A Comparative Analysis Of Canva And Photoshop; Freemium And Premium Features

Digital Methods & Information Analytics

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Report Contents:

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of software accessibility extends beyond the design world, like possibly affecting users with limited financial resources. User experiences vary across different platforms, lead by the relation between people and technology, following the principles of human-computer interaction (HCI) (Earnshaw et al. 2017; Rogers 2012). HCI considers interaction from many perspectives, two of which are usability and user experience (UX). "Usability describes how easily the interfaces are able to be used as intended by the user" (Nielsen 2012). This research explores the differences between platforms, specifically examining freemium and premium models. Canva, a user-friendly graphic design tool, represents the freemium category with a simplistic drag-and-drop interface (Gehred 2020, 338). It provides various features and allows users to register for a free Canva Basic account, with premium features available for purchase.

Another platform worth noting is the premium offering of Photoshop, specifically tailored for the professional graphic design market, in contrast to Canva's free subscription model (Manovich 2011). Photoshop's interface is characterized by menus housing numerous commands, with each command offering multiple options. In a significant shift made by Adobe, the licensor of Photoshop, in 2013, the application, along with other Adobe creative programs, transitioned to a subscription-only service, when adopting the Creative Cloud name, going fully premium (Lindblad 2020).

The term "freemium" is a combination of "free" and "premium," describing a strategy where users access a basic product or service for free and can upgrade to a premium version with added features by paying. The upgrade enables more features. Companies favour the freemium model for its ability to attract large traffic volumes and directly reach potential paying customers without substantial marketing investments (Kumar 2014; Gu 2018). As a marketing tool, freemium draws in customers through word of mouth and organic searches. From the customer's viewpoint, it offers a free way to try out a new product or service. Established software such as Photoshop has already garnered a reputation that doesn't necessitate the level of marketing required by Canva, especially among professionals.

2. QUESTION

In this research, I pose the question: In what ways do the features in Canva's interface limit students' creative affordances compared to Photoshop, and how does the integration of paid features in free software affect the creative affordances for students I aim to address sub-questions regarding limitations in Canva's interface and the comparative strengths of Photoshop. Additionally, I will explore the enhanced possibilities facilitated by premium options in free software like Canva. The question is interesting because it unveils the practical affordances within a relevant comparison, where it is doable within the specific timeframe by limiting it to two, for me, accessible platforms. The significance lies in its potential to inform other students about the affordances of these graphic design tools, influencing their choices and enhancing the learning experience.

3. METHOD

In this software analysis, the walkthrough method will be employed, specifically adopting a design-centric perspective with a focus on the material aspects relevant to user experience design (UX) from a practitioner's standpoint (Dieter & Tkacz 2020). In software studies, it is specifically interesting to look at how software applications are used in everyday practices and how they influence and change them. The walkthrough method is "explicitly designed to mimic or rehearse ordinary use" and will be employed in this research to trace the trajectory of a student user as they engage in the process of creating a poster. The investigation will contain a 'walkthrough' of the Canva platform, emphasizing the step-by-step process of creating a poster as a student, from the sign-up phase to the exporting phase. There will be looked at all the necessary features for creating a poster, and how they are afforded. The exact same process will be repeated for Photoshop.

The primary goal is to assess a student's proficiency in navigating and utilizing the Canva platform, drawing a comparison with Photoshop on their affordances. In this analysis, the focus lies on comprehending the user's journey and determining what better aligns with a student's persona. The aim is to provide insights into the limitations imposed by Canva's interface on users' creative affordances when juxtaposed with Photoshop. Creative affordances, in this context, refer to the breadth of capabilities an application provides to achieve the desired outcome. This research incorporates insights from Manovich (2011) for Photoshop and prioritizes Gehred's work (2020) for Canva.

As Rogers (2019, 9) also discusses, the chosen approach involves a cross-platform analysis that benefits from comparing data points across each platform. Adopting the "designerly" approach by Dieter and Tkacz (2020) along with the "walkthrough" method sourced from Light, Burgess, and Duguay (2016), the study aims to delve into the impact of integrating paid features into free software, examining how this influences creative affordances on Canva.

Based on the persona criteria used in the research by Earnshaw et al (2017; "Persona | Usability Body of Knowledge," n.d.), the research aligns with the persona of Media and Information student. The goal is clear: design a poster. The student explores options like Canva and Photoshop, seeking a user-friendly platform to simplify the design process. Motivated by the desire to contribute creatively with a very small budget, the student's attitude drives the search for an intuitive and accessible design experience. For the chosen platforms, the business objective is clear: provide a seamless design experience to ensure the successful creation of a graphic design.

