

A superhero in your pocket: the phenomenon of super apps from a technocultural perspective

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Abstract

Imagine having a digital superhero in your pocket: a single application with the power to manage payments, order groceries, hail rides, and chat with friends. This is the era of super apps, dominant in East Asia, consolidating numerous services into one interface (Steinberg et al., 2022). The ecosystem's ability to integrate contributions from multiple companies enhances its value for end customers (Palmié et al., 2022). Additionally, as more users adopt the platform, its value increases for service owners (Sutticherchart & Rakthin, 2023), making interoperability (Ota et al., 2023) central to the super apps' business model success. As super apps emerge as the future of media, grasping all their nuances, particularly from the consumer standpoint, becomes crucial. Drawing on a technocultural perspective (Kozinets, 2019), we explored bright and dark nuances of young consumers' experience and implications for everyday life. The study adopts a practice-based view (Schatzki, 1996; Schau et al., 2009; Akaka et al., 2022), emphasizing the significance of practices, recurring activities, and behaviors in understanding values, interactions, and cultural contexts. In-depth interviews were conducted with 26 East Asian respondents from Generation Z between May and June 2024. Our interpretation provides a framework reconciling the practices of super app usage with the meanings consumers attribute to them. The theoretical and empirical contribution sheds light on the values of this generation of users and reveals their underlying paradoxes. By recognizing the consumer cultural perspective of such technologies we extend current knowledge and provide managerial implications for technology diffusion in other countries.

Keywords

Super Apps; East Asia; Generation Z; Practice-Based View; Technoculture Theory

Literature Review

Super apps represent a burgeoning phenomenon, particularly prominent in East Asia, and are poised to shape the future of media (Steinberg, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2022). Originating as single-purpose platforms such as social media and communication (WeChat, LINE, KakaoTalk) and e-commerce (Alibaba, Shopee), they have evolved into multi-functional super apps (Steinberg et al., 2022). Unlike traditional single-service apps (e.g., for online shopping, food delivery, ridesharing), super apps offer comprehensive, personalized services within a single environment, eliminating the need for multiple downloads (Roa et al., 2021).

Multiple studies explore how consumers associate attributes to technologies, devices, and digital ecosystems. While studying how technology ideologies influence consumer-level thought, speech, and action, efficiency and productivity emerge as some of the attributes associated with technology consumption (Kozinets, 2008). Other studies highlight the potential of digital platforms to form significant networks of social relationships, such as consumer collectives (Arnould et al., 2021). Consumers are also found to derive emotional benefits from their smartphones, such as psychological comfort and stress relief (Melumad & Pham, 2020). On the other hand, Mick and Fournier (1998) investigated the technological paradoxes and the extent to which they generate anxiety among consumers. Additionally, digitalization has been identified as one of the key drivers of liquid consumption, which is not necessarily positive for consumers, as it removes sources of security and stability (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Contradictory nuances have also emerged in recent research on the affordance mechanisms of digital products, as technology can make actions easier, but also more challenging (Mardon et al., 2023).

Given the wide range of meanings consumers attribute to technologies, and the potential of super apps, it is valuable to investigate what the latter mean to users, which attributes they associate with them, and the practices through which these associations are formed. However, despite the extensive coverage that super apps receive in the media and gray literature, scholarly research has largely neglected the phenomenon to date (Hasselwander, 2024). While highly successful and dominant super apps like WeChat and Alipay thrive in Asia, there are also efforts underway in Europe and the U.S. to establish similar tools (Hasselwander, 2024). To fully grasp the global potential of this phenomenon, it is essential to understand its nuances, particularly from the perspective of regular users. Research in this area is still in its infancy and largely lacks a critical theoretical lens – namely, the cultural one – which is crucial when addressing technological innovations. Indeed, technologies are increasingly “reflecting us, connecting us, shaped like us, shaping us, replacing us, controlling us”, touching every part of our lives, and becoming a new force in our existence, cultures, and world (Kozinets, 2019: 620). Such integration of technology with the human experience leads to circumstances that researchers in cultural and science and technology studies have referred to as “technocultural” (Kozinets, 2019). In this work, we draw on technoculture theory, defining technoculture as “the various identities, practices, values, rituals, hierarchies, and other sources and structures of meaning that are influenced by, created through, or expressed via technology consumption” (Kozinets, 2019: 621). Given the digital nature of the phenomenon, our study focuses on Generation Z (Gen Z) – the first generation to come of age in the 21st century – and often described as “digital natives” (Addor, 2011). Born between the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, these individuals are expected to be the first to live into the 22nd century, already constituting more than 40% of consumers in some countries (Aggarwal et al., 2022), and highlighting the need for greater attention in research.

Accordingly, the research questions guiding this study are: What are the practices behind super app usage? What meanings do super app users attribute to them? What values of the users can be reflected in their super app consumption?

