

FACTORS AFFECTING CONSUMER CHOICE OF MULTIPLE MOBILE SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines student selection of mobile phone services. The research used a quantitative methodology. The author surveyed some 500 University and Polytechnic students in Ghana and finds that the basic reason for changing phone servers is reliability and cost savings. The author also finds that reference group influence, social reputation and regular contact with others were also influential factors.

JEL: D11, D12

KEYWORDS: Tertiary Students, Multiple Services, Mobile Phone, Service Operators

INTRODUCTION

Mobile phones have become a fundamental communication tool in both developed and developing countries. Previous studies have identified a number of reasons for owning or using a mobile phone as well as choice of phone operator (Hamel and Prahalad, 1991; Kumar, 1997; Nagel, 2003; Gerstheimer and Lupp, 2004; Chakraborty, 2005; Donner, 2007; de Silva and Zainudeen, 2007). Apart from expanded mobile phone usage, there has also been an increase in the number of network providers. According to Hansen (2003), the mobile handset market has experienced between five percent and ten percent growth and a substantial growth in operator subscribers.

Ghana is not left out in this global development of increasing expansion in mobile handset and operator subscribers. The Business Monitor International (BMI) report on October 12, 2010 indicated that in the first six months of 2010, the number of mobile subscribers increased by 7.3% to 16.475 million in Ghana. For the year as a whole, BMI predicted a market expansion of over 14%. This was to raise the penetration rate to just over 70% by the end of 2010.

In response to the increasing subscriber penetration rate, Ghana has six mobile phone companies licensed to do business in the country. Five are currently in operation. These are MTN, which is the largest, Tigo, the oldest mobile phone provider, Vodafone, Zain and Espresso. The sixth provider, Globacom is yet to start operations. It is however, expected that when Globacom begins operations the number of subscribers will rise. One segment of the market that is affected by this increase in mobile phone penetration rate is the tertiary student in Ghana.

Studies have tried to use the wider concept of consumer behavior and its associated consumer decision making process to research factors affecting consumer choice of mobile phones. These studies have identified different factors that influence the decision making process. Riquelme (2001) used 94 consumers to investigate the amount of self-knowledge consumers have when choosing between mobile phone brands. The study suggested six key attributes that affect consumer choice of a mobile phone; connection fees; access cost; mobile-to-mobile phone rate; call rates; and free calls.

Another study by Lui (2002) investigated factors affecting the brand decision in the mobile phone industry in Asia. The study found attitudes towards the mobile phone brand and attitudes towards the network as the two distinct attitudes that determined consumer phone selection decisions. While choices

between mobile phone brands were affected by new technology features such as memory capacity and SMS options; price and regularity of services determined choice of network providers.

In-Stat/MDR Research Institute (2002) examined consumer choice of mobile phones and found color displays as a driving force behind consumer decisions. Consumers considered a color display a more important choice criteria than high data rates or new features. The report also revealed a real demand for color display handsets. Another study was conducted in Finland where 397 respondents from selected educational institutions in Finland were surveyed. The study found price and properties as the most important motives affecting the decision to purchase a current mobile phone model (Karjaluoto et al., 2005). These findings suggest that consumer decision processes on the choice of mobile phone may be economy-specific; technology-specific; cultural-specific; and person or buyer-specific.

Despite the many studies on consumer decision process in the purchase of mobile phones (Riquelme, 2001; Lui, 2002; Jones, 2002; Bradner, 2002; Wagstaff, 2002; Karjaluoto et al., 2005), these studies have basically been limited to issues related to factors for choice the of mobile brand. Those factors associated with adoption and choice of mobile operators; factors that affect the introduction of mobile payment systems; and factors affecting adoption of mobile content services. The issue of multiple choices of mobile phone services has not received any attention, which creates a gap in the literature.

This article investigates consumer choice of multiple mobile phone service in Ghana. This is not only to fill the literature gap, but also to provide empirical evidence on multiple choices of mobile phone which has escaped research attention for some time. We study the choice of multiple phone services by Ghanaian phone users, particularly students of the tertiary institutions in Ghana. Students of Tertiary are used for the study because in adopting a “mobile personality”, this group has adopted mobile phones as a means of personal expression. With the ever growing market there is a demand that needs regular attention. Moreover it is important to distinguish between buying behavior and usage aspects referring to reasons that affect multiple choice of service (Karjaluoto et al, 2005).