4. ANALYSIS

In examining the chosen platforms for this research, a comprehensive analysis of their graphical design creation process reveals intriguing insights. Commencing with the onboarding phase, specifically the signup page, notable differences emerge. Canva facilitates a straightforward account creation, while Photoshop offers a similar option with access limited to trial versions of Creative Cloud applications. Both platforms utilize personal email for signup, but Canva further engages users by posing questions about their intended usage, exemplified in Figure 1 where I indicated the use for student purposes. This interaction led to personalized recommendations for templates, fonts, and ideas, showcasing Canva's commitment to affordance.

Figure 1. Sign up process of Canva. From having downloaded the program to selecting a document type.

The capability to receive tailored recommendations based on user input, such as identifying as a student, makes Canva very helpful in selecting a document type. Conversely, Adobe's Photoshop presents a more complex process by necessitating the download of an application manager, as seen in Figure 2. Upon doing so, users are confronted with numerous application options, including trial versions, and are encouraged to explore paid plans. Despite being made for professionals, Photoshop does have an affordance that highlights a student plan. The multiplicity of choices, while comprehensive, adds complexity to the onboarding experience. Different than with Canva, Photoshop doesn't ask any questions regarding the use of the software when signing-up.
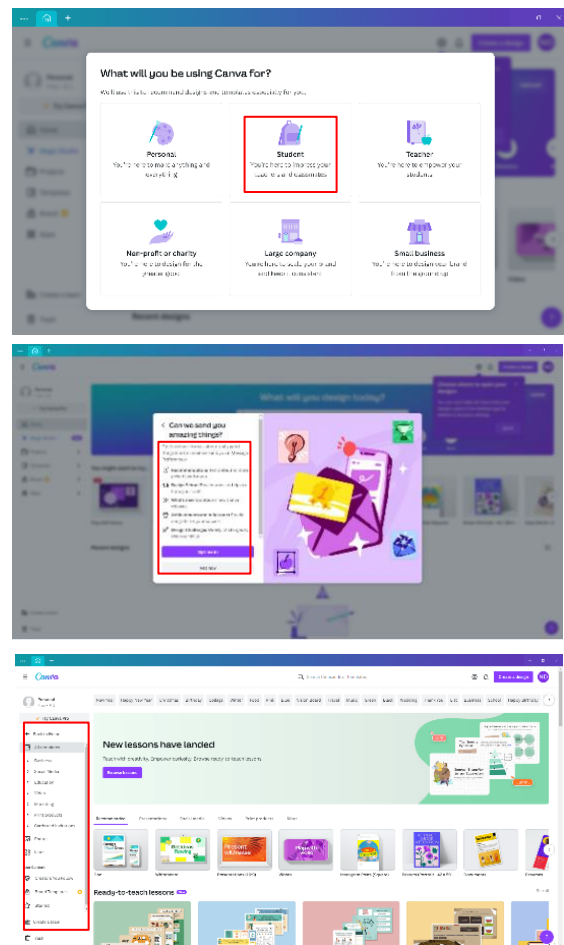
Figure 2. Sign up process of Adobe (Photoshop). From having downloaded the program to selecting a document type.

