Social Structures of a Consumer’s Economy:  
IT Adoption and Consumption of Three Different Cultural Capitalist Consumers

Sherman Ting, Monash University, Sherman.Ting@buseco.monash.edu.au  
Chris Dubelaar, Bond University, cdubelaa@bond.edu.au  
Linda Dawson, Monash University, Linda.Dawson@infotech.monash.edu.au

Abstract

Extensive Information Technology adoption, acceptance and consumption research have typically focused too narrowly on technology adoption rates and drivers leading to technology adoption and acceptance. This paper discusses how understanding a consumer’s unique portfolio of economic, cultural, social, educational, technological and political capital resources, proposed as the social structures of a consumer’s economy, can reveal their approach and experience towards technology adoption and consumption, present and future. The adoption and consumption experiences of three technology consumers with different cultural capital volumes was compared to illustrate how the framework can be used by technology marketers to obtain new and rich insights into consumers’ behaviours, and reinforces the important role of cultural capital in the proposed framework.

Keywords: Social Structure, Consumption, IT, Adoption, Capital, Resource
Social Structures of a Consumer’s Economy: 
IT Adoption and Consumption of Three Different Cultural Capitalist Consumers

Introduction

Individual consumers adopt and consume technologies differently, even when compared with other consumers of similar age, gender and innovativeness, because they are individuals uniquely characterised by complex human behaviours and actions in the community and not in isolation (Bagozzi, 2007). Understanding Information Technology (IT) adoption and consumption have long meant measuring or predicting people’s decision to adopt and consume technology. However, extensions to prominent frameworks, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) and Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 2003), have focused too narrowly on basic demographics and perceived qualities rather than understanding the in-depth characteristics of the individual consumer. This paper decomposes the characteristics of the individual consumer by introducing the social structures of a consumer’s economy, based on Bourdieu (2005), to understand how consumer’s distinctive life developments and accumulated experiences impact their IT adoption and consumption experiences. This paper makes theoretical contributions to the field of marketing and IT, and provides new managerial insights into understanding the type of products and services consumers of different lifestyle segments adopt and consume.

Social Structures of a Consumer’s Economy

Bourdieu (1984; 2005) developed the social structures of the economy to understand how our social world and accumulated history constituted into capital. Social structures is typically defined as the enduring social relationships, dimensions and social order that exists between individuals (or consumers) and/or groups within our society, whilst the science called ‘economics’ sciences is based on “dissociating a particular category of practices… from the social order in which all human practice is immersed” (Bourdieu, 2005, p.1). This paper extends Bourdieu’s social structures into a consumer’s economy by dissociating categories of adoption and consumption practices.

Individuals of similar social structures display similar characteristics and practices called habitus. As such their similarities binds them together in society by connections called field (Wacquant, 1996) to differentiate individual actors (or consumers) by their portfolio of capitals (Holt, 1998). Capital “holds a promise and aura of measurability, which in market-driven times is a highly strategic attribute” (Pieterse, 2000, p.1) and helps explain why consumers act differently, resulting in a multitude of consequences – simply because individuals hold different values, attitudes, beliefs and habits to react differently, even under similar situations (Inglehart, 1990).

Capital refers to the material and monetary capital as well as the personal relationships between our pertinent social properties, including our portfolio of cultural tendencies, education level, social networks, technological awareness and even our political activism. Capitals or capital resources embody beyond traditional physical resources, but share the same production returns, investment and storage concepts. They are not easily or tangibly transferrable between individuals and are accumulated to (re)produce economic and non-economic profits (Bourdieu, 1984, 2005). Our portfolio of capital resources can impact how we adopt and consume technology.
Research (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998; Rojas, Straubhaar, Roychowdhury, and Okur, 2004; Smith-Mitchell and Dubelaar, 2006) suggested a correlation between an individual’s access to their capital resources with consumption, including technology consumption. Consumption can serve to facilitate cultural capital reproduction, whilst economic, social, educational, technological and political capitals can facilitate access or restriction to technological judgment and consumption. To understand how and why consumers accept, reject, resist or cope with technology, it is useful to understand their portfolio of capital resources.

**Six forms of capital resources**

Six primary forms of capital resources (Ting, Dawson, and Dubelaar, 2005; Ting, Dubelaar, and Dawson, 2005) are proposed to form the social structures of a consumer’s economy framework. Economic capital is institutionalised in financial resources, occupation, time availability, demographics and property rights, and is the most recognisable form of capital resources (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Economic capital volume is attained by a consumer’s availability, liquidity and diversity of economic resources.

