Understanding user expectations of products in physical and virtual domains

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the product expectations that users form when they are confronted with audio products. It presents the results of a comparative study conducted with twenty users to reveal the similarities and differences of their expectations from portable audio devices versus audio player applications. Analyses using the Repertory Grid Technique are described, followed by a discussion on how the user expectations change depending on a physical or a virtual product is of concern.

Introduction

In the past few years, developments in digital technologies have emerged to create an almost immediate impact on user lifestyles, leading to new ways for acquiring, managing and distributing music, radio, and assorted audible media. These developments represent a fundamental lifestyle shift in the way users enjoy and personalise media at home, on the road, and at work. This transformation is happening through, for example, software applications that combine networking and digital music technology. Portable audio devices are proliferating just as widely.

The prevailing effects of the developments in digital technologies are not limited to the transformations they bring into everyday life, but pertain to changes in the way users interact with products as well, and hence, to users' expectations of products. Until recently, user preferences of products have mainly been linked to product functionality. However, with the widespread use of digital technologies, users become more acquainted with digital products (and their add-ons), and both consumers' and industry's considerations are expanded to include hedonic and pleasurable aspects to achieve increased 'quality of experience' (Wilson, 2005; Kwahk & Han, 2002; Alben, 1996).

As discussed by Thomas and Macredie (2004), to be more wieldy and productive, usability engineering studies are better conceived as being about *'user experience'* rather than *'ease of use'*. Similarly, Wilson (2005) states that the*'whole product design'* has been familiar to the design field since the 1980s. However, the concept has become active recently, with the focus on product usability shifting from ease of