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# **A rendezvous with the cartoon characters in consumer products**

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## **Abstract**

The basis of this paper is the observation that consumers' decisions for purchasing a product are made, amongst other reasons, on the basis of visual attraction. Purchase decisions are said to rest either with (i) the subconscious affective relationships associated with daily-use products, or (ii) the carefully crafted and planned affective relationships and emotion evocations of brand and product positioning in the advertisement world. This paper seeks to explore the nature of the first of these purchase influences, with the proposition that cartoon characters can be used as a vehicle for understanding consumers' visual-led product preferences. Consumers are known to show an emotional attachment to their favourite cartoon characters. It is not unreasonable to suggest that a similar emotional attachment is made with consumer products, and that cartoon character features can be one of the stimuli that evoke emotion. To test this proposition a two-stage questionnaire has been administered to potential users to identify their favourite cartoon characters and product preferences. Unknowing to the participants, each cartoon character and product were classed as either 'abstract', 'iconic' or 'realistic'. The subsequent data analysis focused on exploring any correlations between consumers' stated attraction to cartoon characters and to products. Correlations have been studied in relation to form, colour, layout and other visual attributes common to cartoon characters and consumer products. The paper presents a literature review and the preliminary survey results from a pre-test conducted. The second stage of research, having learned much from the pre-test, will be conducted later in 2004.

**Keywords:** emotion and design; product character; cartoon character; choice of product

## **Introduction**

The impetus of this research stems from ideas of the research team to explore whether or not, and how, comic/cartoon characters from childhood have an influence on adult choices of specific types of design. This study focuses on the subconscious affective relationships one may associate with daily life product, rather than the carefully crafted and planned affective relationships and emotion evocations for brand and product positioning in the advertisement world.

This paper presents a literature search on the subconscious aspects influencing product selection. Further, it describes a study whereby a group of 38 participants have been analysed to identify their favourite cartoon characters and product preferences. Unknowing to the participants, each cartoon character and product were typified as either 'iconic', 'realistic' or 'abstract'. The subsequent data analysis focused on exploring any correlations between consumers' stated attraction to cartoon characters and to products. Correlations have been

studied in relation to form, colour, layout and other visual attributes common to cartoon characters and consumer products. The main purpose of the study was to test preliminary methods to investigating the issue of the influence of the attachment to cartoon/comic characters on one's preference for a specific type of design.

Moving beyond functionality and usability towards emotional appeal and irresistibility in product design has been the aspiration of product manufacturers and designers for the last decade (Wells, 2003; Bonapace, 2000). After having been neglected for many years, a recent interest in emotional responses elicited by consumer products has emerged (Norman, 2004; Desmet, 2002). Today's consumers are aware of the 'user friendliness' and the 'ease of use' aspects and consider these as a given that must be available in any product (Bonapace, 2000).

Emotions are believed to play an important role in consumers' decision-making process when buying products. Bruce and Whitehead's (1988) proposition on decision-making sheds interesting light on the goals hierarchy, as their scenario depicts product acquisition as a means of obtaining an abstract state, that is, having "something allows someone to be something". This, in turn, resonates with Baudrillard's theory (1975 in Campbell, 1998) that commodities are not valued for their use, rather, they are understood as possessing a meaning which fits into a self-referential system of signifiers, or Bourdieu's idea (1984 in Campbell, 1998) that consumption is a means by which one can create and maintain social relationships of dominance and submission.

Marketing campaigns are powerful tools that create strong mental associations between product and selected states of mind such as: having fun, sensing pleasure, feeling powerful, sensing luxury, indulging, feeling sexy, and feeling attractive. According to Mahajan and Wind (2002), the fashion industry, together with perfume, liquor, and high-quality image producing companies, have always appealed to emotions in order to encourage people to buy their brand. For this purpose, these products have been associated with fashionable and attractive people and situations. This long recognized appeal for emotion, 'affective' emotional relationship in the advertisement world, is now increasing in a wide range of markets (Mahajan and Wind, 2002).

Research looking at the brain activity has demonstrated that memory and emotion play a big role in brand loyalty, being related to people's impulsive need for power, sex, and sustenance (Wells, 2003). However, the situation is slightly different for "search goods", such as clothing, household appliances, furniture, because these products have the potential to be judged before their consumption.

