

EXPLORING SYMBOLIC MEANINGS BEHIND PERSONAL PRODUCTS OF ATTACHMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the symbolic meanings behind product-user attachment with personal products. The first step of the research was to identify the participant's personal products of attachment in relation with time and execute semantic differential scales and interviews to capture the meanings they each expressed towards it. From this approach four possible strengthening factors of product-user attachment emerged: usability, essential purpose, pleasure and sentimental value.

Keywords: Product-User Attachment, Product Semantics, Design Value

INTRODUCTION

In a world of abundant of personal objects only a few are elevated to objects of attachment (POAs) and assigned preferential treatment (Page 2014). Among these a handful survive disposal and, over time, form a strengthening relationship with the user. This relationship has been recognized as the consumer-product attachment and is defined as the strength of the emotional bond a consumer experiences with a durable product (Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008). However, the current study of how symbolic meaning making may be used as leverage to understand objects of attachment, employs the term user-product relationship to better express the embodiment of emotional capital within the product as personal to the user over time.

The emotional bond between user and object of attachment appears to be formed during the

experience of the product which Hekkert (2006) distinguishes as consisting of three related components: aesthetic pleasure, experience of meaning and emotional response (Figure 1). Thus the user-product experience may be defined as a holistic set of affects elicited by the interaction between a user and a product. In terms of the Hekket framework (ibid), this elicitation includes the degree to which all senses are gratified (aesthetic experience), the meanings attached to the product (experience of meaning) and the feelings and emotions that are elicited (emotional experience). The current study's exploration of how user attachments to POAs can be driven by symbolic meaning, focuses upon the concept of experience of meaning while contextualizing this focus within a broader understanding of the user-product experience.

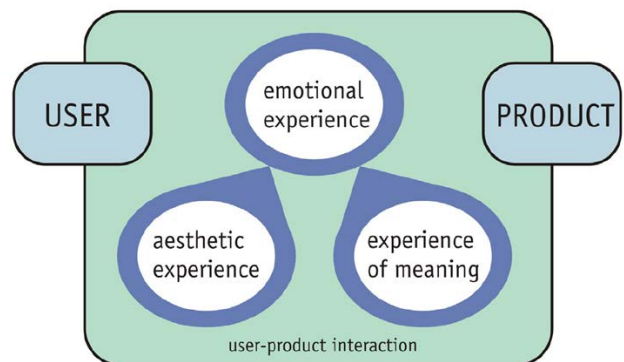


Figure 1. Framework of product experience

It is well establish the personal products have value to the user beyond practical functionality, often acting as symbols of meaning related to such things as cultural beliefs, self-identity, affiliation with particular cultural, political or religious philosophies,

societal groups or sub-groups (Crilly, Moultrie, & Clarkson, 2004). As such personal products can often develop into important carriers of meaning for the user (Krippendorff & Butter, 1984), with these symbolic meanings essentially related to the formation of product preferences (Allen, 2006). Thus, We define symbolic meaning embedded within personal products as the meaning of the product for the individual user, encompassing abstract ideas and associations with a product and beliefs about the kinds of people who may use it (Allen, 2002). The current study examines the role of symbolic meaning making, derived from the users own beliefs, preferences, culturally and socially driven ideals, as driver for attachment to personal products. Because product attachment is highly sensitive to both idiosyncratic preferences and different contexts we do not deny the challenges of a generalizable understanding of product-user attachment. However, the current explorative study's focus upon the role of meaning making in personal product attachment offers some insights into the position and role of symbolic meaning in offering potential for increased attachment. Assuming that personal product attachment embodies a product with increased value and richer personal meanings, identifying the symbolic values behind different kinds of personal attachments provides opportunities for designers to consider how attachment may be fostered in the design of more sustainable products and services..

Aims & Significance

Based upon literature review, product attachment may be classified between two groups in relation with time; Recent Attachment and Long term Attachment. The current study examines the role of symbolic meaning as driver for product attachment, how these meanings may change over time and implications for personal product attachment. As such we address the following research questions:

- How does symbolic meaning in objects of attachment change over time?
- What implications may meaning change have for attachment?