The rest of the paper reviews previous studies on the topic, including the objective of the study and the questions to be answered. The method for the study and results of findings are also addressed. The paper ends with conclusions and comments based on the results of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer choice of multiple mobile phone services is examined from the larger discipline of consumer behavior (Blackwell et al., 2001; Beckman and Rigby, 2003; Solomon et al., 2003; Turkwell, 2004). These authors defined consumer behavior in slightly deferent but similar meanings. Blackwell et al. (2001) identified consumer behavior as activities people undertake when obtaining, consuming and disposing of products and services. Beckman and Rigby (2003) see consumer behavior as consisting of activities of individuals in obtaining, using, and disposing of goods and services, including the decision processes that precede and follow these actions. Solomon et al. (2003) suggested that consumer behavior is the process that individuals or groups go through to select, purchase, and use goods, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy their needs and desires. Turkwell (2004) sees consumer behavior as “the acts of individuals in obtaining goods and services, including the decision processes that precedes and determine these acts”. An organization must have a firm understanding of how and why consumers make purchases decisions so that appropriate marketing strategies are planned and implemented.

The consumer goes through a number of stages before finally making a decision to buy. This is referred to as the consumer purchases decision process (Blackwell et al., 2001; Turkwell, 2004). According to Turkwell (2004), the decision process involves problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post purchase evaluation. Blackwell et al. (2001) had earlier suggested

that the consumer buying process involves need recognition, search for information, pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives, purchase, consumption, post purchase evaluation, and divestment. It must be noted, however that consumers who use multiple mobile phone services might not always go through all the stages of the decision making process.

Beckmann et al., 1997 argued that the consumer decision making process is dependent on the type of problem-solving effort required. They argue the problem solving effort includes routine response, limited problem solving, and extended problem solving. Routine response is when the consumer sets the evaluation criteria and identifies the alternative option. In the limited problem solving, the consumer has set evaluative criteria but encounters a new unknown brand. Extended problem solving occurs when evaluative criteria have not been established for product category or when the individual wishes to review such criteria.

Students' choice of multiple phone services thus, might be affected by all the three types of problem solving criteria in one case or the other. While some choice may be routinely made by just buying under the influence of peer pressure, other choices might require the student to give some level of careful thought to the choice decision, but might change his or her mind when new service providers enter the market, or when better service is perceived to be provided by other mobile phone operators. Finally, some choices might be decided upon by a comprehensive and careful review of important factors such as dependability, reliability and economy of use. Therefore, whether a user of multiple mobile phone services goes through all the stages; or few of the stages of the decision making process, will basically dependent on which problem solving effort is required by the student.

Shapiro et al.'s (1996) indicated that, among other things, economic needs primarily affect consumer choice of a product or service. They identified these needs as economy of purchase of use, dependability, efficiency in operation or use and improvement of earning. Thus, students' choice of multiple mobile phone services is considered to be affected by economic, social, technological and psychological factors which shape their decision to use particular mobile phone operators. Consumer choice of multiple mobile service is particularly considered to be influence by such factors as economy of purchase or use, convenience, efficiency in operation or use, and dependability of service or use (Shapiro, 1996); reference group influence, life style and social class (Turckwell 2004); and attitudes, personality and opinion leadership (Solomon et al. 2003).

The purpose of this article was to investigate student choice of multiple mobile phone services, with its economic and non-economic implications. The study's specific objectives were to find the extent of use of multiple mobile phone services by students; factors that affect the choice; the economic and non-economic implications of the choice of multiple phone services; and the different ways to finance the use of multiple phone services. These objectives were addressed by finding answers to the following research questions: a) How far reaching is the choice of multiple phones by students in the tertiary institution of Ghana? b) What factors actually motivate the consumers' choice of multiple phone services? c) What are the economic and non-economic implications of choosing multiple phone services? d) How are students able to finance the multiple phones?