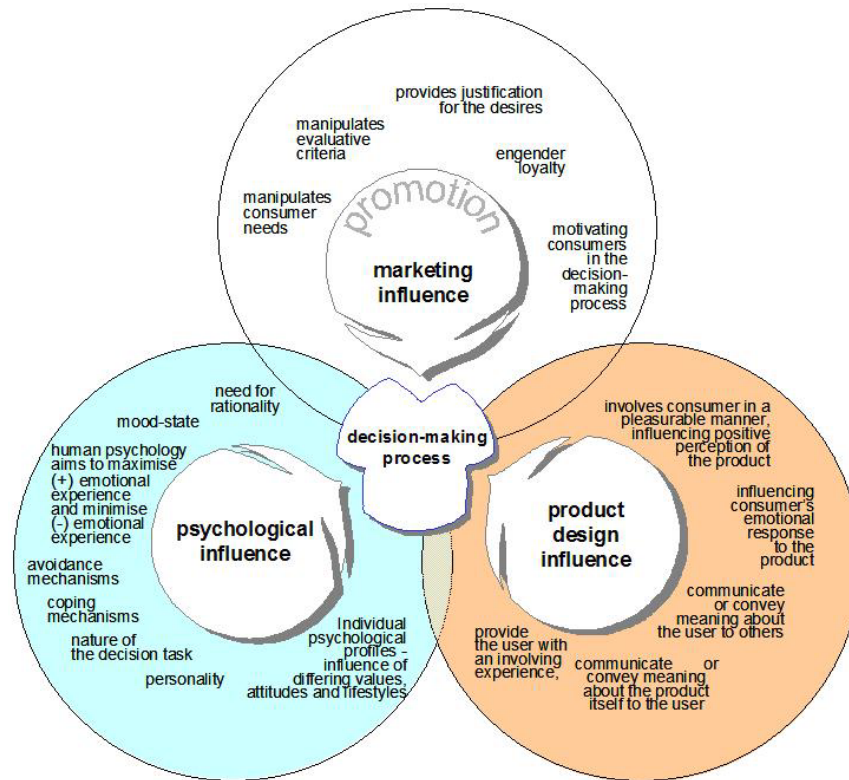


Figure 1. The strong influences on the consumer decision-making process (Jonker and Demirbilek, 2004)

### Factors affecting people's preference when it comes to products

Among the three main influences on the decision-making for product preference (Figure 1), the psychological and design ones are examined in the present study. Human psychology shapes and determines needs and motivations by regulating and interpreting the effect of memory and experience on product evaluation, and acts as a gatekeeper, determining the final selection decision. Design influence, is able to both satisfy the basic, functional and rational needs that a consumer brings to the decision-making process. It also involves the consumer on a deep, emotional level by manipulating their interaction with the product in order to provide a pleasurable experience that attracts them to the product as they are introduced to it.

The literature review on psychological influence on consumers' decision-making process can be summarised as follows:

- People's individual psychological profiles profoundly affect the decision-making process through the influence of differing values, attitudes and lifestyles (Hantula, 2003; Lin, 2002; Schiffman *et al.*, 2001).
- The common human psychology aims to maximize positive emotional experience and minimize negative emotional experience in the decision-making process, a mentality that is feasibly linked to evolutionary survival tendencies (Demirbilek and Sener, 2001).
- Mood-state has an effect on product evaluation, with positive mood (as a result of positive experience in the consumption context) resulting in positive product evaluation, while negative mood has the opposite effect. (Forgas and Ciarrochi, 2001).

- The intensity of the effect of positive experience on product choice is dependent on personality and on the nature of the decision task (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999).
- The psychology of coping mechanisms can influence motivation to purchase (Chang and Arkin, 2002; Goulding, 2001).
- The psychology of avoidance mechanisms can influence decision-making strategies. (Hausman, 2000; Luce, 1998; Heiman *et al.*, 2001).
- The psychological need for rationality puts consumption justification as a gatekeeper of the decision-making process (Campbell, 1998).

Psychology basically determines human response to all stimuli, from marketing effort to cultural background, product experience, and, as such, directly influences all aspects of the decision-making process. An understanding of psychological factors (including attitudes, moods, personality and rationality) provides an understanding of the less quantifiable influences on the consumer decision-making process.

The literature review on design influence can be briefly summarised as follows:

- Design is able to communicate or convey meaning either about the user to others, or about the product itself to the user, therefore personally involving the consumer in the product (Demirbilek and Sener, 2004; Kalviainen, 2000; Luutonen, 1999; Walker, 1999; Dittmar, 1992.)
- Design is able to provide the user with an involving experience, therefore influences the consumer's emotional response to the product (Lloyd and Snelders, 2003; Poynor, 2000; Dilnot, 1993)
- Design is able to involve the consumer in a pleasurable manner, therefore influences the consumer to positively view the product (Norman, 2004; Desmet, 2002; Jordan, 1997).