Cultural capital is the socially distinctive skills, knowledge, practices, tastes and competencies individual consumers distinctively enact in consumption through art, food, interior décor and hobbies (Holt, 1998; Rojas et al., 2004). It exists in the forms: embodied as implicit practical knowledge, skills and dispositions; objectified in cultural objects; and institutionalised in official degrees/diplomas, and are typically accumulated via family upbringing, formal education and occupational culture (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; Holt, 1998). Cultural capital volume is attained through the education and occupations of the consumer and of their father (for patriarchal-oriented families) (Holt, 1998).

Social capital aggregates an individual’s durable membership and reach within groups, spanning networks of family, friends, acquaintances and organisational affiliations (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). It encompasses civic engagements and social connectedness featuring norms, policies and social trust built upon reciprocity (Putnam, 1995). Social capital volume is attained by consumer’s network size and diversity, and how effectively they can mobilise their network towards a goal (Bourdieu, 1986).

Educational capital encompasses formal education, knowledge and skills that fosters the foundational life-long learning, critical thinking, effective communication and problem solving (Callan and Finney, 2002). Due to its long acquisition path and hysteresis, individuals of the same qualification can have markedly different portfolio of capital resources (Bourdieu, 1984). Educational capital volume is attained through formal education and developed learning skills, which typically “leads to economic benefits, citizenship, personal empowerment, and quality of life” (Callan and Finney, 2002, p.26).

Technological capital is a product of techno-dispositions and techno-competencies acquired via technology knowledge, skills and awareness (Rojas et al., 2004). Technological capital volume is attained through the individual’s occupation, education, usage levels, technical competencies and awareness (Rojas et al., 2004).

Political capital encompasses an individual’s organisational memberships, networks, structural positions and influences that builds political or movement engagement capacities (Fuchs, Minnite, and Shapiro, 1999). Political capital volume is attained through the political
intensity and engagement that sponsors movement activism, democratic norms, and an individual’s voting and participation willingness and for others (Booth and Richard, 1998; Sullivan, Borgida, Jackson, Riedel, and Oxendine, 2002).

Psychological (Goldsmith, Veum, and Darity Jr., 1997), symbolic (Bourdieu, 1984), human (Schultz, 1961) and emotional (Gendron, 2004) capitals are derivatives of the six primary forms of capital resources and supplements our understanding of the social structures of a consumer’s economy in technology adoption and consumption.

Method

This paper presents brief illustrative narratives of three mobile IT (Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) or smart-phones) consumers possessing a contrasting High (HCC), Medium (MCC) and Low (LCC) volumes of Cultural Capital resources, based upon Holt (1998). Illustrated narratives provides a means to analyse and present contrast within single and across multiple cases with rich descriptive details reflective of the social reality and lived experiences illustrated by the individual consumers themselves (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Neuman, 2007, 2006).

The preliminary result presented in this paper forms part of a larger empirical research study involving in-depth semi-structured story-telling narrative interviews and device demonstration –observations with twelve PDA/smart-phone consumers. Informants ranged evenly in gender, aged between 20s and 50s, occupation from an electrician tradesman to an IT academic, and educational level from vocational to doctorate. Informants recounted adoption stories and their positive and negative consumption experiences. This paper cross correlated only against the three informants’ cultural capital whilst the larger research additionally proposes new literature-derived capital resource indexes and correlates them with their technology adoption and consumption experiences.

Findings from Three Different Cultural Capitalist Consumers

Jane’s (HCC) history with PDAs stemmed from a need for a reliable tool to organise her busy schedules with her personal assistant and also a personal stake in the field of IT teaching with an aim to assist women’s “challenges” working in the male-dominated IT industry. She adopted “higher end” Palm branded PDAs to ensure she received consistent quality and “Palms were the only ones in the market of any... worth”.

Being an electrician tradesman with a long personal interest in adopting and “using toys, gizmos, electronic products”, Kurt’s (MCC) first discovered PDAs from reading a magazine. His limited formal education, especially in IT, has not hampered his enthusiasm for PDAs, being an early innovator of PDA adoption, with sound “justification” for spending the money on successive PDA adoptions to combine work with personal interest in PDAs.