METHODS

To identify and explore symbolic meaning making in personal products of attachment, a survey was conducted that utilized semantic differential scales.. The survey consisted of two parts: identifying the product of attachment for each interviewee and marking the semantic differential scale for each product the interviewee selected. The interviewees were asked to identify two different products of personal attachment in relation with the time they spent with the product. The first product was limited to a product they had formed an attachment with within a year (recent attachment). The second product was selected among the products which they formed a significantly longer attachment with (long-term attachment). The survey was designed as shown in Figure 2 (products examples replaced with participants own examples).



Figure 2. Survey for identification of personal objects of attachment

Measuring semantic value is a challenge due to the intangible nature of the concept itself. However, several attempts have been made. For example, Richins (1994) used survey to identify the private meanings of valued possessions. Jindo and Hirasago (1997) used a semantic differentiation method in

their study involving a Kansei or effective engineering approach. Cupchik and Hilscher (2008) conducted interviews to understand why they found design objects “meaningfully and emotionally connected”.

In the current study semantic differential scale (SDs) were selected as instrument to measure the participants’ assignment of symbolic meaning to their two personal objects of attachment. The bipolar adjectives were drawn from an existing study of the semantic assessment of design objects by Khalaj and Pedgley (2014) shown in figure 3. For each of the two products of attachment (Long-term and recent) participants were required to complete the same set of SDs. After the survey an open-ended interview was conducted for each of the two products to discuss the reasons the interviewees marked the SD scale as such and record their thoughts about the attachment in relation to recent and Long-term attachments.

A total of 10 participants were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in Korean and all related terms regarding the survey were explained to the participants before the survey.

| Social values and position (SVP) (n = 5) | Usability and interaction (UI) (n = 8) | Qualities of form (QF) (n = 6) | Personality characteristics (PC) (n = 10) |
|--|--|----------------------------------|---|
| SVP-1 Contemporary Traditional | UI-1 Clear Confusing | QF-1 Elegant Inelegant | PC-1 Attractive Repulsive |
| SVP-2 High Class Low Class | UI-2 Easy To Use Difficult To Use | QF-2 Organic Geometric | PC-2 Aggressive Submissive |
| SVP-3 High Technology Low Technology | UI-3 Safe Dangerous | QF-3 Ornate Plain | PC-3 Futuristic Nostalgic |
| SVP-4 Expensive Cheap | UI-4 Comfortable Uncomfortable | QF-4 Innovative Imitative | PC-4 Quiet Noisy |
| SVP-5 Global Local | UI-5 Reliable Unreliable | QF-5 Compact Large | PC-5 Mature Immature |
| | UI-6 Robust Delicate | QF-6 Symmetrical Asymmetrical | PC-6 Exciting Calm |
| | UI-7 Easy To Clean Difficult To Clean | | PC-7 Feminine Masculine |
| | UI-8 Practical Impractical | | PC-8 Friendly Unfriendly |
| | | | PC-9 Extraordinary Ordinary |
| | | | PC-10 Interesting Boring |

Figure 3. Bipolar adjective for SD scale survey

RESULTS

In order to examine how symbolic meaning of objects changed over time and implications for product attachment, an analysis of SD scale and open interview responses was conducted.

SD scale results from both recent attachment and long-term attachment were subjected to frequency counts to identify which adjectives were most often

used to describe the participants’ two product examples of recent and attachment over time. Frequencies were multiplied by each scale and summed up to identify the overall frequency for each bipolar adjective. The adjectives with scores over 50% preference were identified for each adjective group as shown in figure 4 for both recent and long-term objects of personal attachment.

| Recent | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------|--|------------------------|
| Social Values | Personality | Usability | Qualities of Form |
| Global | Attractive | Clear Easy to Use Comfortable Reliable Practical | Symmetrical |
| Long-term | | | |
| Social Values | Personality | Usability | Qualities of Form |
| Traditional Global | Attractive | Clear Easy to Use Safe Reliable | Compact Symmetrical |

Figure 4. Frequent adjectives from SD scale survey

Open interview responses were initially transcribed under each SD scale category. Descriptive coding and value coding were performed to group the data and were narrowed down to find common threads and frequent findings from the interview. Based on the coding results key terms emerged from the interview for each category are as shown in Figure 5.

| Social Values | Usability | Personality |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Brand Sentimental Value | Essential Purpose Experience | Typical Product Essential Purpose |
| Qualities of Form | Pleasure | Memories |
| Design Preferences | Sentimental Ideo Experience | Sentimental Meaning Essential Purpose |

Figure 5. Significant terms from descriptive coding

Participants expressed similar preferences of adjectives for both groups but ‘traditional’ was selected for long-term attachments. Open interviews also showed similar patterns in both group except ‘sentimental’ was discussed more frequently for long-term attachments.