METHODOLOGY

Both primary and secondary research methods were employed. Secondary research was primarily to study other works in the field to form the basis of this research. Primary data was needed because the variables used in this study were different from those of the previous studies. Thus, a survey was appropriate to test the variables. Quantitatively, the research instrument for the study was structured as an undisguised questionnaire. The use of only a quantitative instrument was because the study aimed at avoiding introduction of subjectivity into the findings. However, open-ended questions were used alongside closed

ended questions to make room for variables that the study might not anticipate could constitute factors of consumer choice. The survey included twenty four item variables.

With the concept of tertiary students in mind, there were three target groups for the study - the Polytechnics, the Public Universities, and the Private Universities. Purposive sampling technique was used to select four Polytechnics, three Public Universities and three Private Universities, where 50 respondents each were surveyed for the study (given a total of 500 respondents). To get the appropriate number of female and males; and to ensure that only non-working students are survey, a quota sampling technique was adopted. SPSS Version 17 was used for the data analysis. Descriptive statistics were computed for frequencies for the respondents’ profiles and mean scores for the other constructs. Looking at the nature of the questionnaire and the purpose of the study mean scores were analyzed.

RESULTS

The response rate for the study was 98%. Regarding an acceptable response rate Babbie (1990) quoted an acceptable response rate of 60% as ‘good’ and 70% as ‘very good’. Thus, the 98% response rate is encouraging. The demographic profiles of the respondents were made up institutions, ages, gender and class. Tables 1 to 4 give an insight into the profile of the respondents. With the 468 of the questionnaire completed and returned, the descriptive statistics showed that 33.1% were from public universities, 23.9% from private universities and 42.9% from the polytechnics. Males represented 46.8% of the respondents, while females represented 53.5%. The respondents whose ages ranged between 16 years and 30 years were made up of students from first year to fourth year.

Four constructs were used to measure the extent of use of multiple mobile phone service. The findings showed an average mean of 1.53 (SD 0.584). The highest mean score was 1.95 for the item “how long multiple mobile phone services have been used”; while the lowest mean score was 1.19 for the item "desire to use more than one mobile phone." This means that the degree to which users of mobile phones in the tertiary institutions in Ghana choose to subscribe to multiple services is below average. Thus, the situation is not as alarming as the researcher might perceive. The degree of multiple uses of services was higher than the desire to do so. The mean score of 1.44 for consumers desire to use multiple phone if they could afford was an indication that under desirable conditions consumers would not be attracted to the use of multiple. Table 1 below gives the statistical details of the extent of use of multiple phone services.

Table1: Extent of Multiple Uses of Mobile Phone Services

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Service Operators	468	1.00	3.00	1.4444	0.64046
Desire to use more than one phone	298	1.00	2.00	1.1946	0.39658
How different services are used	170	1.00	4.00	1.9706	0.91939
Length of use of multiple service	170	1.00	3.00	1.9471	0.71552

Descriptive Statistics of the use of multiple mobile phone services

Factors that affect the choice of multiple phone services were measured by five constructs. There are “reference group influence”; “social reputation”; network unreliability”; “follow common practice”; and “others factors” (including, different call rate for different operators, enjoy variety of service, and keep old contacts). The findings denote “service unreliability” as the main factor for the choice of multiple mobile phone services; with a means score of 3.38 (SD 1.322). This means that students are very particular about their calls, and would not like to miss important calls no matter their location, hence the desire to have different services that made it possible for them to reach and be reached at all time in all places. With a mean score of 3.08 (SD 1.674), the collective effect of other factors (including, different

call rate for different operators, enjoy variety of service, and keep old contacts) was found to be the second most significant in determining the choice of multiple services. This implies that if there is a uniform call rate for mobile services in Ghana, use of multiple services should go down. Since some customers use multiple services just to enjoy variety, and some to keep old contacts, even when the system is improved to take care of all major factors, some customers shall still opt for multiple phones.

The findings also showed “reference group influence as the third important factor for choice of multiple services, with a mean score of 2.40 (SD 1.247). This shows that reference group has an appreciable level influence in the consumer decision making of tertiary students. Mobile phone operators should appreciate this and find ways to incorporate reference group factor in the design of their marketing mix. The item “social reputation”, ranked fourth, with a mean score of 2.27 (SD 2.40) as a factor that affect multiple choice of mobile phone services. This means some use multiple services because they think too much of themselves, or want undue attention and recognition.

