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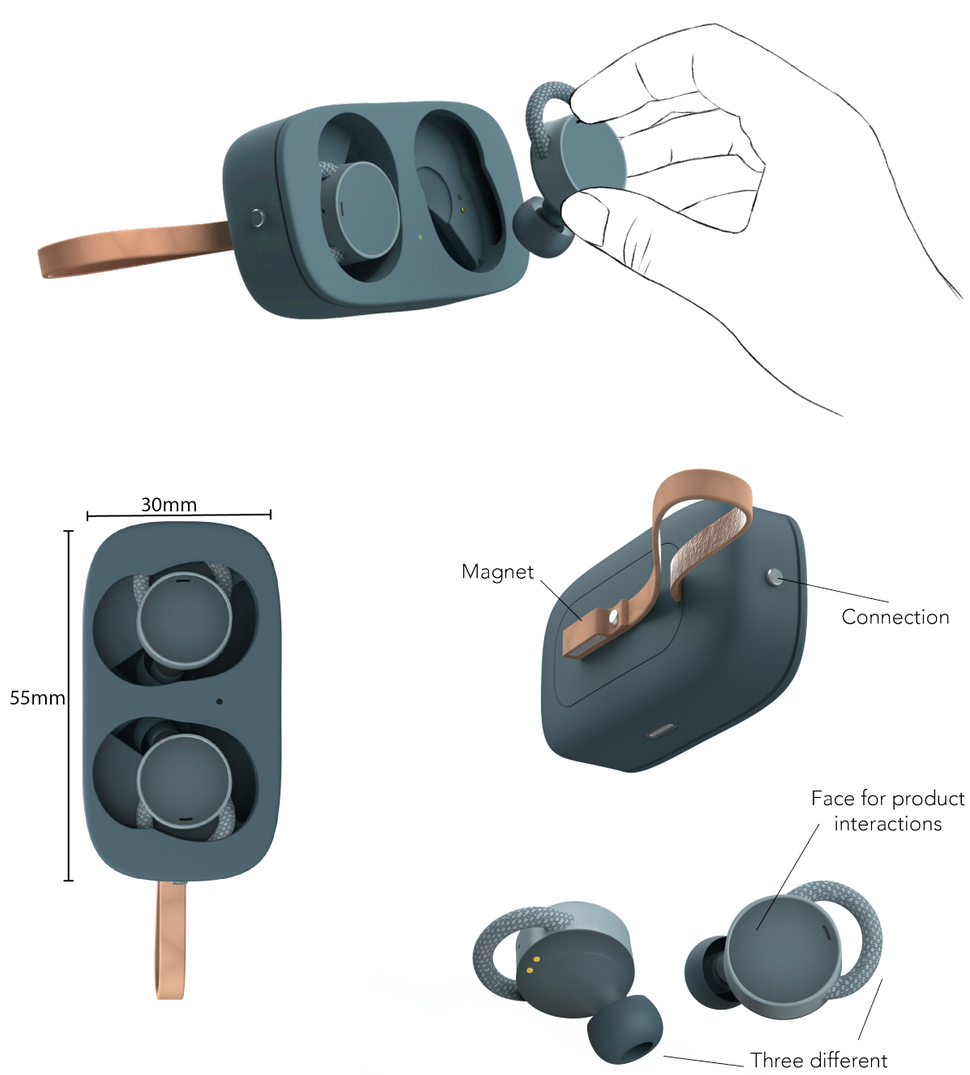
Exploring social interactions of headphone users

- Behaviour studies and concept design

This thesis have researched how social interactions are affected by the increased use of headphones and how design can challenge this development. The insights from the research are presented as two design proposals.

Urbanears Vitan

Vitan enables the user to wear their headphones during social interactions and challenge the perception of it being a disrespectful act. The headphones aim to communicate availability to the people in the users surrounding. The default mode for the product is with the light off. The function is triggered when the user has transparency mode activated and blinks in intensity with the frequency of the person that is talking to the primary user. The light lights up from within the headphone and out, visualising how the sound enters through the headphone to the user's ear.



Urbanears Rågis

Rågis is a product that aims to make the storage of the headphone more accessible for the user. The open case can be placed on the user's garments with the help of a magnet secured with a leather strap. Enabling placement of the case closer to the ears, facilitates placing the headphones in the case compared to putting them into a case that is stored in a pocket or in a bag. It also communicates to the secondary user that the headphones have been taken off in a clearly visible way.

The development of wireless headphones has put us in a new situation, both considering the product itself and how it is used. Headphones are today used everywhere, by everyone and are more and more 'always on'.

Studies have looked at how we as humans get affected by music and how it affects both our personal space and focus on our surroundings. However, little has been studied on how the design of the headphone influences behaviours of the user and how the people interacting with the user is affected.

The goal of this project is to strengthen the existing studies with research with a stronger focus on the social interactions between people while wearing headphones, and how design can influence these behaviours. A human-centred approach was used, implementing qualitative and quantitative analyses together with trigger materials that explores design alternatives.

The research findings showed that true wireless headphones have changed users' behaviour both in usage and when encountering social interactions. It is a common understanding that it is rude to keep the headphones on while interacting with someone but the way the headphones are designed today there is not enough incentive for everyone to take them off. The major problem for the secondary user is the uncertainty if the counterpart hears them properly or not.

Two final products were created as two separate examples of how the findings can be implemented. To prevent antisocial behaviour, one of the products is designed to be left in the ear, but that communicates with the surrounding that the user is open for conversation using a light source. The other product facilitates the act of removing the headphones temporarily, by providing simple and accessible storage of the headphones that can be placed on the user's garments.