

The Emotional Machine

How to Distillate Emotions for new Product Experience

What are the most important aspects, which shape our emotional experiences? Are there any specific aesthetic or desirable elements in our material world, which enable these experiences? Is the keyword intimacy or would most people need a certain degree of seduction or provocation to induce an emotional experience? If so, how could we manifest these intimate, changing and probably provocative experiences? Within the project we would like to collect and understand the emotional experiences our participants (students) are willing to share. These emotional experiences should be materialised (controlled, guided, and amplified) in a design oriented product experience.

Traditionally design decisions are focussed on the product's materiality. However when it comes to create a rich user-product relationship, shape, material, smell and colour are not the only factors that matter. Designers need to pay as much attention to the non-material side of products if they are to create an enduring user-product relationship.

We developed a new way to extract product emotions through stories. Within the ISA module (Relax Concentrate Create) and the DMI classes (Creative Problem Solving) we have given our students the task to remember some products of their childhood that made an ever-lasting impression. Most products we have seen were either portable (clothing, bags, Gameboys, Tamagotchis, walkmans or contact lenses) or means for transportation (old cars, skateboards, snowboards, bicycles or shoes).

In a first workshop, each student had to write down the feelings each product evoked and in small groups select a particular product to be converted to a persona and setting which would be the base of a story. These stories were passed on through different groups until the essential feelings were left but no traces of the actual product.

In a second workshop the students, now in groups of 4-8, were given a story they had not previously worked on. This story would form the base of a small design challenge, to create an actual piece of soap. The students were asked not to limit themselves to the shape, smell and colour but also include the packaging and a marketing plan within their design.

Below, an example of a short story based on the emotions evoked by an old winter coat:

“An old lady during the winter is looking outside the window. She sees the road covered in ice whilst she is preparing for a dinner with her grandchildren. She is really looking forward to see them again and like to be the best host she can be. However she suddenly realises that she forgot an important ingredient. She feels stressed because she will have to go out in the cold winter weather to buy the ingredient...”

It gave the students the idea to create “Savon 1890”, a simple old-fashioned, handmade soap with an honest, straightforward packaging, see image below left. On the image to the right to you see the “soap crystals”, based on the experiences of an old walking cane.

Casting and carving soap concepts





“Savon 1890” and the “soap crystals”

In total we tried the method four times with our students (in groups of 15 to 24) and ended up with 12 soap concepts. The variety of outcomes shows that emotions are a great source of inspiration for product design. However it would be useless to collect the emotional triggers for product design because most our emotions are not directly linked to product characteristics but indirectly, on the explanations based on these characteristics.

According to Paul Hekkert (2002) there are three classes of product emotions in which products are considered as an object, an agent or an event.

In our case emotions directly related to the object were most eminent. These emotions relate to taste or whether the product has a certain appeal. This appeal is based on an attitude, which can be formed by its aesthetic appearance, a personal relationship or social classification.

To get some feedback on the method we have conducted a questionnaire, which can be interpreted in a qualitative way. Most students saw the potential of the method as a way to remind them that emotions are an important factor that cannot be neglected in their projects. Some of them saw the method as a good way to bring an interdisciplinary team together. Using the method for teambuilding is something we had not considered. We all have our emotional attitudes towards products independently of our professional background, which is a great common ground to build a team.

Lessons learnt:

Most emotions evoked by products are not about these products, they are transitive: I am not just angry, I am angry with someone; I am not just fascinated, but fascinated by something; I love someone; I fear something. With this method we have shown that emotions can be transferred to a new product which is highly inspiring, given the fact that the students only had two hours to design and create a soap, its packaging and a business model.

On the other hand, the method proved a great way to build and interdisciplinary team. We have made good use from trying out the method within the ISA modules, which bring together students from all departments.

We expect that this method is one of many ways to use stories to identify emotions, which are a trigger for new insights. New methods can be designed as a strict guidance, which can be shared easily via our creativity methods platform.