

Will Wearables Become Useful For Market Research?

Market researchers have a long history of using biometric measurements, such as heart rate and skin conductance, to get moment-by-moment readings of how consumers respond to things like TV ads and other commercial messages. However one of the downsides to this is the expense of bringing consumers into testing locations to fit them with sensors, and the fact that its an artificial environment may mean they aren't responding exactly as they might out in the real world.

Until recently these kinds of sensors have mainly only existed in clinics and amongst fitness-enthusiasts who, for example, wear heart rate monitors in the gym or whilst running. However with the growing popularity of wearables, an increasingly large number of people are wearing sensors that can track things like heart activity at any time, whilst they are going about their daily lives. Research firm Tractica ⁽¹⁾ expect around 24 million smart watches to be sold this year, with at least 16 million of them being the Apple Watch. Many of these watches have built in sensors that can measure not only what the person's heart activity is like, but how they are moving. This is important as movement obviously increased heart rate, so researchers need to know how much of their heart rate changes are due to activity and how much in emotional response to what they are seeing or doing.

The potential benefit of these devices is that people are wearing them whilst in real-world environments: in the shopping mall, cinema, whilst watching TV at home, or browsing retail websites; all the places in which market researchers are interested to know how people are responding to their messages. The fact that they can connect to the web means data can be uploaded in real-time or that their physical position

(e.g. in a shop) and what they are doing (e.g. which webpage they are looking at) can in theory be correlated with their responses. Indeed, it's this contextual information that is key to making the bio-data valuable to researchers.

Another potential benefit is that if these devices become more affordable and popular, and the cost of the sensors comes down to the point where they are able to measure more bio-signals, then researchers could have access to sample sizes way larger than they could achieve in lab-based studies.

The use of such data obviously raises ethical concerns. Most people are happy to answer market research questionnaires (provided they aren't too onerous and they are getting paid). However, with traditional questionnaires respondents are in conscious control of what they choose to reveal. Bodily data such as heart activity feels more personal. People may be less keen to share it. However, if they were consciously choosing to 'opt-in', getting paid for it, perhaps receiving some useful information back about their own data, and are reassured that their privacy will be protected, they may be more comfortable with the idea.

There are clearly practical, technical and ethical questions that remain to be solved, but the potential of using smart-watches and other wearable devices for market research could unlock many new insights into how consumers behave and respond in the real world.

Reference:

<https://www.tractica.com/newsroom/press-releases/apple-watch-is-on-track-to-capture-68-percent-of-smart-watch-market-share-by-the-end-of-2015/>