Finally, Grant (LCC), a mature-age community development officer, confessed that in his “secondary life […] I’m a geek... I like gadgets and technologies and it’s attractive” and his interest in PDAs were self-sparked even though his four PDA adoptions received scarce employer financial and logistic support.
Two Forms of Cultural Capital: Embodied and Institutionalised

In advance capitalist societies, elite cultural capital consumers (HCCs) like Jane, secure distinction by their expression of socially scarce consumption through aesthetic and interactional styling rather than through objects (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998). They emphasise unique embodied tastes and actions via implicit knowledge, skills and dispositions using consumer objects, including technologies, beyond its functional purposes and as a medium to accumulate valued cultural capital through time investments into self learning. Jane’s PDA adoption motivations were characterised by her emphasis on work productivity “what’s useful. I’m not into toys”. Whilst she adopted “top of the range” PDAs which were almost equivalent in

“price to a PC… the more functionality you’ve got, the more you’re going to use it. And the more you’re going to want. So the decision to go to the LifeDrive Manager [name of PDA model] was a good one… once I’ve worked out how to use it”.

It provided an opportunity for Jane to learn and gain new skills and knowledge into extending both the capability of her device as well as in her to further increase her productivity and efficiency via using IT.

Cultural capital masses (MCCs and LCCs), like Kurt and Grant, in contrast tend to emphasise taste of necessities (Bourdieu, 1984) and utilitarian functions such as to being more organised, desire for a routine lifestyle (Holt, 1998) or simply to store contact details and assist their memory. For example, Kurt’s PDA/smart-phone was primarily a tool to “have all my phone numbers all my contact details, all the information will always be there” and fulfill his need for a central repository for his six hundred clients’ and suppliers’ details. What further reinforced the existence of Jane’s higher embodied cultural capital was her higher level of formal education and her culturally producing occupation compared to Kurt’s and Grant’s education and occupation (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998).

Third Form of Cultural Capital: Objectified

HCC consumers traditionally possessed financial wealth that allowed them to consume more luxurious and scarce material objects. Today however, they tend to prefer to consume through cultural understanding rather than through simply overt financial extravagance. Insights into consumer’s volume of cultural capital can reveal contrasting motivations and emphasis for technology/PDA extravagance. For example, Jane was willing to pay higher prices for market leading PDAs that specifically fulfilled her diary management and work productivity needs, thus empowering her life with enhanced efficiency.

Conversely, cultural capital masses like Grant, on a more limited income, tend to desire demonstration of societal achievement and status by consuming more through financial conspicuousness (Bernthal, Crockett, and Rose, 2005). They are seemingly attempting to buy acculturation via attainable material objects to demonstrate ostentatious extravagance (Bourdieu, 1984) to allow them to enjoy the object’s benefits “now”. Grant adopted more personal technologies, including four PDAs, numerous computers, a large LCD TV and a digital personal video recorder. He “bought things […] that are extravagant” to demonstrate to others and expressed his “enjoy[ment]” from displaying to his peers his PDA and thus his technological achievements which further enhanced his image he presented to them.
In between Jane and Grant, Kurt’s practicality and suitability with his work requirements were the main influencers to his PDA adoption selections:

“a couple of different things I’ve got to say I do need with a PDA. One’s got to be easy to use. I don’t want something that’s awkward and uncomfortable to use... It’s got to be a practical device, but it’s got to have something that keeps me interested as it evolves”.

He mixes practicality with capability for him to obtain fun, enjoyment, playing around and an opportunity to build on himself technologically and culturally through knowledge, skills and personal enhancement.

**Conclusion and Future Work**

This paper offers a novel framework beyond demographics to provide a unique insight into understanding consumer’s fundamental characteristics and its influences on how we perceive and experience technology adoption and consumption. It introduced the framework of the social structures of a consumer’s economy, composing of an individual’s portfolio of economic, cultural, social, educational, technological capital and political capital resources.

Findings confirmed how cultural capital masses (LCCs and MCCs) tend to focus on extravagant feature-packed technologies to demonstrate abundance and luxury whilst cultural elites (HCCs) tend to focus on using acculturated embodied and institutionalised capital to demonstrate cosmopolitan and practice distinction in how rather than what technology they consume. HCCs can use their knowledge and skills to overcome adoption and consumption difficulties, such as over-reliance, whilst MCCs and LCCs have less internal capacity to constructively overcome setbacks for future adoptions. HCCs, MCCs and LCCs differ markedly in their perception and approach to mobile ITs, even if they are of similar age, education, occupation and income, because they differ in their acculturated volumes of economic, cultural, social, educational, technological and political capitals.

Theoretically, the introduced social structures of a consumer’s economy builds on and brings together existing yet fragmented theories on capital resources across disciplines into marketing and IT. Managerially, the framework gives marketing and technology practitioners a rich insight into the type of products and services consumers of different lifestyle segments adopt and consume. It can also assist manufacturers to develop customised technologies with targeted type, functionality and complexity for marketers to customise marketing strategies that infuses technology into the marketplace. Further work is needed to investigate the cross correlation of informants across their six primary capital resources, and will be conducted as part of the larger study.


