

## REVISITING KUBLER-ROSS'S FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF: SOME COMMENTS ON THE IPHONE 5

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### ABSTRACT

Following the recent launch of Apple's fifth generation of the iPhone product line, this study specifically looks at the feedback from consumers who experience grief as a result of a let-down in anticipation. This study randomly extracts some useful consumer comments from online forums, reviews and Tumblr illustrations. From these findings, this study provides some comments on its possible implications for market leaders of establish brand names.

**Keywords:** Kubler-Ross Model, The Five Stages of Grief, Apple, iPhone 5

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For anyone following the Apple's iPhone 5 rumors over the past year, the new iPhone 5 arguably did not bring about any major surprises. From its design and hardware (e.g., wider screen, a more efficient processor) to its software (i.e., a new operating system-iOS6), the actual launch presents more of a confirmation to its rumors rather than giving a 'wow' factor to its target market and observers. Instead of leveraging on its core competencies in which Apple has been famously known for, that is-creativity and innovation, the new iPhone 5 proud itself as the lightest, fastest and sarcastically described by most observers, 'the tallest' iPhone to date. Most anticipators and observers had higher expectations and were expecting to be given something special that would have taken them aback and make its competitors lose breath in trying to play catch up with Apple, especially after a disappointing debut to the iPhone 4s as a successor to iPhone 4. In other words, this is arguably the second major setback for most Apple fans and observers who craves for the innovative, breath-taking gadgets that once created an ecstatic and electrifying buzz around the world. To this end, many of Apple's target market and its observers have taken an immediate step forward to express their feelings, in which a sense of grief was strongly observed, that is-a

multi-faceted response to loss, in this case, an emotional response to a loss of expectation. To further understand this phenomenon, the Kubler-Ross model, which is commonly known as the five stages of grief, is premised upon. This study obtained some brief feedback through the comments on randomly selected online forums, reviews and Tumblr illustrations to understand the grief process and subsequently provide some commentary on its potential implications for market leaders of established brand names.

#### 1.1. Kubler-Ross Model-The Five Stages of Grief

The Kubler-Ross model depicts the five stage of grief and was first introduced by the late Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969). Grief is a natural response and reaction to loss in which an individual encounters an emotional suffering when something or someone the individual loves or has high hopes upon is taken away (Smith, 2012). Loss can be categorized as either physical or abstract, whereby the physical loss can be related to something that a person can touch or measure whereas the abstract loss can be related to aspects of a person's social interaction (Rando, 1991). The five stages of grief, according to Kubler-Ross (1973), include denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, or popularly known by the acronym DABDA. These stages are not meant to be complete or chronological (i.e., there are no

defined sequence). In other words, not everyone who experiences grief will feel all five of the response nor will everyone who does go through that experience do so in any particular order. The assumption is that the reaction to loss is as unique as the person experiencing them. The first stage of grieving is denial. Denial is a temporary defense mechanism for an individual. It helps individuals to survive the loss and makes survival possible. This can be expressed consciously or unconsciously as a refusal to accept the reality of the situation. The second stage of grieving is anger. Anger is a necessary stage of the healing process. At this stage, the individual recognizes that denial cannot continue. It is an indication of the intensity of an individual's love or attachment to a particular subject. This can be expressed through feelings of wanting to fight back or rebellious actions, such as rage and envy. The third stage of grieving is bargaining. Bargaining is where individuals create a possibility and hope that can somehow postpone loss. There is some negotiation that goes on-be it within the individual or between the individual and another person. Individuals may even bargain with the pain as they are willing to do anything not to feel the pain of a loss. More often than not, bargaining rarely provides a sustainable solution. The fourth stage of grieving is depression. Depression is a stage whereby individuals are in a state of low mood and often engage in aversion to activities. This is also the stage where the individual begins to understand the certainty of loss and can be expressed through overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, frustration, mourning of loss as well as the hopes, dreams and plans for the future-more often than not, feeling numb and having a lack of control. The fifth stage of grieving is acceptance. Acceptance is a stage of realization. Individuals understand that they have to accept the loss and not just trying to bear with it quietly. They understand that the loss is not their fault and finds good that can come out of the pain of loss; for example, finding ways for comfort and healing. While Kubler-Ross originally applied these stages to people suffering from terminal illness, she did not discard the possibility of applying this theoretical model to any form of catastrophic personal loss, in this case, an emotional loss of expectations (emotional attachment loss can be severe-see Cassidy and Shaver (2008)) is arguably sound.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study randomly extracted some useful consumer comments from online forums, reviews and Tumblr illustrations to better understand the grief of Apple iPhone

5's potential target market. This was carried out through Google search and sites were clicked into randomly. Subsequently, the responses obtained were first selected randomly with a selection criterion that it has to show some form of grief. The responses were arranged according to the thematic labels of the five stages of grief.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Denial

Responses indicated that some consumers experience a sense of denial as refused to accept the reality of the looks and attributes of the new iPhone 5:

That can't be it. I was sure all of the leaks were fake. I don't understand. There's no way Apple would make something so boring. Surely Steve Jobs is just playing a prank from the grave!

### 3.2. Anger

Some consumers were observed to vent their anger by expressing their frustrations and the use of abusive and sarcastic languages:

Are you f\*\*\*\*ing kidding me?! It's just a f\*\*\*\*ing stretched out iPhone 4! The Samsung Galaxy Note II 4G LTE has bigger screen AND more words and numbers in its name. APPLE FAIL. I hate you APPLE for coming out with such lame upgrades! Oh wait, it's not even an upgrade. It seems the iPhone has just grown taller and went for some slimming service!

### 3.3. Bargaining

Observations show that some consumers try to negotiate their state of expectation loss with the new features of the smart phone:

Well, it DOES have fancy, branded, names like "lightning connector" for every single one of its tiny new features and I've been informed it's "magical" and "feels good in the hand". The wider screen is a good upgrade to enable better movie viewing. The "lightning connector" name sounds pretty cool too!

### 3.4. Depression

Our search shows that some consumers come to terms with reality that their fancy expectations remains a dream and that what is real is just a minor improvement:

I hate myself for wanting something so marginally better than what I already own.

### 3.5. Acceptance

Most consumers went through some form of the previous stages of depression (as observed through the same user names) before finally coming to terms that maybe buying the iPhone would be a good choice:

I guess it isn't that bad. Since I've been waiting such a long time, I think I'll buy the new iPhone 5.  
\*Throws money at Apple again\*

### 4. CONCLUSION

From the findings, it is clear that a let-down of consumer expectations (derived based from the company's positioning) can create grief among potential customers. Given the level of hype around the iPhone 5, it is almost inevitable that the phone itself ends up feeling a little underwhelming, especially after its long-awaited anticipation for a breathtaking upgrade from the previous two versions. Apple, however, is a past master at ticking boxes and at convincing its fans through a long list of reasons to justify an upgrade. Observations shows that the iPhone 5 will potentially be selling like hot-cakes as many consumers who encounter denial, anger, bargaining and depression are likely to end up in the acceptance stage. The shortcomings, however, is that a minor upgrade that is not reflective of its positioning image in consumer minds does not edge competitively further in front of their competitors and thus does not send out shockwaves that shudders the tech world nor does it make its competitors to lose their breath. While this may be a short-term solution to profit generation, such a practice may not be a sustainable one if competitors of market leaders, especially of innovative and technological products, moves further ahead in terms of technology advancement and product offerings. As this is a short commentary on a focused phenomenon, this study strongly encourage future research in this area to establish an empirical link between emotional grief and product purchase decisions, both in the short-term and in the long-term, cross-culturally.

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