

Short Research Article

An Investigation Into The Effect of Smartphone Back Button Location On Users' Experience: A case study comparing Apple iPhone and Android UI.

ABSTRACT

The use of touchscreens as an input method on smartphones has become the norm in mobile industry. This has changed the way keys are traditionally arranged on smartphone devices. One of these changes is on the location of “back button” . Few studies, However have been conducted to investigate the effect of key locations on users performance and experience. This study investigated the effect of back button location on users’ experience of using smartphones. A comparison was made between Apple iPhone and Android UI. Using observation, users navigation through Facebook and Gmail app on both iPhone and Android were observed. This was done by observing the time it takes a user to locate a back button, his/her first point of reference and emotions while locating the button. A semi-structured interview was also conducted on users, asking them to compare how the difference in the location of back button on iPhone and Android has affected their experience of navigating through both Facebook and Gmail app. The study reveals that back button key location affects user experience of using smartphones, keys located at the bottom edges are easier to locate and those located at top edges are harder to locate and press.

Author Keywords

Smartphones Keys, Back Button, User Experience, Touchscreens

INTRODUCTION

Smartphone devices have become increasingly prevalent. These devices have witnessed increasing changes in their functionalities in the past few years, from an era where users’ interaction was via keypads to the current era where interaction is mostly through touchscreens. Most current smartphones have only few hardware keys, touchscreens are used by users for almost all inputs [1]. However, the increased use of touch screen as an input method on smartphones has led to some changes in smartphones user interface specifically, keys layout. For instance users of smartphones are traditionally accustomed to the “back button” location being at the “bottom right of smartphones”. However, due to the evolution in

smartphone interface design and specifically the used of touchscreen as an input method in smartphones, the idea of placing “back button” in the bottom right location is slowly diminishing. Furthermore, increased in the number of smartphone applications with each having its distinctive interface structure is also affecting “back button” location on touchscreen smartphones. This can be seen for example on Apple iPhone and Android phones where on the former, depending on the application the user is interacting with, the location of “back button” is located either at the bottom left edge or top left edge of the device. Nevertheless, recent studies in this field have focused on the effect of touch screen, button size and spacing on users’ touch characteristics see [6]. There is currently no evidence of research that addressed how the variation in location of back-button affect users’ experience of using touch screen smartphones. This paper is a step towards addressing this gap, it presents an empirical study of the effect of touchscreen smartphones back-button location on user experience. Specifically, the paper seeks to compare two major smartphone devices, the Apple iPhone iOS and Samsung Android. The selected devices were chosen because they have different “back button” location. To conduct the study, we employ both observation and interview-based methods. Observation was used to observe the effect of “back button” location on user experience of using two mobile applications namely Facebook, Gmail on both Apple iPhone iOS and Samsung Android. Similarly, Semi-structured Interview-based questions was used to find the impact of this variation on users.

The report is structured in four sections as follows: Literature review which will give an overview of the work in literature, Methodology section which would discuss the method use to collect data so as to answer the research question. Result section which presents the data gathered from the study, methods used to analyse the data. Discussion section summarises the findings of the study in details. Conclusion section is the final section and will summarise the overall contribution of the study to the field of human

computer interaction specifically smartphone user interface design.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The question of how smartphone key size and locations affects users' performance has been the subject of much attention in the field of User Interface Design (UI). Many researchers have conducted studies to find the effect of touch screen button size, button spaces and location on touch characteristics of users and users' performance. For example, a study by [4] investigated the effects of touch key sizes and locations on mobile phone usability in terms of the success rate, the number of errors, and the pressing convenience. A commercial PDA was used in this research with a touch screen size of 240 * 320. The study used three touch key size levels (square shape with 4mm, 7mm and 10mm wide) equivalent to small, medium and large key sizes respectively. For key location, the research used 25 different location level with each being the centre point of 25 rectangular areas that has same width and height. Participants were asked to hold a PDA with their right-hand and use only right thumb to perform tasks. For key size, participants' success rate, number of errors was recorded. To find the effect of key location on users, participants were asked to rate their pressing convenience while performing similar task but involving different key locations. The result of the study revealed that the number of errors decreases as touch key size increases also the larger the key size the higher the success rate. For location, the authors made a special note that keys located at the bottom-right edge and those located at the top-left edge of mobile devices are hard to tap and often users need a considerable thumb flexion and extension to press keys in these areas. Although the findings of this research are important for UI design however its limitation is that users were only tested against their interaction with touchscreen keypads not with actual mobile applications. In another research, [2] conducted a study to investigate single-handed mobile interaction, one of the areas they looked at was how device size, target(button) location, and movement direction influence thumb mobility. The study concluded that device size is not a factor in how quickly users can access objects within thumb reach, but that larger devices have more areas that are out of reach implying that the location of buttons impacts performance more than device size. In another research, [5] evaluated one handed thumb tapping on mobile touchscreen devices. The study looked at the usability effect of target/button location on user's accuracy of tapping, the research shows that participants found buttons/targets near the centre of the screen as easier and more comfortable to tap, although the study also found that participants tapped faster in the middle of the screen and the edge closest to the hand. While these studies have all looked at the effect of key

size, key location on smartphones usability, they have not however examine the effect this can have on users experience. Nevertheless, recent study by [3] have shown that there exist a relationship between system's usability and user experience. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the effect of "back button" location of touch screen smartphones on users' experience of using smartphones applications. To do this, an experiment involving real users was conducted.