The least factor determining choice of multiple services was identified to be the item, “follow common practice”. The mean score was 2.18 (SD 1.226). This means that some customers of the mobile phone service do not know their needs. They would only buy and use a service only when they find it usual and convenient to use, without necessarily consider their benefits or associated costs. Customer-centric product development should help these customers be more focused on the use of just a service at a time. Service providers should involve customers of mobile services so as to ensure that products are designed to meet customer needs. Intelligence generation and intelligence responsiveness should be employed with introduction of new technologies.

Even though some of factors were below average mean score, the fact that they were all had mean scores of above 2.0 indicate that the factors are all necessary in the choice consideration of customers. The reason behind the used of multiple mobile phone services are outlined in the Table 2.

Table 2: Factors Affecting Multiple Uses of Mobile Phone Services

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reference group	410	1.00	5.00	2.4024	1.24759
Social reputation	410	1.00	5.00	2.2732	1.28124
Manage unreliability in service	410	1.00	5.00	3.3829	1.32207
Follow common practice	410	1.00	5.00	2.1756	1.22660
Other reasons	88	1.00	7.00	3.0455	1.67407

Descriptive Statistics of the use of factors affecting the use of multiple mobile phone service

Implications for subscribing to more than one mobile phone service were measured by six variables: “monetary cost”; “opportunity cost”; “inconvenience”; “need for extra income”; “missing important calls”; and “difficulty to have financial assistance from friends”. The average mean score for the choice implication was 3.22. This implied that all six variables had strong implication on consumer choice. The highest mean score was 3.47 for the item "monetary cost"; while the lowest mean score was 2.81 for the items "inconvenience." This confirms that consumers’ choice of multiple phone services have great economic and non-economic impact on them. This can affect customer satisfactory and loyalty to the mobile operators in Ghana. Table 3 below is a statistical description of the implications for using multiple phone services.

Table 3: Implications for Multiple Use of Mobile Phone Services

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
High cost of using multiple services	170	1.00	5.00	3.4765	1.15745
Forgoing other more pressing need	170	1.00	5.00	2.9706	1.29828
Inconvenience	170	1.00	5.00	2.8059	1.23699
Financing from additional sources	170	1.00	5.00	3.4647	1.27397
Missing important calls	170	1.00	5.00	3.4588	1.25508
Difficulty in getting help from friends	170	1.00	5.00	3.1588	1.38186

Descriptive Statistics of the use of implication of the use of multiple mobile phone services

The means by which consumers finance the multiple phones was measured by five variables. These were: “parents/Guardians”; “friends”; “self-financing”; “borrowing”; “other means” (including, “gifts” and “bonus credit”. The item “self financing” had a mean score of 3.65 (SD 1.198) to indicate the highest means of financing choice of multiple mobile phone services. The least means score is 1.64 (SD 1.000) for the item, “borrowing”. This means that students basically finance the use of multiple services with their money that are to be used in school; and considers borrowing as a means of financing their services. The study also revealed that a reasonable number of students are able to subscribe to multiple phones because they are either sponsored directly or indirectly by their parents/guardians (mean score, 2.46) or by friends – who may be same sex or opposite sex (mean score, 2.07). Though students sometimes benefit from ‘bonus credit’ given by mobile operators, and credit from a friend as a gift, these constitute just a small amount of the cost of using multiple services. How multiple mobile phone services users have been financed is detailed in Table 4.

Table 4: Financing of Multiple Mobile Phone Services

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Parents/Guardians	170	1.00	5.00	2.4647	1.21696
Man friend/ woman friend	170	1.00	5.00	2.0647	1.13651
Use "pocket money"	170	1.00	5.00	3.6471	1.19868
Borrowing	170	1.00	5.00	1.6412	1.00033
Other means of financing	42	1.00	3.00	1.7857	0.71689

Descriptive Statistics of the financing of the use of multiple mobile phone services

CONCLUSION AND COMMENTS

This study was carried out to examine the factors affecting choice of multiple mobile phone, their implications and sources of funding among students in Ghana. The findings identified unreliability of service, different call rate for difference operators, and reference group influence as some of the factors affecting choice of multiple services. The study also found increased mobile phone expenditure, the pain of looking for other sources of funding of mobile services, and missing important calls while receiving other calls as major prices to be paid for the use of single mobile phone services. The main source of financing multiple choices of mobile phones was ‘self-financing’; that is from consumers’ own income.