When going into the Photoshop application processes and affordances themselves, we investigate the creation of a file and the first look into the workspace interface. The workspace is the place containing all the graphic design tools and the design canvas (Adobe n.d.). While the 'create file' button is clearly marked, selecting the document type and size poses some challenges, with the UI recommending one option but not always offering the desired choices. Nonetheless, the affordance to proceed to the workspace is clearly delineated, as seen in Figure 3.
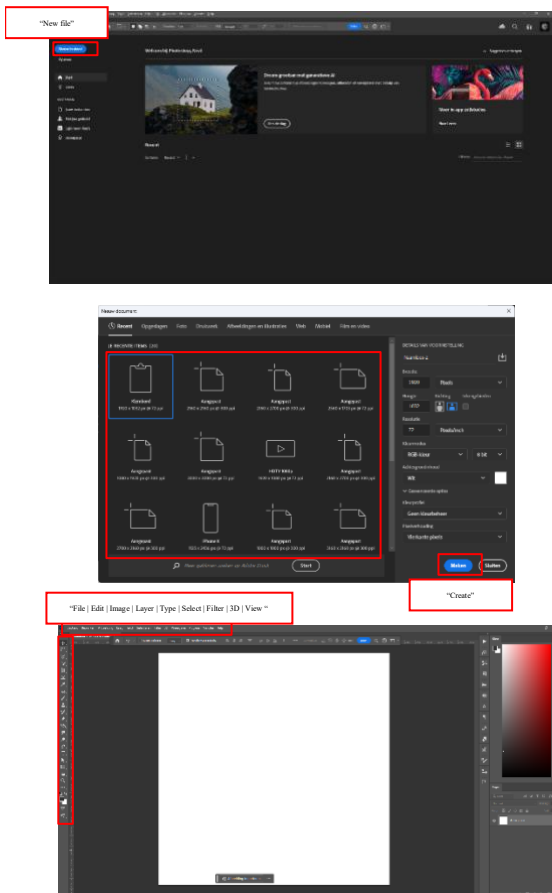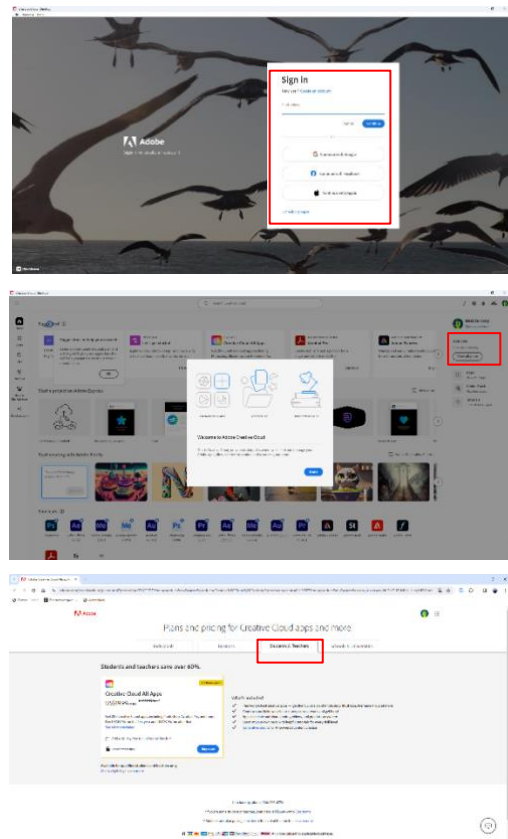

Figure 3. Workspaces of Photoshop. From the landing page to the creative workspace and the design canvas.

In contrast, Canva's creative workspace, depicted in Figure 4, stands out for its user-friendly design. The affordances for creating are clearly marked, and the simplicity of the interface ensures that all tools are easily identifiable, distinguished by intuitive icons. This strategic simplicity aligns with Canva's approach to providing a concise yet comprehensive set of tools. Users can pick a template and easily navigate through the available features, making the design process more accessible and efficient.

When looking at the transformations of Photoshop, a glimpse into its history reveals its evolution from a rudimentary application in the 1980s to a sophisticated graphic design software suite (Lindblad 2020). The initial 12 tools and 5

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command tabs have grown to 20 tools and 10 command tabs, marking a substantial development in creative affordance.

In addition, Photoshop offers the flexibility to streamline and customize its interface options according to individual preferences, as said by Kost (2021) in her blog on personalizing the UI of Photoshop. Furthermore, users have the ability to create personalized shortcuts for every command. This capacity to tailor the workspace for maximum efficiency sets Photoshop apart from Canva.
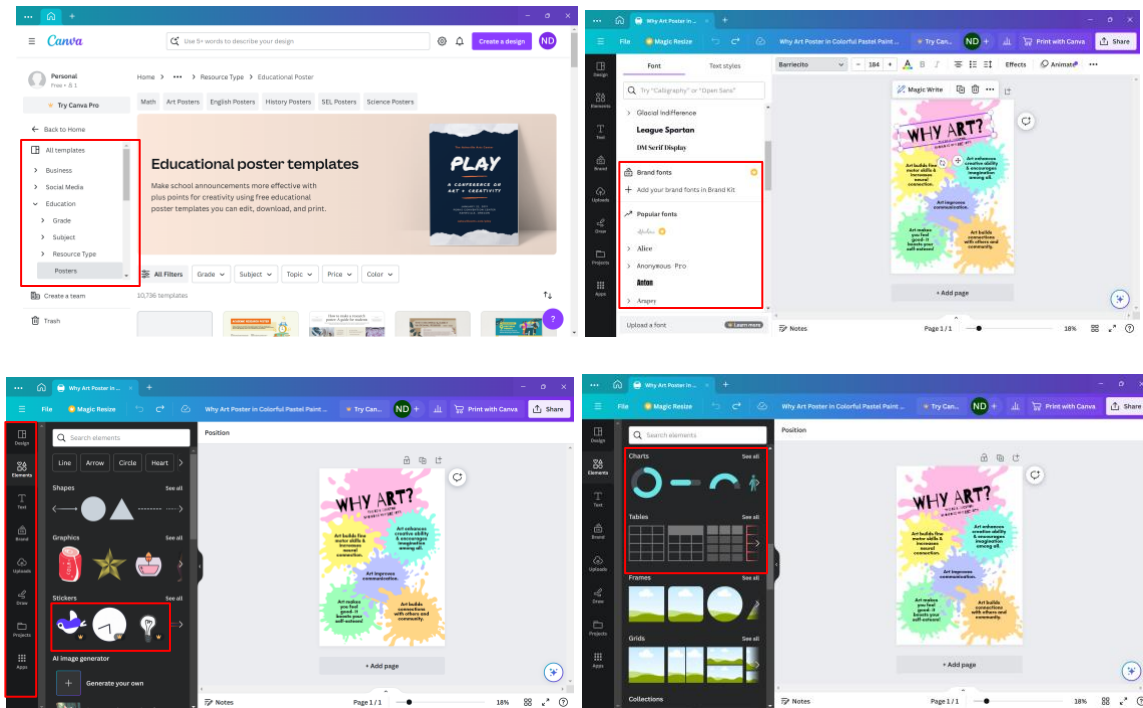

