Chapter IV

Foreseeing the Future Lifestyle with Digital Music: A Comparative Study Between Mobile Phone Ring Tones and Hard-Disk Music Players Like iPod

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Abstract

This chapter aims to explore the future trajectory of enjoying digital music entertainment among consumers comparing the characteristics of the usage patterns of digital music appliances in the U.S. and those in Japan. As the first step of this research, the author conducted two empirical surveys in the U.S. and Japan, and found some basic differences in the usage patterns of a variety of digital music appliances. Next, a series of ethnographical research based on focus-group interviews with Japanese young women was done and some interesting reasons of the differences were discovered. In Japan, sharing the experiences of listening to the latest hit songs with
friends by playing them with mobile phones that have the high quality, ring tone functions can be a new way of enjoying music contents, while hard-disk music players like iPod have become a de facto standard of the digital music appliances in the world.

Introduction: Central Questions

The November 2001 debut of iPod and the subsequent opening of iTunes Music Store have brought a rapid expansion of the digital music market around the world. Some estimate that the market will be worth $1.7 billion dollars by 2009 (Jupiter Research). Now, iTunes Music Store service is available in 30 countries around the world, with the total number of downloaded songs surpassing the 500 million mark in July 2005.

The store only opened in Japan in August 2005 and sold over 1 million songs in the first 4 days. This is an astonishing achievement, considering that Japan’s largest online music store Mora has monthly sales of around 450,000 songs. In March and April 2005, SONY, which has long led the portable music player market, released a new digital music player under the Walkman brand, offering both the hard disk type and USB flash memory type to launch a marketing drive against iPod. The developments have finally begun to provide Japanese music lovers with an environment whereby digital music contents are broadly enjoyed in terms of both services and hardware devices.

One of the major characteristics of Japan’s digital music market has been the presence of digital music contents for use on mobile phones. The use of digital music contents on mobile phones, which started as regular ring tones, has gradually evolved into Chaku-uta® (true-tone ring tones) by December 2002, and to Chaku-uta Full™ (mobile-phone-based music distribution service launched in December 2004 by the mobile carrier “au”). Chaku-uta® and Chaku-uta Full™ have sold over 100 million songs and 10 million songs respectively, making the digital music service the largest segment in mobile-phone content services.

The environment for enjoying digital music content is set to expand even further into the future. How would such a development affect the way Japanese music fans listen to music in general? This paper examines future ways of enjoying digital music content in Japan, and the competition between music players like iPod for use with personal computers and mobile phones that have adopted the usage as music players.
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