RESEARCH METHODS

Subjects

A total of 40 participants all Students of Sokoto state University participated in the study. 26 were males and 14 females. 30 were Android smartphone users while 10 were Apple iPhone users.

Experimental Design

The study was divided into two phases. The first phase was an observation phase, participants were asked to perform some tasks involving the use of back button. Specifically, participants were asked to:

Interacts with Facebook app and perform some tasks using either android or iPhone iOS.

Clicking a link within an email and to use "back button" to go back to the email's inbox. An observation sheet was used at this phase to capture and record information regarding participants' interactions, participants details such as ability to locate a back button while interacting with the smartphone, emotions and time it takes them to locate the back button were recorded. The second phase was an interview, in this phase, participants were interviewed regarding their experience of the previous stage.

Apparatus

Android Samsung Galaxy S3 (Height 142mm, 72.5mm width) and iPhone 5s (Height 123.8 mm, 58.6 mm width) were used. These devices were chosen because of their dimensions which is clear representation of present smartphones. Specifically because they have different back button location. The iPhone back button is merely dependent on the application a user is interacting with, although the home button could also be used in place of back button. The Samsung galaxy has its back button positioned at "button right".

Experimental Procedure

Each participant was given written instructions on the experimental objectives and procedure at the start of the experiment. Participants were also given the research consent form at this stage and were asked to perform the following afterwards:

Open a Facebook application, click any link within it and try to go back to home page by using the back button.

Open any email application i.e, gmail or yahoo mail, click message with a link in its content, click the link and try going back to your inbox.

However, depending on which smartphone a participant is using i.e if the participants are android users, then they are asked to first perform the above tasks on iPhone and then repeat the same tasks but this time on android. For iPhone users, similar procedure was adopted but in this case they were asked to first perform the a tasks with Samsung android and then repeat same tasks on iPhone .

In both ways, participants' interactions with the smartphones and specifically the "back button" was observed and recorded. After the observation stage, participants were interviewed regarding their experience of using both devices and whether the difference in the location of "back button" on the two mobile phones has affected their experience of using these applications.

Observations

Observation was the first stage of the experiment and was applied to observe how users' use back button to navigate through mobile applications and the effect of back button location on user interaction. Observation sheet was used to record users emotions while locating the back button. The terms "confused" and "confidence" were used to refer to users' emotions when trying to locate the "back button" . The time it takes a user to locate the button and his/her first point of reference (i.e where he/she first looked at) was also recorded.

Interviews

Semi-structured interview was used to ask users on their experience of locating the "back button" and the location they think is the most preferred for placing back button on touchscreen smartphone devices.

RESULTS

Observation Results

Three variables were observed at this stage: users' point of reference when asked to locate "back button", their emotions, and ability to locate the button .Figure1 shows iPhone users first point of reference when asked to locate a back button during interaction. In figure 2, we show the first point of reference of Android users on both iPhone and Android.

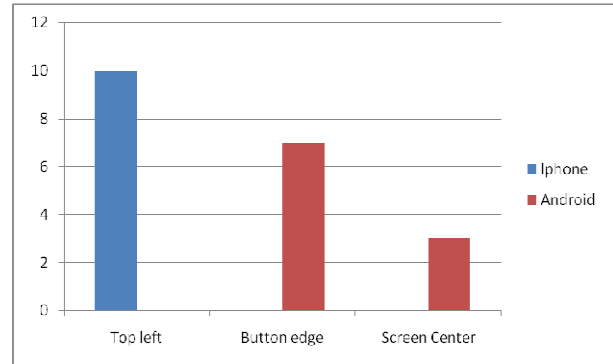


Figure 1: Iphone Users first point of reference when asked to locate back button on both Iphone and Android smartphones.

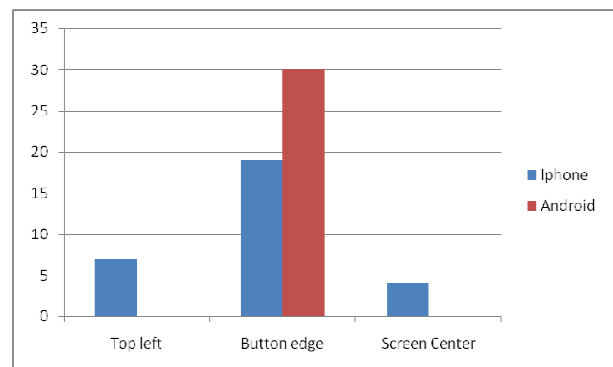


Figure 2: Android Users first point of reference when asked to locate back button on both Android and iPhone smartphones.

