in the smart phone era, or whether more frequent engagement with a technology that offers a wider range of options for communication have impacted on consumer attitudes to mobile marketing communications. In addition, one new smart phone related technology that might be of considerable potential interest, because it is the basis for pull marketing communication in which consumers can exercise control over the messages and content that they receive, is QR codes. QR codes are two dimensional bar codes that are placed on books, leaflets, posters, billboards, and other public objects. Scanning a QR code, for example, provides a consumer with a link to a mobile website, reveals text or connects to a customer services centre. On the other hand, QR code market penetration in the UK and elsewhere is still relatively low with, for example, only 10% of smartphone users in the UK engaging with them, in contrast to the 78.5% accessing the mobile internet (ComScore, 2011). Accordingly, understanding consumers' use of and attitudes towards QR codes may contribute to a paradigm shift in mobile marketing.

Despite the importance of understanding consumer preferences, there has been little prior research on consumer attitudes towards mobile marketing communication in the smart phone era or on the use of and the factors that might influence the adoption of QR codes. In addition, it is evident that marketers are still struggling to harness the mobile channel and QR codes for optimum engagement. Accordingly, the aim of this research is contribute to understanding of consumer attitudes to mobile communications marketing, by undertaking an exploratory study to characterise the situation. More specifically, the objectives of this study are to:

1. Explore whether consumers' attitudes to mobile marketing communication have changed with the advent of smart-phone technology, particularly in respect of:
 - a. Attitudes regarding different types of text messages.
 - b. Attitudes towards permission and SMS-marketing.
 - c. Attitudes towards mobile website content.
2. Explore consumer use of and attitudes to QR codes, as a form of pull marketing, particularly in respect of:
 - a. The characteristics of QR code use.
 - b. Factors influencing use and adoption of QR codes.

The next section briefly summarises previous research into mobile marketing, including the limited research on QR codes. Next, the methodology for the research is outlined. This is based on a questionnaire-based survey using a convenience sample. The following section reports and offers a critical discussion of the findings. Finally, the conclusions section summarises the contribution of the study, and offers recommendations for practitioners and for further research.

2. Literature review

There is limited research specifically on mobile marketing in the smartphone era, or on QR codes and their use. However, a body of more general research on mobile marketing and consumers' responses has developed over the last decade, and this offers a number of useful insights. A significant proportion of this research centres on the use of SMS or text messaging for marketing communication. There are also a few studies on permission based marketing, mobile content marketing, and QR codes.

2.1. SMS marketing and intrusiveness

In the earlier era of mobile marketing, the main means of communication was via text messages or SMS technology, and most of

the previous research on mobile marketing has been undertaken in the context of this technology. SMS technology allows marketers to send messages to consumers through their mobile handsets (Zhang & Mao, 2008) and can be regarded as a type of "one-to-one" marketing (Xu, 2006). SMS technology enables brands to promote goods, services, and ideas through personalised messages that are sent directly to individual consumers (Sultan, Rohm, & Gao, 2009). SMS has been used, for example, for voting on radio shows or reality TV, tracking deliveries (Leung, 2007), and distributing mobile discount coupons (Grant & O'Donohoe, 2007). SMS advertising may also be used to reinforce other traditional media such as broadcast and print media (Zhang & Mao, 2008). However, the SMS approach has serious limitations as often consumers view text messages from businesses as: irritating (Muk, 2007; Samanta, Woods, & Ghanbari, 2009); an invasion of privacy (Windham and Orton, 2002); and, brand intrusion (Monk et al., 2004). On the other hand, marketers view SMS messaging as attractive because there is evidence that mobile advertising campaigns generate higher response rates than direct mail and internet banner ads (Jelassi & Enders, 2004; Zhang & Mao, 2008). SMS messaging is also particularly useful for reaching younger consumers, who may be more difficult to reach using other channels (Barnes, 2002). In addition, research suggests that recall of SMS messages may be higher than through other channels (Fortin, 2000).

Despite the interest in mobile marketing, only a few studies have investigated the factors and possible incentives that drive consumer acceptance of mobile marketing (Hanley, Becker, & Martinsen, 2006). These studies suggest that utility, relevance/personalisation, context and incentives are pivotal (e.g. Khan, 2008; Merisavo, Vesänen, Arponen, Kajalo, & Raulas, 2006; Merisavo et al., 2007). Accordingly, mobile communications should provide consumers with either relevant information or a way to save time or money based on the consumer's situation, location, or personal profile. Bauer, Barnes, Reichardt, and Neumann (2005) underlined the importance of tailoring mobile marketing messages according to consumer entertainment and information preferences. Gao, Sultan, & Rohm (2010), in a study examining young consumers' acceptance of mobile marketing in China, concluded that meaningful incentives and compelling content could overcome barriers such as level of personal attachment and risk perceptions. Several studies have commented on the value of incentives (Barwise & Strong, 2002; Drossos, Giaglis, Lekakos, Kokkinaki, & Stavragi, 2007; Standing, Benson, & Karjaluoto, 2005). Very recently, Persaud and Azhar (2012) conducted a study of mobile marketing through smartphones, and identified the importance of perceived value, shopping style, brand trust, age and education on intention to participate in mobile marketing.

2.2. Permission-based marketing

Given consumers' negative attitudes in respect of the intrusiveness of towards conventional SMS messages, there has been growing interest in developing permission-based marketing strategies. Whilst research on SMS messaging tends to privilege transactional benefits such as incentives, relevance and utility, due to the essential nature of permission marketing, the research on this topic focuses more on interaction and relationships, with factors such as trust and control taking centre stage. Permission marketing, via electronic channels, gives the consumer some control over the messages that are sent to them; they have the opportunity to opt-in or opt-out (Godin, 1999). Consumers have the option of expressing their preferences, in respect of, for instance, personalisation, timing, location and information content of messages (Stewart & Pavlou, 2002; Watson et al., 2002).

For permission marketing to be successful marketers need to understand what makes consumers willing to grant permission. As

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