



Cell phone usage and broad feature preferences: A study among Finnish undergraduate students

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 February 2012

Received in revised form 8 April 2012

Accepted 21 May 2012

Available online 29 May 2012

Keywords:

Cell phone usage

Feature preferences

Conceptualization

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the cell phone use and broad cell phone feature preferences among high school and undergraduate in Finland. Of particular interest is the issue of gender differences regarding the use of the cell phones and the broad phone feature preferences, and their conceptualization. In this research the female respondents seem to use the calendar, Internet, music, and E-mail significantly more than the male respondents. As far as the feature preferences are concerned the female respondents seem to appreciate more price, aesthetics, design, standard processes and parts used, local language capability, safety in terms of radiation, and ringing tones. Male respondents on the other hand appreciate significantly more the use of business services. Also the broad feature preferences were compared to the actual usage areas of the cell phone. With many of these (parts, process, water, solidity, safety, ease of use, and ringing tones) there were no significant relationship with the actual usage. Interestingly the game feature had a significant correlation with the usage of the games, but the correlation was quite low. Finally the conceptualization of the cell phone by different genders was analyzed, and differences in the conceptualization were discovered.

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1. Introduction

The cell phone is a pervasive communication technology all over the world. According to the recent statistics provided by ITU (International Telecommunications Union (ITU), 2010) the mobile cellular subscriptions exceeded more than 4 billion worldwide in 2008, and expected to reach 4.5 billion by 2012 (News, 2012) while there were only about 1.4 billion subscribers in 2003. This means a compounded average growth rate of 23.30% p.a. The highest relative growth during this time period occurred mostly in the developing world in countries like Iraq, Turkmenistan, Tadjikistan, Afghanistan, and Libya. The global penetration stands at 0.60 phones per person while the highest penetration rate is currently in the United Arab Emirates with a penetration of 2.09 mobile cellular subscriptions per person. Finland has been one of the forerunners in the adoption of the cellular technology, and the penetration was 1.29 mobile cellular subscriptions per person in 2008. In addition the broadband Internet penetration in Finland stands at 33.3 subscribers per 100 persons in 2007 while the highest in the world stands at 36.3 in Denmark. This is another indication of the intensity of the use of communication technology in Finland.

The market segment consisting of young people has been called the sweet spot of the communications industry (Charny, 2002; McVicker, 2001). This is because the young people are very active users of cell phones, and other communications media like Internet. They are also active users of technologically advanced communications applications. This is the case also in Finland. According to Statistics Finland there are about 585,400 people in the age bracket 16–24 years, and the penetration

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of cell phones is 100%. The media habits of young people also differ from the older people meaning that the young people in the age bracket of 16–24 years old tend to use Internet, and play digital games much more often than the grown ups (Kangas et al., 2008).

The use of cellular phones has also changed and will continue to change fast. While during the 1980s the cell phones were mainly used for business purposes, particularly when driving, the culture of SMS messaging in everyday use came out during the 1990s, and the new form of cellular communications emerged during the 2000s with the use of camera phones with video and even with broadcasting capabilities (Kangas et al., 2008; McFarland and Mongrain, 2003; Robbins and Turner, 2002). For this reason it is vital to continuously investigate how the use of cellular communications evolves, and particularly so among younger people. The purpose of this study is to investigate the cell phone usage among undergraduate students, and secondly what kind of differences are there between different genders regarding the so-called broad features of the cell phones. In addition to the gender differences regarding the broad cell phone features, the purpose of this study is also to investigate if any patterns in the relationships among the broad variables between the genders will emerge; in other words if there are any differences in the conceptualization of the cell phone between the genders. We believe that whatever the outcome of the research (in other words whether there are any differences between the different genders or not) the results will have important implications for the design and marketing of the cellular phone.

Against this background, we seek to provide answers to four important research questions. First how do the young people in Finland use their cell phones currently and are there any differences between genders in usage? Second what are the broad feature preferences regarding cell phones and differences between genders, and third is there consistency between the actual usage and the feature preferences, and fourthly how do the different genders conceptualize the broad cell phone feature preferences. These research questions are important to answer given the importance of young people as users of cell phones particularly since they appear to be trendsetters for the future cell phone design and marketing.

This research is organized as follows. After the introduction the theoretical aspects of cell phone and communications technology usage, and cell phone usage, the feature preferences are discussed. Second the methodology of the research is addressed. This is followed by the data analysis, and discussion section, and finally future research prospects as well as the limitations of the study will be discussed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Cell phone and communications technology usage

Cell phones are used for various purposes today to satisfy the needs of the users. These include safety and security, social interactions, connection with family, information search, management of everyday life, learning, communication, m-commerce, and even the delivery of health services (Loo, 2009). The usage is driven by consumer trends like individualism, multitasking, increasing receptiveness to technology, convenience, and chaos in life (Lindgren et al., 2002).

In broad terms the attitudes of males are more favorable to the use of computers than those of females, and the use of computers is stereotypically regarded more as a male activity (Jackson et al., 2001; Jackson et al., 2008; Morahan-Martin, 1998; Jackson, 2008). Research has also indicated that there is no difference between genders in the overall usage of Internet. There are, however, differences in the nature of Internet use meaning that females tend to use the Internet more for communications purposes while the males tend to play games and search for information (Jackson et al., 2008; Morahan-Martin, 1998). As regards to the cell phone usage the young people have been found to be heavy users of the cell phones (Auter, 2007), and tend to use their phones in more ways than the older users (Auter, 2007; Lee, 2007), but gender gap in cellular phone usage has been found practically to have vanished (DeBaillon, 2003; DeBaillon and Rockwell, 2005). It has been discovered in previous research, however, that young males are likely to be more interested in the technological aspects of the cell phones, and the young females are, similarly to the use of computers and Internet, more involved with the social interaction, and thus consume more time with regular voice calls and perhaps also send more text messages (SMS) (Jackson et al., 2001; Henderson et al., 2002; Rakow and Navarro, 1993; Shade, 2007; Skog, 2002).

2.2. Cell phone feature preferences

The technology and stylistic features (colors, design, size, etc.) have evolved since the introduction of the cell phones. In the early days the oral communication features dominated while today the cell phone incorporate true combinations of all sorts of multi-tasking features like camera, calendar, mp3 player, etc. Thus it is no wonder that the cell phones are deeply rooted in every person's everyday life (Palen and Salzman, 2002), and enable the performance of many tasks, which go beyond the traditional means of communication (Lee, 2007).

A typical way to strengthen the attractiveness of a product in the eyes of the consumer is to add new desirable features to the product (Glasscock and Wogalter, 2006; Goldenberg et al., 2003; Matzler et al., 1996; Mukherjee and Hoyer, 2001). This process is called differentiation from the marketing point of view, and has the aim to add desirable features to the product that the competition does not have yet. This phenomenon has been particularly popular in the cell phone industry. The contributing factors to this phenomenon are the decrease of prices in the more and more powerful electronic components, as well as their ever-smaller scales (Lee et al., 2006).

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