Recognizing this can provide valuable insights for countries aiming to implement similar applications successfully in the future.

Methods and Data Collection:

To address the research questions, this study adopts a practice-based view (Schatzki, 1996; Schau et al., 2009; Akaka et al., 2022), which emphasizes the significance of practices, repeated activities, and behaviors in understanding how individuals engage with the world within a shared cultural context. This perspective is valuable for understanding current and future consumption patterns as it shifts the focus from viewing consumption solely as individual choices or preferences to recognizing it as embedded in broader social practices, such as routines, habits, implicit behaviors, and cultural norms. Examining Gen Z's consumption patterns through the lens of a practice-based view is particularly beneficial because it allows us to explore the practices that shape how young people interact with technology (and super apps specifically) in their everyday lives and which meanings they associate to them. To this end, we applied mixed qualitative methods including interviews, creative techniques, and video journals. Informants actively participated in the data collection process by sharing visual data from their everyday lives. We employed various techniques to meet different objectives: collages to facilitate self-description, diaries and idea-generation boards to understand daily practices and stimulate problem-solving, and video journals for triangulation, allowing us to observe everyday practices and local contextual specificities in action, and cross-reference them with other data. The research team had a multicultural composition. One researcher is originally from the region under investigation and is an expert in the local culture and technologies, while two other members have lived in the region previously, which helped to contextualize the findings. We collected data from 26 East Asian respondents, ranging in age from 16 to 29 years old. Sixteen respondents had work experience, and their backgrounds were diverse, encompassing fields such as economics and management, (digital) communication, fashion, art and culture, design, real estate, the chemical industry, languages, and social sciences. Eighteen respondents were from China (including first-, second-, and third-tier cities), four from Singapore, two from Taiwan, one from Hong Kong, and one from South Korea. Interviews were conducted remotely, resulting in 35 hours of recorded material, with an average interview length of 80 minutes. Each respondent was asked to complete several pre-tasks, including selecting four/five images that represent themselves, detailing their typical week, and creating three videos about their routines. These videos included "My 9 to 5 Day" and "My 5 to 9 Night", allowing us to familiarize ourselves with their city and neighborhood. We collected 95 minutes of self-recorded videos. Data from the interviews were coded using rigorous procedures (see Thompson et al. 1989; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Spiggle 1994) and triangulated with other secondary data.

Results

By applying a technocultural lens alongside a practice-based approach, we organize our preliminary findings (see table below) through a framework that reconciles the practices of super app usage with the meanings consumers attribute to them – both

positive and negative. This approach sheds light on the values of this generation of users and reveals underlying paradoxes.

Practices	Meanings	Values	Paradoxes
Using super apps to manage everything from payments to shopping Preferring one app to handle various tasks instead of multiple apps	Seamless, smooth (Mardon et al., 2023)	Simplicity	Gen Z values simplicity, efficiency, and pragmatism, yet seeking advanced, high-performing solutions. The quest for simplicity can ironically lead to complexity, as super apps with too many features complicate what was meant to be a seamless experience
Trusting super apps for their consistent and dependable service Perceiving super apps as secure since they handle sensitive tasks like payments and personal data storage	Reliable, safe, but not pacifying (Melumad & Pham, 2020; Mick & Fournier, 1998)	Stability	Gen Z seeks security, certainty, and routine, often becoming reliant on a few trusted solutions. However, this dependence creates a fear of feeling lost if those solutions were suddenly unavailable
Using super apps as facilitator of social interactions and networking Making use of super apps as they support both personal and professional connections seamlessly	Connector, networking enabler, social amplifier (Arnould et al., 2021), cage-within (Dittmar, 2007), liquid (Bardhy & Eckhardt, 2017)	Sociality	Gen Z seeks sociality, but it can turn into a burden as the pressure to stay constantly connected and engaged leads to social fatigue and anxiety. The very tools designed to enhance social life can make relationships feel superficial and overwhelming, blurring the lines between close and distant connections
Leveraging super apps and all their functions to organize and manage lives and tasks efficiently Downloading miniprograms to enhance productivity (e.g., financial management, task management)	Convenient, efficient, productive (Kozinets, 2008)	Self-discipline	Gen Z is driven by achieving their goals and pursuing personal and professional growth, often looking for tools to help them stay disciplined. However, this may also present many distractions that might weaken their self-discipline, potentially leading to burnout, stress, and perfectionism

Conclusions and Implications

The study offers valuable contributions to several stakeholders. First, it allows service providers to better understand consumer perspectives to enhance offers and address potential drawbacks of super apps. For countries where super apps are emerging, recognizing both strengths and challenges of these platforms is essential. More broadly, marketing managers can benefit from insights into this demographic. As technology evolves, this research underscores the numerous opportunities for consumer researchers for studying consumer behavior in relation to their technological consumption.

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