These conclusions indicate that design is a strong influence on the consumer decision-making process as it is able to both satisfy the basic, functional, and rational needs that a consumer brings to the decision-making process as well as involve the consumer on a deep, emotional level. Design can manipulate their interaction with the product in order to provide a pleasurable experience, which attracts the consumer to the product as they are introduced to it. Furthermore, it seems sensible to say, as McDonagh, Bruseberg and Haslam (2002) do, that appearance, use of materials, shape and form, rather than functionality, all present the most immediate product data to the user. What is important is how the consumer interprets this data, i.e., what it means to him or her.

### **How does memory affect people's preference when it comes to products?**

Studies on the patterns of electrical energy created by the activity of the human brain carried out by Daimler-Chrysler show that when looking at the front view of a sports car, a part of the brain responding to human faces was stimulated. Among the many reasons why this may happen is

the fact that car headlights are placed symmetrically and look like eyes, creating 'imaginary faces' for cars. In a research with Ford stylists, Tovey, Porter and Newman (2002) indicated that the character of a vehicle was clearly expressed in terms of the form and design of details. They found clear commonalities of form and detail features used to express particular character adjectives. For example, "friendly designs typically have soft well-rounded body forms, tall glass houses and lamps and grill in a -happy face-" (2002:239). Similarly, the success of the Mini Cooper car, for example, may be due to the fact that its facial attributes remind some people of a friendly cartoon character (Wells, 2003).

Memory plays an important role in product preference, and studies on the activity of the human brain show that, when people have to make a choice among common and closely related items in a shopping environment, they are making an emotional choice based on past experience (Wells, 2003).

### **What is the role of emotions in people's preference when it comes to products?**

Emotion is the perceptual experience that one has when using a product (Hammonds, 2002). Desmet (2002) defines the distinction in product emotions between emotions expressed by products, and those elicited by products. This paper focuses on the emotions that people experience towards products as those elicited by the appearance of the products.

Desmet (2003) points out that people have attitudes with respect to aspects or features of products. On the other hand, Hammonds (2002) points out that the things that people value in a product are the visual form, the way of handling, and how it makes them feel. To clarify these two statements, referring to simple psychology definitions will help. Emotions are not triggered by situations or events, but by our thoughts, beliefs and attitudes about certain situations or events. Figure 2 shows the actual flow of raising emotional responses as depicted by the authors. Many people think that emotions stem immediately from an event or a situation, where, in fact, emotions and behaviour are manifested as a result of our thoughts, attitudes and beliefs about the event or situation in question. The same principle applies to our perception of objects and environments (Figure 3) where our memories, past experience, attitudes and beliefs related to a product triggers the related emotions and the attachment.

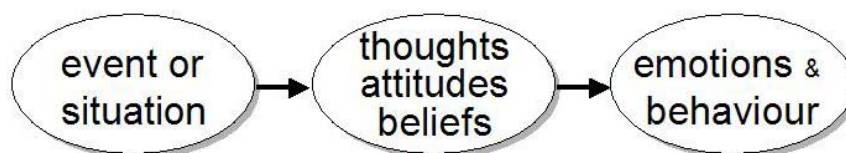


Figure 2. Induction of emotions in our minds



Figure 3. Emotional response to products

### The study

This study was a test of preliminary methods to investigate the influence of and attachment to cartoon/comic characters on one's preference for a specific type of design. The four main aims were to identify:

- The age and the amount of exposure that people had to comic and cartoon characters,
- The favourite comic/cartoon character(s) and the reasons associated with these,
- The aspects that are likeable in comic/cartoon characters, and
- The aspects that trigger participant's preference among three types (iconic, realistic, and abstract) of the same product.



Figure 4. Examples of iconic, realistic, and abstract products



There are various levels of reflections of the cartoon/comic characters onto product design. In order to identify the category of products that have been analysed in the present study, we have classified these products in three main categories

1. **Graphical applications onto products:** this category (see Figure 5) involves graphical applications onto products, and encompasses products ranges from children and teenagers' to sophisticated luxury accessories for adults. An example of this is the late interest for such graphical applications in a prestigious leather bag company, such as Louis Vuitton (Porter, 2002; Frederick, 2003).
2. **Products in the shape of cartoon characters:** this category (see Figure 6) involves products that are in the shape of famous or unknown cartoon/comic characters, mainly encompassing a product range for children, teenagers and young adults. The recent explosion of fun domestic products has brought and incredible range of products in this category (Koziol 2004; Alessi, 2000).
3. **Products having features of cartoon characters:** this category (see Figure 7) includes products having features of cartoon/comic characters, and is the main focus of the present paper. Examples of such products are the Philips Electronics concept products showcased in The Home of the Near Future exhibitions (Milan 1999, New York 2000), which attracted attention with their curved and soft shapes, designed to look "warm, friendly, and inviting" (Kay, 2001).