Figure 4. Workspaces of Canva. From the template page to the creative workspace and the design canvas.

Canva's premium subscription enriches the design experience by providing users with a multitude of freemium affordances. Subscribers benefit from an expanded selection of unique fonts, allowing for more creative and personalized typographic choices in their projects. The inclusion of exclusive pre-made icons, graphics, and images further enhances the premium package, enabling users to incorporate distinctive elements into their designs that set them apart from those using the free version.

This array of freemium affordances distinguishes Canva's premium subscription, catering to users with diverse design needs. Whether it's the quest for unique visual elements or the seamless integration of data, Canva's premium features empower users to take their designs to the next level with added convenience and creative flexibility (Gehred 2020, 339).

Canva not only offers freemium features but also boasts an array of entirely free features, some of which are not even available in Photoshop. Notably, Canva offers the inclusion of charts and tables directly in your designs. The user-friendly tools for crafting these visual elements make the entire process accessible to a wider audience, including individuals without advanced graphic design skills. This extra layer of functionality not only enriches the user experience but also ensures that even those new to graphic design can effortlessly incorporate data visualization into their projects.

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5. DISCUSSION

The observation that Canva offers educational opportunities without imposing substantial financial burdens aligns with the overarching societal challenge of restricted access to quality education. Despite this challenge, the use of Canva mitigates the impact, offering a user-friendly user interface (UI) that is both comprehensible and conducive to learning for students. The affordability of Canva, combined with its educational affordances, makes it an accessible tool for students pursuing graphic design, contributing positively to their learning experiences. As also said by Gehred (2020, 339), the "best way to learn this program is by experimentation." As the program is intuitive and user-friendly, according to this author.

The limitations and possibilities outlined in the analysis shed light on the contrasting features of Canva and Photoshop. While Canva's freemium model allows for extensive exploration of design features without cost, Photoshop's premium approach caters to professional market, not that relevant to our student persona. The discussion around the freemium model emphasizes how Canva, with its inclusive strategy, enables more users to try out and utilize a variety of features without a substantial financial commitment. This promotes accessibility.

The potential impact on education is evident in Canva's emphasis on user engagement and the provision of free features beneficial for learning. This research acknowledges the strategic simplicity of Canva's interface, designed to cater to users with various design needs, including those new to graphic design. Although, Earnshaw et al (2017) states that, "Learners might experience challenges navigating an interface (…) When an interface is not easy to use, a user must develop alternative paths to complete a task and thereby accomplish a learning goal." Which could still be a reason to not choose Canva, due to its too simplistic design that limits design exploration.

6. CONCLUSION

The walkthrough approach employed in this research provided valuable insights into the user experiences of Canva and Photoshop, specifically focusing on material aspects relevant to user experience design. However, it's crucial to acknowledge certain limitations. The research predominantly delved into the user interface and affordances, lacking insights into real user experiences of multiple users. Future research should adopt a more nuanced approach, encompassing a broader spectrum of user interactions to gain a deeper understanding of the strengths and limitations of each platform.

In terms of literature, this research drew from three in-class texts (Rogers, Dieter, and Light et al.) and eleven non-class texts. These sources played a pivotal role in illustrating the method and introducing the objects of study. Additionally, they contributed to the public discourse on societal problems, fostering discussions with other authors.

In conclusion, Canva emerged as an accessible and user-friendly tool, especially for students and beginners. Its freemium model, offering both free and paid features, presents an inclusive strategy that fosters learning. Where, based on this research, the use of the freemium options of Canva is preferred over the use of the premium software Photoshop for student purposes. This research highlighted the differences between these platforms, following users in their choices based on the interface's affordances. Ultimately, the research contributes insights into the evolving landscape of graphic design tools, emphasizing accessibility, affordability, and educational affordances.

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