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Usability of Headphones

For my review, I have chosen two different types of headphones. Standardized headphone design (Figure 1) has created a popular understanding and knowledge of their function and use. Everybody with access to the world at large is able to use headphones with relative ease. However, in the last decade, we have seen an increase in the use of headphones for new devices such as cellular phones and MP3 players. These new devices have also ushered in newer models of headphones. In this paper, I will examine the similarities and differences between standard headphones (Figure 1) and the new wrap-around style headphones (Figure 2).

Images of Headphones



Figure 1



Figure 2

First, let me briefly describe the physical features of both sets. The first set of headphones (Figure 1) is the most commonly known design and could very well be the pictorial representation of a headphone in dictionaries. The headphones are designed in such a manner where a person instinctively wears the auditory device like a headband, thus allowing their ears to be covered by the cushioned muffs. The headband has a larger width at the crown of the head and slims down as it reaches the sides of the head for added comfort and durability.

An additional feature on the standard headphones is a ridge and knot system above the ear that indicates the earphones are adjustable. When a user desires to resize her headphones, she will pull the top of headphone and earmuffs further from each other and will be rewarded with a "click & stick" command and response function. In other words, the user hears immediate feedback through clicks and notices that the headphones stick when one stops pulling. Sony has conveniently placed visual indicators ("L" & "R" to signify left and right respectively) near the resizing feature to illustrate which ear each earmuff should be placed on. A wire hangs loose from both earmuffs and ends with an adapter that is highlighted in green. In most universal systems, green indicates a plug for auditory output.

The second set of headphones (Figure 2) is one of the latest developments in headphones. They have been referred to by several names including wrap-around headphones, behind-the-head headphones, and street style headphones. The latest [intended] improvements this headphone features is 1) allows a user to wear a pair of headphones behind the head and directly at ear level. The reasoning behind this redesign is for an extra snug fit for active sports and other related activities. 2) In addition, this

headphone style won't disturb you if you happen to wear a hat or if you are overly juvenile about messing up your hair. The headband remains the same width the whole band of the headphone. Wrap-around headphones do **not** give visual cues as to how they should be worn. The following is a compare and contrast between both models.

(Standard = S, Wrap-around = W)

Usability

S: Good design because users understand the simple mechanics and know how cause it is a commonly held knowledge.

Visual cues: "L" & "R" reading. Tactual: To adjust, ridges in a click and stick system move up and down to increase or decrease headband size. Sensory clues: an immediate clicking of the ridges. The positioning of the ear fluffs make you wear it in one direction, in order to cover your entire ear.

Unusability

S: Unable to use headphones while engaged in a rigorous, physical activity.

W: Alienation of people who are new and don't understand the conventions of W use. There can be trouble stemming from the size of the head of the user, as these kinds of earphones are usually un-adjustable.

Wrap-around headphones have sprung up recently and don't command the same type of understanding and usability. I have run into on more than one occasion where a person (typically an older population because wrap-around headphones aren't their core market) has attempted to wear the earphones in the same manner one does with regular headphones. This doesn't work out well because usually one's head is not that small. The result is an embarrassed user, one who apologizes for their ineptitude to use a common every day object. Of course, Norman would blame the design rather than the user.

Standard headphones offer better usability, but I find the newly designed wrap-around headphone (although there is a slight learning curve), more beneficial to me. Wrap-around has a good anticipation of who will be using them. Ideally, the younger crowd will buy this design and pick up how to use them very quickly. I would improve the wrap-around style headphones by putting "L" and "R" visual indicators and perhaps maybe even a little picture of a head to show proper use for new users.