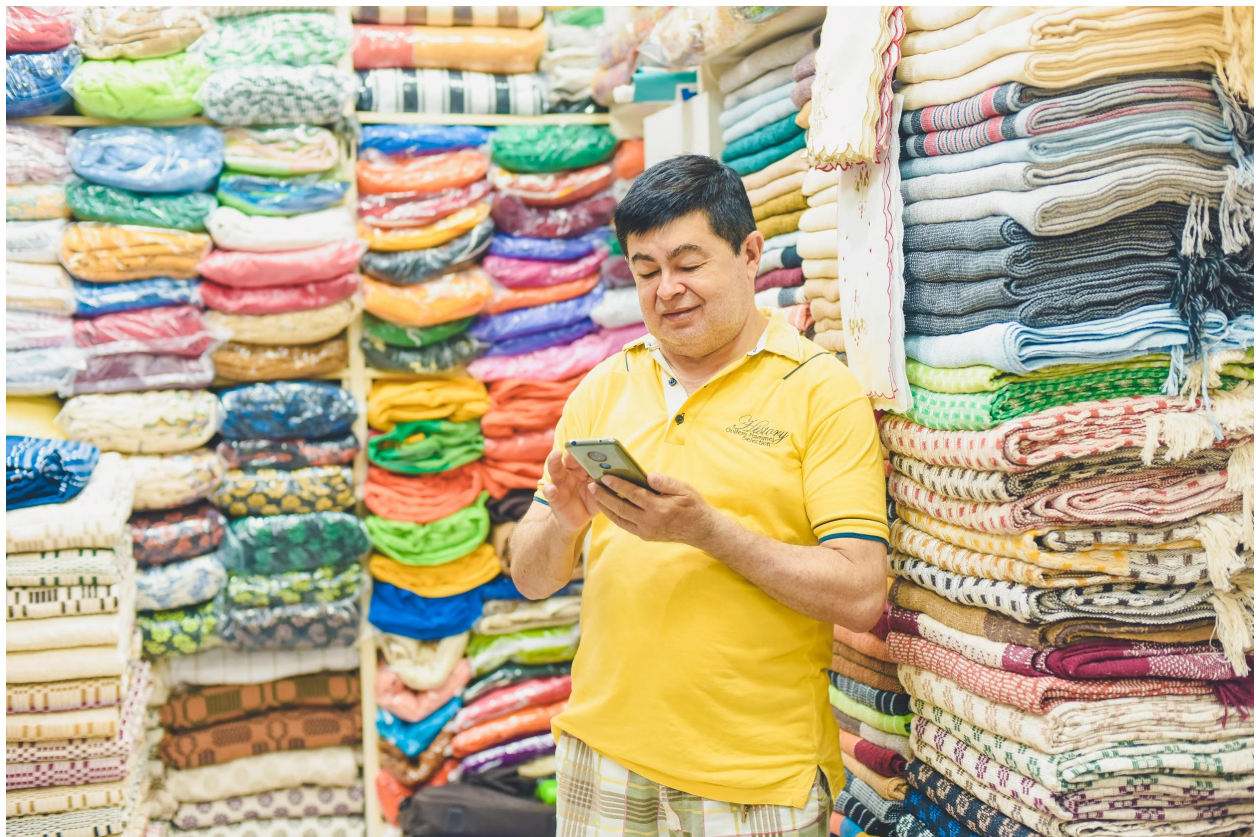




How Smartphone Perceptions Vary for New Internet Users

Research with the Next Billion Users

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Google's Next Billion User initiative, which prioritizes building for emerging markets, has spent the last three years researching a specific population called New Internet Users. New Internet Users will make up a significant portion of the next billion people to use the internet.

In our research, we spoke with 200 New Internet Users across Brazil, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Mexico and kept in touch with more than 70 for a year while they learned to use their first smartphone. We wanted to learn about their technological perceptions, aspirations, and digital learning curves. Here's what we found about what smartphones represent to them.

1. A smartphone is a status symbol

Longtail financial preparation

A smartphone is an expensive purchase that requires financial planning. Most participants desired a smartphone at the US\$60-\$100 price point.

"I saved up many years to get a phone as a surprise gift for my boyfriend. It cost me one month's salary."

"Show off" behaviors

Some participants described disliking when people "show off" with their smartphone by doing activities in public, like rewatching movies and TV shows, or taking selfies.

"On the train people are showing off, rewatching movies and TV [shows] on their phones."

Societal perceptions

"Everyone has it" was a common reason why people wanted or previously had smartphones, relating to societal perceptions and their fear of missing out.

"Everyone's child has a phone. I wanted to get it for [my son] to talk to his elder sister, or it doesn't look good."

How might we...

- ... influence the preconceived notions and use cases of smartphones?
- ... illustrate that the phone is more than a status symbol or fashion accessory?

2. A smartphone is for educated people

Education is needed to use it

Both highly educated and non-educated participants believed this to be true. In general, those with fewer years of schooling felt strong feelings of inadequacy.

“Not that I am very literate, but for some who cannot read or write, they definitely can’t use phones.”

It’s an English device

Some are unaware that the phone can be in a local language. For those who are aware, they are afraid or know that even local languages will be hard to understand.

“I know there is Tamil there, but I feel it’s going to be too bookish... I will learn the phone in English [instead].”

Clear benefit as a study aid

Most participants had kids who convinced them to buy them a phone to help with information-finding for school and to receive key messages from fellow students and teachers.

