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HW 4

<p style="text-align:center">Contextual Inquiry:
Laundry Room Interactions</p>

Introduction

Everyone does laundry. However, not everyone washes their clothes in the same way. In fact, some laundry rooms even allow people to choose how they want to pay for their machine use. What common themes arise when people clean their clothes? Do they prefer cash or card? How often do they choose the most environmentally friendly option? The aim of this investigation is to identify some trends that develop when students use a common laundry room.

Location

The laundry room used for this investigation is located in the basement of Stearns East Hall. The facility includes five washers and five dryers, two large, wooden tables, a variety of power outlets, and an electronic payment station located in the entrance to the room. The results from this study come from an hour and a half long contextual inquiry on a Saturday evening at approximately 9 pm.

The crowd consisted entirely of college students, distributed approximately equally between men and women. While the year of the students in this investigation are not known, the laundry room in Stearns East Hall typically consists of Freshmen with occasional upperclassmen mixed in.

Findings

Most students prefer to use the electronic payment station. While some students chose to use quarters directly at the washing/drying machines, the majority of students took advantage of the card reader after loading the empty machine with their clothes. However, of the students using the electronic interface, only a few of them needed to swipe their cards one time. Additionally, after swiping their

cards, many of the students needed to walk around the corner to double check the number associated with the machine they intended to use prior to entering the number in the number pad of the electronic payment kiosk. Interestingly, some students would swipe their cards at the payment station, select their machine, then manually add a quarter or two to the selected machine to add additional time. There did not appear to be a way to add time to a machine electronically.

Future Work

Based on the results in the previous section, there seems to be several ways in which the system could be improved with technology. At the time of the study, there were no posters or diagrams indicating the numbers of the individual machines that could be seen by a user of the electronic interface. To solve this issue, the interface could incorporate such a diagram to visually aid the user in selecting the correct machine. Also, since there was no perceived way to add time to a machine using the electronic interface, students often had to add quarters manually to the machines, thereby taking away some of the benefits of the electronic payment system. One solution to this problem would be to add an option for increased time in the kiosk. Finally, the reader seemed to be very sensitive to the cards the students used, often times forcing the student to swipe their cards more than once for the reader to recognize the card. To solve this problem, a better card reader could be used or an option could be installed into the kiosk allowing a user to manually enter information, such as their student ID or a specific card number.

Reflection

This contextual inquiry in the residence hall laundry room was largely successful. I managed to gain valuable information about the habits of students without having to talk to them about their choices or experiences, which allowed me to build my own conclusions and look at the laundry room more objectively. Additionally, because of the simplicity of the setting, I did not have to be very close

to the students as they completed their tasks in order for me to determine what they were trying to do, which provided a way to give the students privacy.

However, if I were to do this activity again, I would like to make some adjustments. Because it was Saturday night when I conducted the contextual inquiry, the laundry room was relatively empty, so there were not as many users as there might have been during the middle of the day or during the middle of the week. To improve on this, I would do another contextual inquiry during the middle of the week, during the morning and afternoon to expand the dataset.