There is every reason to believe that the use of multiple mobile phones is not a desirable but rather response to a situation. Thus, until such situations improve the choice of multiple phones shall increase. Multiple services mean fierce competition on operator selection at a time, especially where the problems associated with networking are almost synonymous with almost all the service operators. This means that

mobile phone companies in the country would have to improve their services to remain competitive in the market. Such an environment should promote customer power which shall be an impetus for customer value creation.

The primary reason affecting consumer behavior or choice of multiple mobile phone services was the presence of poor service reliability. Thus, to address the undesirable but phenomenal use of multiple phones, operators must improve services reliability. This would help overcome the economic and non-economic costs associated with the choice of multiple phones. Consumer associations and regulators in the telephone industry should perform their respective functions effectively so the country enjoys wider coverage from all mobile operators in the country.

Choice of multiple phone services is not without a price – increased mobile phone expenditure, opportunity cost of forfeiting other pressing needs, the task of finding additional sources of financing, and the possibility of missing important calls while using other services, especially for those who use double services with one phone were found to seriously affect the use of multiple mobile phone services. The negative effects of these factors on the students, their guardians and the nation at large cannot be overemphasized. Resistance to unnecessary peer pressure, putting less premium on social reputation, and the willingness to ‘say no’ to what ‘common practices dictates should serve as an antidote to bearing the cost associated with use of multiple mobile phones.

The main source of funding multiple mobile phone services among students was “self -financing”, or “pocket money”. This means student would demand more from their guardians so they can finance their multiple choices of phones.

Knowing the use of multiple phones has both economic and non-economic implication on the users, consumers must insist on their right to advocate for reliable service from the mobile phone operators. This means that a customer can serve most, if not all the good reasons for owing a mobile phone. Consumer associations should demand from mobile phone operators nothing but reliable service comparable to services rendered in other countries. This shall ensure customer value creation in the provision of mobile phone services in Ghana. The way forward is to put due pressure on both the service operator and the communication regulators for a deserving service, especially with regards to network reliability. The results of the study should be useful for consumer activists in the country whose tactics can include boycotts, petitioning the government, media activism, and organizing interest groups (Kzinets and Handelman, 2004; Hilton, 2008; Glickman, 2009)

The findings should also help the government impress upon mobile phone operators in the country to improve on their services. The regulators should put in all efforts to formulate and implement telecommunication policies in general and policies on mobile telephony in particular that is customer friendly, create value, and comparably cheaper. Service reliability, uniform ‘call rates’, and nationwide network coverage are some of the considerations that regulators can factor into their policy framework. As much as possible, both the consumer association and the telephone regulators should aim at negotiating for a uniform ‘call rate’ for all mobile phone operators in the country. This shall go a long way to reduce the increasing use of multiple mobile phone services with its associated social and financial implication, especially for the young tertiary students who might not be working.

The results of the study duly contribute to the existing literature on consumer choice behavior in the mobile phone market. For mobile phone operators, the results of the study provide a vital aspect of consumer choice of mobile phone services by indicating that consumers tend to value network reliability and wider or nationwide coverage than any other consideration.

The study was basically quantitative and hence could not ascertain in-depth issues. Thus, a more in-depth, and qualitative studies needed to be carried out to examine the details pertaining to the factors, implications and funding of multiple use of mobile phone services. Future studies on consumer choice of multiple mobile services can look at the effects of gender, and life style on consumer buying behavior. Also the sample size of the study was relatively small. Hence future studies may consider increasing the sample size to make it more representative to generalize the results for a more forceful understanding of motive behind choice of multiple phone services. Researchers may also widen the scope to cover consumers in the working class, since this study was limited to only students. A cross-country analysis of consumer choice of multiple mobile operators might be an appropriate study to consider having a more global perspective of the phenomenon.

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BIOGRAPHY

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