

Reading Summary

Course: CEN4721 Human-Computer Interaction

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Reading: "Like Having a Really Bad PA": The Gulf between User Expectation and Experience of Conversational Agents

The authors interviewed and analyzed the responses of fourteen subjects who interacted with conversational agents (CA). Conversational agents are the autonomous voices which many Big Tech companies have been developing for years now, such as Alexa, Siri, and Google Now. Their motivation was to find the factors that “motivate and limit” (Luger, E., & Sellen, A., 2016) using CA’s for everyday tasks. They noticed a gap in the research where most studies on CA’s were pertaining to their architecture and technical details, with very little content on real user experience. They hoped to determine if the design of the CA’s were meeting the needs and wants of the people who used them.

The authors found that the CA’s were not used very often, if at all. They found Siri to be the most used, but all of the CA’s struggled to answer all of the natural language prompts. The subjects were faced with scenarios where they would have to “dumb down” the phrases for the CA’s to understand them. Furthermore, longer questions, follow up questions and extended conversations would not flow well, as the CA acted as if it were answering questions for the first time, with no leading context. In sum, the subjects were generally irritated and felt let down by the CA because of its limited “feedback and transparency” (Luger, E., & Sellen, A., 2016)

There are some limitations and biases of the study. As mentioned in the paper, most of the participants of the study were male and the sample population is UK-centric (Luger & Sellen, 2016). Consequently, even though different accents were taken into account, users who speak different languages and with different backgrounds were not considered in this study. Additionally, gender imbalance in this study, although claimed to produce no significant difference in the study outcome, was acknowledged by the authors (Luger & Sellen, 2016). It is also important to point out that the study focuses on the state of art CA, which is Siri at the moment. Thus the analysis used in the study was more interactional-themed focused (Luger & Sellen, 2016).

The study is really relevant in today’s technology world where conversation agents start to become more involved in people’s daily lives. However, “the operation of the CA systems failed to bridge the gap between user expectation and system operation (Luger & Sellen, 2016).” This study evaluated the current CAs and gives valuable future directions on what needs to be taken into consideration for designing future CAs, such as “ways to reveal system intelligence”, “reconsidering the interactional promise made by humorous engagement”, and “rethinking system feedback and design goals in light of the dominant use case (Luger & Sellen, 2016).” On the other hand, it shows how to spot and bridge gaps when designing using a user-centered design approach.

Reference:

Luger, E., & Sellen, A. (2016). "like having a really bad pa". *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858288>