DISCUSSION

USABILITY

The overall SD scales for both recent and long-term groups showed similar results. Both groups expressed strong alignment in terms of good usability, meaning that satisfying usability is a crucial factor for forming a strong product-user attachment regardless of the period of possession. For both period groups participants discussed high satisfactions of their products meeting its essential purpose. They did not want any unusual or special function from their product but just a reliable, clear and easy to use performance strengthened and maintained the attachment between the user and product.

PLEASURE

Enjoyment was also one of the key elements of forming a strong product-user attachment. Based on the interview related to pleasure, participants expressed various types of pleasure derived from their product. They expressed psycho-pleasure with sentimental values, physio-pleasure with enjoyable experiences and ideo-pleasure with representation of themselves. Among various types of pleasures ideo-pleasure was identified as the dominant pleasure participants expressed with their product. Regardless of time-factor all the products selected from a single participant showed similar personality and image that the participant thought of as an image they would like to be shown as. For instance one participant liked their product because he could use them recklessly because it is theirs and all the products were selected to endure his style of product usage. Another participant had a clear image of what kind of design she liked and tried to match that standard in all her products of attachment.

SENTIMENTAL VALUE

Sentimental value is the special meaning the user gives to the product for whatever reason they have in relation with the product. In most cases participants expressed sentimental value with gifts they received. The gift acted as a reminder of a special person or an event to become a meaningful product with sentimental value. Other than gifts products that required maintenance which lead to

customization was given sentimental value from the participants. Cars, automatic watches and leather products are some examples of products requiring maintenance.

Products with sentimental value formed attachments despite the lack of usability. One participant expressed attachment towards a product that has been broken and was unable to perform its essential purpose but had sentimental value. Similar cases were found with other participants who expressed sentimental value where other aspects of attachment did not matter and the attachment was continued with just sentimental value alone. Products with sentimental value were closely related to the adjective 'traditional' and this was the only adjective that only appeared in the long-term attachment group.

The symbolic meaning did not show any significant differences over time however sentimental values were more highly discussed in the long-term attachments. Indicating that if the recent attachment maintains usability, pleasure and attractiveness over time it is likely to gain sentimental value which leads to long-term attachments. However regardless of other factors 'sentimental value' alone can form an attachment with the user since it provide the users with unique emotional experiences that no other factor can (figure 6).

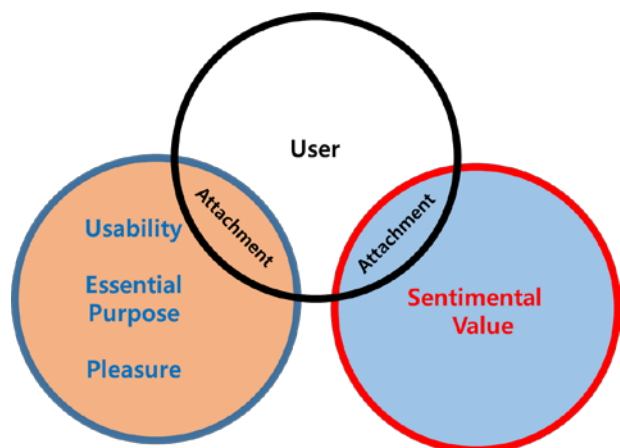


Figure 6. Different routes to product-user attachment

CONCLUSION

Identifying symbolic meanings behind product-user attachment through this study showed several limitations. One of them was the weakness of the attachment itself. The age range of the participants was from 20 to 35 and most attachments were not strong enough to identify as a long-term attachment since most participants discussed their products of attachment to possibly be replaced by something else if they had the chance. This lack of strength in attachment resulted in a non-significant difference between the recent and long-term attachments. The other limitation was that the range of symbolic meaning was too broad and had too many variables to successfully identify the relationship between various aspects consisting the product-user relationship.

However the findings discussed suggested the need for further study on identifying the relationship between sentimental value and attachment which was placed in a unique position in comparison with other variables.

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