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# **Subconscious emotional appeal of products**

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Emotion-driven design has emerged as an important area of design research. This has been fuelled by the fact that the digital revolution has turned most products into complicated and unusable black boxes, driving designers and academics to explore the links between design and emotion. Functionality; attractiveness; ease of use; affordability; sustainability; latest technology and safety are all attributes now expected as given in a good design, and as users, we are expecting more from products.

Desmet (2002) has identified three different situations where a product can elicit emotions in a person: buying a product; using a product; and owning a product. This paper focuses on emotions elicited by the appearance of products and discusses the various methodologies employed to explore emotions related to our perception of products, and to some extent to our preferences and decision making. Appearance, or in other words, the “wow factor” (Design for Future Needs, 2001) is important, especially when it is now widely accepted that attractive things make people feel good, and are easier to interact with. Feeling good, in return helps people to think in a more creative way, allowing them to understand the function of a product more easily (Don Norman, 2003).

## ***Research looking into the brain***

How far will we go to try to uncover the links between design and emotion? The immediate answer to this is: right into the brain. Design research is merging with scientific research when it comes to subconscious emotional appeal of products, as most of what lies beneath user preferences is unconscious. Research investigating the brain activity has demonstrated that memory and emotions play a significant role in brand loyalty, being related to people’s impulsive need for power, sex, and sustenance (Wells, 2003). However, this is somewhat different for products such as clothing, household

appliances, electronic items, and furniture as all these have the potential to be judged before being purchased. "... customers make decisions based on feelings, perceptions, values and reflections that usually come from gut feelings" (Spillers, 2004).

Ad executives and scientists are joining their forces with Emotional Mapping methods in neuromarketing, a recent methodology seeking scientific credential, used in marketing research to understand the subconscious world of feelings and emotions. Neuromarketing employs techniques such as *functional magnetic resonance imaging* (fmri), a 12-ton medical imaging scanner that looks directly into the human brain, to see what happens when people are seeing or thinking about desirable and undesirable objects (Singer, 2004).

During such scan tests, it was discovered that an area in the brain, associated with self-referential thinking, sense of identity and social image activates when people look at pictures of things they love (Singer, 2004). In this situation, people somehow identify themselves with the product. This identification may come from our memories and from our upbringing background. One other interesting finding was that in many instances, it was fear, and not admiration or attraction, that was unconsciously driving use to make decisions on certain products. This is the feeling of being seen as "not cool" by others and the fear of social exclusion if we do not possess certain items (Hotz, 2005).

Besides, in a series of different brain studies conducted by Daimler Chrysler, it has been uncovered that, when looking at the front of a car, a part of the brain responding to faces is coming alive. Among the many reasons why this may happen is the fact that the headlights are looking like eyes, creating "faces" for cars (Wells, 2003).

Hotz (2005) maintains that "the creation of belief is the essence of marketing" thus criticising neuromarketing. Among the many problems that Neuromarketing engenders are that it is still a controversial new field of marketing which uses medical technologies mainly to sell products; it opens up the possibility of new forms of manipulation, and it uses brain cells in the same way as in a focus group (Hotz, 2005). The Ethical impacts on

volunteers and beyond are yet to be determined. On the other hand, Formosa (2005) points out that Emotional Mapping methods are part of an overall picture in the quest to know more about the links between emotional responses and product preferences.

### ***Research looking at our reaction to products***

Among the many methodologies involved in research looking at human reactions and behaviour related to products, the most commonly used are: Listening to people (words); and observing people in context (images of behaviour). However, these two methods are often giving contradictory results. Sanders (2002) has expanded on the fact that finding out what people really think, and understanding how they feel would provide implicit knowledge to designers and allow them to empathize with the people they are designing for. Going even further deeper, towards discovering what people dream and imagine could allow designers to better shape their future. Among the various methodologies and tools employed to explore these avenues and empathise with people are the emotional and cognitive *Make Tools* (Sanders, 2002), ethnography, envisionment exercises, future workshops, prototyping & mock-ups, organizational games, and the use of animated comic characters expressing emotions (Desmet, 2002); all of them finding ways to establish resonance with people and work “with them to deliver what they want, when they want it and how they want it”, in an attempt to reveal concealed needs (Sanders, 2002). In a different study, a selection of images of favorite cartoon/comic characters and products, each classified as either ‘abstract’, ‘iconic’ or ‘realistic’ (see Figure 1) were compared on the basis of preferences (Demirbilek, et al, 2004). The subsequent data analysis focused on exploring any correlations between consumers’ stated attraction to cartoon/comic characters and to the various products. Preliminary results have shown that cartoon/comic characters have an effect on the choice of products and that ‘Iconic’ objects and comic/cartoon characters are the most popular ones among the respondents, mainly due to the fact that we can associate ourselves to the humanized look of products having certain cartoony features (Demirbilek, et al, 2004).