“I got [my daughter] a phone because her teacher in the sales course told her to use a [chat messaging app] to get information.”

How might we...

- ... change the belief that smartphones are only for the educated?
- ... make hardware and software more welcoming to novice users of digital technology?
- ... lean into the multilingual nature of users?

3. A smartphone is a culture shifter

There are many ways in which the smartphone sustains and supports cultural values:

- Maintain family ties
- Keep the community supportive
- Spread new knowledge and skills (grow businesses, provide income, and support aspirations)

“My son can speak to me face-to-face when he is [away with video call].”

However, some dislike smartphones and believe they are causing unnecessary, anti-culture behaviors:

- Influence perception of self and others
- Neglect or fight with family
- “Show off” behaviors (selfies, rewatching films)
- Waste time (i.e. games)
- Distraction leading to accidents
- See bad content (i.e. explicit videos and images)
- Meet dangerous people

“A smartphone is not bad, but you should not get involved for 24 hours. You can’t spend time with family.”

How might we...

... better take into account the role that devices and apps play in rejecting or embracing ingrained cultural values?

4. A smartphone is a time shifter

Addiction

After getting a smartphone, participants said how they quickly became more eager to use, increasingly attached, or even addicted to their phones.

“Even if the baby is crying, I feel like getting into the mobile when I’m chatting with my friends, I don’t feel like coming out which, in one way, is not right because I’m getting addicted to it.”

Change in daily time spent

A few days to one week after getting their first smartphone, participants cited that they finished up chores faster, or rushed home in order to spend more time on it.

“I am finishing work quickly to spend time on [my new smartphone].”

Saves or wastes time

While some perceive smartphones as a waste of time (i.e. youth playing games), others cited how it saves time (i.e. they no longer have to walk to a payphone).

“[With the phone], even from a faraway place, [people] can transfer money... that is time saving, money saving.”

How might we...

... protect the digital wellbeing of new internet users on platforms and devices, and educate early on this?

5. A smartphone is empowering

Shifted dependencies

Before participants acquired their devices, we heard things like “To call my mom, I have to call my dad”, or that they would only access a phone at certain hours or late at night when their spouse returned home.

“Previously I had to wait for my husband to come home to make calls to my mom [who is sick]. But now, I don’t have to wait.”

More control over timepass

Participants also mentioned they had more choices on how to spend their time. Specifically some who were housewives voiced how timepass was improved because they could message friends.

“[Before a smartphone] I felt alone and would wait for someone to come to talk to me. Now I don’t feel lonely... I feel happy, learning a lot. Now I don’t need anyone. I don’t want that old life.”

Information access

As expected, learning new things and finding information when needed or wanted was an empowering daily life change for participants.

“My kids’ grades went up since we have access to the internet. Whenever they have a [homework] question, they ask. I’ll use YouTube for that.”

How might we...

... further empower new users to not have to wait on others to learn new capabilities with their smartphones?

6. A smartphone is a risk

Easy to make mistakes

Several participants knew that “smartphone” meant a touchscreen. This worried them because they could accidentally tap something, lose money, or see bad content.

“Phones are like weapons, with a single click you could lose everything — like money -- for those that don’t know how to use the phone.”

Hazards

This is a big reason why some people prefer feature phones: they are seen as robust, reliable, simple, less pricey, and fulfill key needs.

“Feature phones are the only [phones] that will last.”

Causes arguments

Easily-made mistakes on the phone can cause arguments within a home, as can misunderstandings of how the phone is being used by in-laws and others.

“What if I tap on something and something else comes? [A] fear is that [my son will] start shouting. There might be something related to his education.”

How might we...

- ... increase the digital reliability and physical robustness of smartphones?
- ... reduce the fear of making mistakes or tapping the wrong things?

7. A smartphone is non-essential

Benefits are not well-known

Not understanding the benefits can lead new users to judge others for “wasting time” on these devices that they find inessential. The negatives appear better known to new users as they spread faster.

“Smartphones are a fashion accessory.”

Benefits are equated to reaching goals

People are quick to name their grand aspirations, but do not see how a smartphone could help them reach many of them, even though they could.

“The phone is not going to give me money, so what can it do?
Unless it’s internet fraud.”

Negatives are well-known

Even those who were not familiar with technology and smartphones would speak of concepts such as “the photo mafia”, harmful online games, and general time-wasting.

“Many children have died from the [harmful online game] Blue
Whale Challenge. I heard about it at the tea shop.”

How might we...

- ... improve the reputation of the internet?
- ... better connect the internet’s value to users’ aspirations?

Data Source

We conducted a one-year longitudinal study with New Internet Users across five countries (Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria).

During the study, they acquired their first smartphone, and we kept in touch with them between 6 to 12 months total. Each participant (N=73) was met with in-person up to eight times. Between visits, we kept in touch with participants via phone calls and multimedia messages.

From all these interactions, we manually logged 2,500+ instances where New Internet Users reported learning something about their new smartphones and/or the internet. The denominator of the percentages in this paper is the 2,500+ reported learning instances.

To ensure accuracy, each logged activity was triangulated as much as possible between: self-reports by the participant, interviews with the participant's teacher(s), direct observation by Google employees in-person, and cross-checking with others present (partner research agencies: D'Well India, D'Well Indonesia, Kantar Millward Brown Nigeria, INSITUM Mexico, Mercedes Sanchez Brazil) in each interaction.