SESSION OVERVIEW

The meanings of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are defined not by the developers of the technology, but by the consumers who choose to use them, or not. This session explored the meanings of ICTs, including the Internet, to consumers, and how the meanings may aid or hinder adoption and penetration of these technologies. It began by discussing the frustrations with technology encountered by users in a developed society, the United States, moved to a discussion of factors which might potentially influence use of one technology, the Internet, throughout the world, and concluded with a discussion of ICTs by consumers in a developing country, Turkey.

SUMMARIES OF PRESENTATIONS

The first presentation, by David Glen Mick and Susan Fournier, is a refutation of research which claims that technology and its influence in daily life are inconspicuous. Most pertinent to the consumer behavior field, Joerges argues that “small” everyday technologies (e.g., appliances, entertainment, and office equipment) are the “peripheral elements” of the “largely out-of-awareness deep structures” that constitute the broad-scaled technization of life. Inconspicuousness, however, does not imply that technoculture is the modern day garden of paradise. Rather, technology reflects the postmodern principle of “double coding” (Jencks 1991) by embodying a variety of existential tensions or paradoxes. For instance, one paradox includes the tension between the tendency of technology to solve problems (or fulfill needs) versus creating others. In sum, it is widely maintained that technology is the singular, overarching manner by which contemporary life is patterned, that the content of this structural orientation reflects a range of existential paradoxes, and that the nature and consequences of consumer technologies in modern life are mostly sunk in deeper recesses of human consciousness. Mick and Fournier presented data from interviews with 16 consumers concerning their technological products. The interviews offer evidence that consumers are aware of the technological enframing of everyday life, and recognize technological paradoxes in common products. The respondents also adopt a variety of acquisition and consumption strategies to cope with these paradoxes.

Thomas Novak reported, in the second presentation, on the research he and Donna Hoffman are doing on Internet demographic and usage differences. The paper deals with 1) methodological and conceptual issues in measuring the number of users of the Internet and World Wide Web, and the behavior of these users, 2) comparison of so-called population projectable surveys based upon random samples and non-population projectable surveys using Web fill-out forms, and 3) a preliminary analysis of cross-national differences in consumer usage of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Wide ranges in the number of users were shown, depending upon the data collection method used and how “usage” is defined. The preliminary results of a cross-national survey of Web usage show a largely linear relationship between number of host computers in a country and number of users. Novak suggests that nonlinearity can be explained in part by geographic location and use of the English language.

The third presentation, by Güliz Ger and Mara Alexander, offered preliminary work on ICT usage by Turkish consumers. ICTs, the skills required to use them, and the information they can be used to communicate are bases of social power in developing societies with immense social inequalities, such as Turkey. As such, they can be used to develop or hinder individual and group identity, and as a means to achieve political power. Ger reported results of qualitative research among affluent and nonaffluent Turks, using comments from focus groups, in-depth interviews, and interviews with experts to illustrate ICTs’ capacity for empowerment and creation of identity. Collages from the focus groups were also presented.

SYNTHESIS

Alladi Venkatesh, synthesizer for the session, offered the view that while much research on technology is about the way in which technology shapes people’s lives, this session instead focused on how people influence the shape of technology. With regard to the Mick and Fournier paper, he noted that consumers can construe their home as physical space, technological space, or social space. In this space, is the paradox resolved, or do consumers learn to live with it? With regard to the paper by Novak and Hoffman, he suggested that research on how the Web is used be extended beyond the few, primarily instrumental, uses mentioned to include experiential uses. For the final paper, Venkatesh recommends considering how the Internet is used cross-nationally, using the concept of “flow” raised in the paper by Novak and Hoffman.