From figure 1, we can see that 10 out of the 10 iphone users referred to top left side to locate back button when performing the experimental tasks. However, almost 7 out of 9 of this same group of users referred to button edge when ask to perform similar experimental tasks on android. None of the users however referred to the centre of the screen when performing the tasks on iphone although 3 were found to refer to this position on Android.

In figure 2, we can see that 30 out of the 30 android users all referred to button edge when ask to locate back button on android. However, when performing similar experimental tasks on iphone, 7 participants referred to top left, 19 referred to button edge and 4 referred to screen centre.

Table 1 shows the number of users that were able to locate back button. 8 out 10 iPhone users were able to locate the button on Android and perform the required tasks both on Facebook and Gmail. 17 out of the 30 android phone users were able to locate the back button on iPhone when interacting with Facebook application and 6 during interaction with Gmail.

	Facebook	Gmail
iPhone users on Android	8	8
Android users on iPhone	17	6

Table 1. Users' ability to locate back button on both Facebook and Gmail application .

With regards to user's emotion while trying to locate the back button, 8 out of 10 iPhone users were confident in locating "back button" on android. However, all android users shows some level of confusion when locating back button on iPhone.

Interview Results

During the interview session, iPhone users were asked to compare their experience of interacting with android and how the difference in back button location has affected their interaction with Facebook and Gmail app. 7 out of the 10 participants said finding the button wasn't hard, it was clearly marked, very easy and convenient to use. Users also like the idea of the button being placed at the button edges, specifically 2 users mention it was helpful for people with short thumb. Another user also complained of his thumb covering the screen when button is located at the top edges, saying this has a negative impact on interaction hence he prefer it at the button edge. Users also complained of the existence of two buttons when navigating on Facebook app, one located within the app and another which is physically on the button right edges of the phone hardware, they believe this is wrong as it can put a beginner user in dilemma on which button to press. Finally when asked if they think iPhone should have a physical back button users said no, iPhone design makes them unique.

Similarly, android users were asked to describe their experience of interacting with iPhone and how the location of back button on iPhone has affected their ability to locate back button both on Facebook and Gmail. All the 30 participants said it was challenging. The 17 users that were able to locate it while interacting with Facebook said it was because the button was present as a touch screen button at the top left of Facebook app. However, on their inability to locate the back button when told to go back to their inbox after clicking a link within their email, users attributed this to the absent of noticeably physical button or touchscreen button on both the iPhone and the Gmail app. Finally, when asked what location would they prefer a back button to be, 1 user said it doesn't matter as long as the button is physically present somewhere, users would get used

to it with time. 2 users however said they prefer it at the bottom edges. To them back button either physical or touch screen should always be at the button edge, they said this should be taken into consideration by designers of smartphone interfaces especially considering how smartphones screens heights are increasing day by day.

DISCUSSIONS

Location of back button affects user experience according to the result. Physically noticeable keys especially those located at the button edge of mobile phones are found easier to locate by users. The result shows that users refer to button edges of smartphones when told to locate a back button on phones they are new to, this could be attributed to the fact that users are traditionally used to having back buttons located at the button edges of mobile phones. Another interesting finding, is on users' thumb size and length in relation to their ability to press a button. According to the interview results, users consider positioning of back button at the top edges to affect their interaction experience, this confirms the findings by [4] that top-left edge keys are hard to tab and often users need a considerable thumb flexion and extension to press keys in these areas. Hence, it is important for smartphone UI designers to note that although having an aesthetic design is good, designing for user experience is very crucial as it makes system helpful, convenient, enjoyable and satisfying. Nevertheless, the limitation of this study is on its data collection approach. The study was conducted while most students were writing their exams hence not many agreed to take part. Another limitation is on the data collection methods. Although the used of observation allowed us to observe the real difficulty encountered by users while locating back buttons, interviews also allowed us to follow up some interesting issues mentioned by users. However, these methods are time consuming and requires extra techniques for captured to give better meaning. For example interview results need to be codified using for instance content analysis. I believe questionnaires would have been the best choice as it would be easier to reach large number of audiences and also ask more questions. In the future, the research could be extended with application of more sophisticated statistical method to find if there exist any relationship between user experience and key locations on smartphones.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to find the effect of back button location on user experience of using smartphones. Results from interviews and observation techniques show that (1) back button keys located at the button edge of smartphones are easier to locate for novice users, (2) That users prefer back button to be positioned at the button edges of smartphones especially if the phone has large screen

size. These results implies that designers of smartphone user interfaces should strongly consider user preferences when deciding the location for back buttons on smartphones although this could mean finding a balance between aesthetic design and designing for user experience.

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