Figure 1. Iconic, realistic, and abstract products (source: Demirbilek, et al, 2004).

***“Emotional appeal” or the aspects making a product attractive to our perception***

Product success is said to be closely linked with the emotional connections it engenders. Further more, products and services need to relate emotionally and physically, as well as perform well, and be safe, effective, dependable and interesting during use (Formosa, 2005). Because emotions are personal and because people have different emotional responses towards a product, it is difficult to manipulate or predict the emotional impact of a design (Desmet, 2002). According to Norman, Ortony, and Russell (2002), we perceive and interpret product attractiveness through a parallel processing system, which is the combination off our cognition and our emotions. The cognitive mechanisms help us to interpret, understand, reflect upon, and remember things about the world. On the other hand, the system of affect and emotion helps us evaluate events, to provide an assessment of a subjective overall

value: + or -, good or bad, safe or dangerous, desirable or undesirable, etc. (Norman, Ortony, and Russell, 2002).

Desmet (2002) has identified 14 basic emotions, seven negatives and seven positive ones. Among the basic human emotions, six of them, such as anger, fear, happiness, surprise, disgust, and sadness have a very high ratio of recognition, regardless of the country, culture, or the age group of people (Goleman, 1995). Furthermore, Fenske and Eastwood (2003) have demonstrated by that people have a tendency to focus on threatening or vital information. They argue that faces expressing a negative emotion confine attention to themselves more effectively than faces expressing a positive emotion. On the other hand, attractiveness is somehow related to positive emotions, which are related to ideo-pleasures, associated to the values that a product and its use represent or support (Jordan, 1997).

All basic design principles are based on our own past experiences in life, on insights from semantics and psychology. According to the closure Principle of the Gestalt Theory, we see things where they are not, and perceive something else or remember something familiar; where lines form different parts and segments but we perceive their combination as a whole. The same applies to three-dimensional objects, where the visual spatial organisation facilitate the perception of the closed continuity of the object surface, its form, texture and colour, and its contrasting interaction with the background (Demirbilek, 2005). Line, as design element, plays an important role in the expression of emotions (McCloud, 1994). Lines form different parts and segments but we perceive the whole and the context is very important in shaping our perception.

In cartoon characters and comics, line is the most powerful design element and tool for expressing emotions. In products, the same role is played by the combination of shapes, forms, proportions, materials, surface finishes, textures, silhouettes and colour combinations. While cartoon characters and comics are addressed to our vision and perception, products are addressed to almost all of our senses. This gives even more opportunities for designers interested in emotion driven design (Demirbilek, 2005).

Human aspects and familiarity play an important role in emotional connections with products. The smile and the smiling face have been used and abused widely in marketing campaigns. We can see many examples of this from smiling cars to soft drink cans. The same applies to product design with the latest invasion of our homes and offices by little humanised fun products (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Humanised products from Koziol and Alessi.

### **Conclusion**

Successfully designed products still have to be intuitive in use in such a way that the user knows how it works and what it does without any instructions; or they should be attractive, and have an emotional impact so that one can feel comfortable to spend time discovering it's function and use. The combination of these two approaches would most probably result in remarkable designs. Scientific research involving brain studies is moving forward very fast and will most likely result in useful and/or dangerous findings about the way emotions are governing our behaviour and product choices. Designers on the other hand, are more involved into design research methodologies allowing them to empathise with the people they are designing for.

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