

Developing a classification of product expressions

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Abstract

Research topic: Products can have specific meaning for us, because they remind us of special events and evoke happy memories. Products can look cute, surprise us and we can love them. Products can also reflect our ideals and communicate our position in society. Clearly these meaningful aspects in a product's design contribute to its attraction. Products, therefore, need to be more than utilitarian tools. They might not only function well and have an aesthetic appearance, but may also be designed to truly appeal to their users.

Research objective: The aim of this study is to develop a tool that can be used to define the need for expression in a product at the first stages of product development, during the design specification. The present model aims in the first place to make the phenomenon of a meaningful and communicative product design more explicit. By clarifying the different expressions that a product can transmit, it might be easier in a second place to identify which messages are needed in a new product design. It might also enable designers or marketing executives to compare the communicative aspects of competing products.

Research method: This study is, for the moment, entirely based on literature research and has an exploratory nature. Analyses that specifically focus on the inclusion of meaningful or artistic expression in a product's design are recently getting serious attention. More research is useful, because the creation of products with an appropriate user-focused expression is a complex process.

Result: As a result of the literature survey, an analytical model has been developed that describes three main categories of product expression. The first category concerns messages in the product that contribute to the *product's personality*. Expressions related to the product's identity might communicate the intrinsic characteristics of a product, such as its usage and quality or might, for example, give the product an added value by fitting its design into its cultural context.

The second category relates to product messages that can be used as an *expression of its user identity*. A product might be used to communicate its user's uniqueness. It can, for example, express its user's gender, age or personality, personal skills or be an expression of taste, ideas and values. Products can also be used to express belonging to a group and to demonstrate ambitions, beliefs, lifestyle, social status and success. Personal memories elicited by the product might also give meaning to the product and contribute to its user identity.

Products can be important in the communication of a brand identity. The third category of product messages, therefore, relates to the *company's or the brand's identity*.

Limitations: In this "model of meaningful product expressions", the various expressions in each of the three main categories are analysed in detail. This model, however, is not a definite representation of all possible meaningful expressions in a product design. It has an exploratory nature and is based on a literature review.

Further steps: Examination of additional literature regarding the expression of a user's identity and specifically relating to a company's brand identity would be useful.

Using this model with international business students in a design course had, in the first place, the objective of making these future marketing executives aware of the variety of

product expressions and secondly, to “pre-test” this model. The development of an electronic questionnaire directed to exchange business students with a very different background, such as French, Norwegian, Chinese and Mexican nationalities, could be a further approach to test this model.

Biographical note

Josiena Gotzsch

Doctorate of Business Administration DBA obtained at Henley Management College and Brunel University in 2003. This thesis examined how some companies create products that through their expression appeal to their users. Master of Science (MSc) in Industrial Design Engineering from the University of Technology in Delft, the Netherlands. Currently working as Associate Professor in the Department of Technology Management at the Grenoble Ecole de Management in France (Gotzsch@esc-grenoble.com).

Professional experience includes, since 1991, the management and teaching of courses for business students in the field of Industrial Design and Technological Culture. Experience, from 1986 – 1992: one year as Industrial Design Trainee at Pentagram in London, England and three years as Industrial Designer at Philips Corporate Design in Groningen, the Netherlands (Domestic Appliances and Personal Care Division). Then two years as Product Development Manager at the Group Sommer Allibert in Grenoble, France.

Research interests:

Design Management, Success Factors in Design Management, and Communicative Aspects in Product Design