### **Pre-test methodology**

The survey process that was conducted tested preliminary methods and allowed the exploration of preliminary data results. Thus, the research and data analysis in this paper are very exploratory. The process has been instructive to the research team in that it will help us refine the final methods used for the next phase of the study – ultimately leading to a more rigorous survey approach and more reliable and valid data on which to address our research questions.

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Figure 5. Examples of graphical applications onto products

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Figure 6. Examples of products in the shape of cartoon characters



Figure 7. Examples of products having features of cartoon characters

The survey process consisted of an electronic, self-administered questionnaire. Actual respondents had been directed to the site using a 'snowballing' technique. The questionnaire itself had three major sections. The first simply gathered general demographic details about the respondent. The second gathered information on the exposure level of the participants with their favourite comic/cartoon characters. In order to address this, questions were asked about when they were first exposed to comics/cartoons, the amount of comics/cartoons they enjoyed and the medium in which they were presented e.g., print form, on television etc. and whether or not participants still engaged with comics/cartoons in their adult life. Participants were also asked to identify specifically which comics/cartoon characters they have engaged with and then answer a series of questions on the various aspects of that character and what triggers their preference for it. The research team had previously labelled these into one of three types: iconic, realistic or abstract but these labels were not revealed to the respondents. The third section presented a range of six different products (chair, iron, kettle, toaster, lamp, table) from which respondents had to identify their product preferences and the characters they like about each. Again, these products were categorised into iconic, realistic or abstract types, for use by the researchers only.

### **Preliminary results**

Whilst there were flaws in the pre-test methodology and limited numbers of responses, some interesting information can be gleaned with cautious reason. In this pre-test, 38 participants (16 females, 22 males) responded to the questionnaire. All participants were residents of Sydney in Australia and half of these were university students of less than 25 years of age.

Although several design attributes and emotive descriptions were tested in this pilot study, not all have been reported on in the paper. Figure 8 presents the overall design preferences. As can be seen in the figure, the first preference for all objects, except for the lamp, was found to be 'iconic'; and the second preference, with four out of the six objects, was 'realistic' (the lamp and the table did not follow this pattern). It is hypothesised by the researchers that all product preferences would follow this pattern. This data has also drawn our attention to the choices that respondents were given for all objects but particularly the lamp. It is appreciated that it is difficult to find products that are only 'iconic' or only 'realistic' or purely 'abstract'.

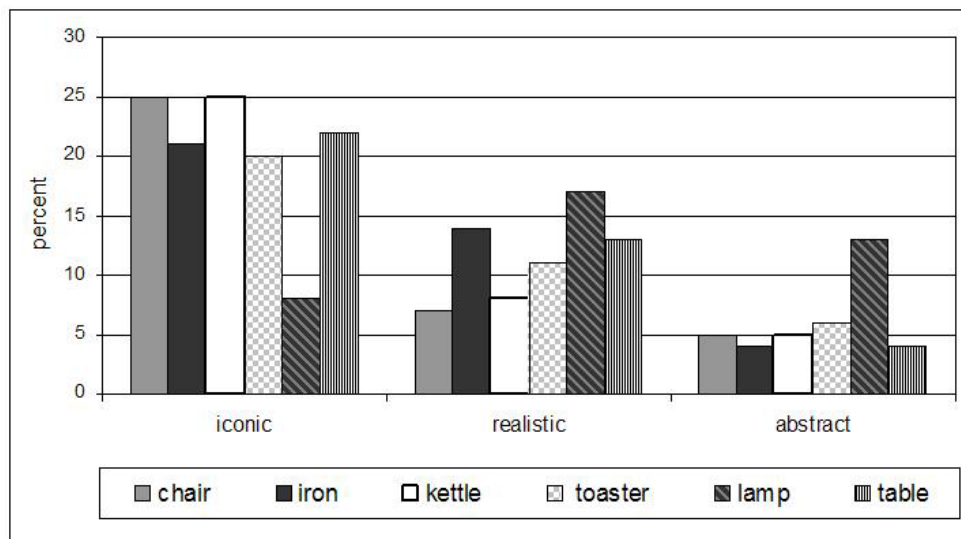


Figure 8. Participants' 'first' preferences for each object types

### Final remarks

The results of the preliminary study have shown that cartoon/comic characters have an influence on the choice of products and that 'Iconic' objects and comic/cartoon characters are very popular among the respondents. One of the reviewers of the present paper has commented that this may not be because products have cartoon characters features but because these products somehow look human. We agree with this comment and relate it to the iconic characters mentioned in McCloud (1994). The research team, having learned much from the pre-test, will be furthering this line of enquiry in the next phase of research in 2004.

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## Biographical Notes

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(146 words)

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(109 words)

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(98 words)

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