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Identity references in product design: An approach for inter-relating visual product experience and brand value representation

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Abstract

This paper examines references of visual product identity in product design. The perception of identity is the result of a composite experience of the presentational and representational dimensions of the product. As consumers to a large degree create their value perceptions of products and brands based on the design of the product, it is important for companies to understand how perceptions of identity are created and conveyed through product design. In this paper, product identity is conceptualised and an approach to examine visual product identity is proposed. Product examples are used to illustrate possible product experiences and how they relate to perceptions of product identity. In essence, the paper suggests principles for how brand identity may be materialised through meaningful references in visual design – in this way, product identity can be seen as a mode of tangible branding. It is proposed the analysis presented in this paper provides a means for identifying and developing strategies for brand representation through visual product design. It may also be utilised as a conceptual framework, which can be used as a pedagogical tool for design education and designers when considering the alternative approaches available for designing visual product identity.

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1. Introduction

Product design plays a significant role for consumers' impressions of products. Audi states that "product design determines up to 60% of a consumer's decision to buy a particular automobile" [1, p.165]. From this perspective, the design of the product becomes a critical component in the endeavour to communicate product identity, to evoke brand value associations, and to create product appeal. The product has a key role in the needs-wants-demands chain

[2, p.6], by contributing to building the brand experience and positioning the product in relation to competitors through meaningful differentiation, achieved through the design of the product.

During the last two decades, work has been devoted to understanding the role of product design for creating, communicating and embodying brand related meaning. For example, Vihma[3] introduced the notion that products are simultaneously perceived on aesthetic as well as semiotic levels, implying that sense-impression and meaning making go hand-in-hand. Warell[4] elaborated on the idea of product identification, suggesting that form elements can be identified on several perceptual ‘levels’ in a product, which work in a synergetic manner to create compound meanings of various complexity, which influences the value and content of the brand message. Today, the role of product design for contributing to appeal as well as meaning of products is well recognised.

As suggested by the process of brand design perception [1], different types of product design stimuli, such as various visual form elements or colours, are processed at different stages of the perception process. Furthermore, perception is componential rather than holistic, implying that an audience may imagine combinations of concepts, which have not been perceived previously, and attributing meaning to such concepts [5]. Being aware of two products of a certain brand, consumers, therefore, can imagine what a third one may look like. Furthermore, cognitive semiotic theory [6] states that representation (meaning-making) through design may be described as occurring through sign references, which are iconic, indexical or symbolic in nature. For example, brand recognition is created by consistently applying similar visual form elements or design cues (iconic references), while brand or product associations such as sportiness are created through symbolic references.

This paper has the following structure: First, product identity is conceptualised and a framework for perceptual product experience is presented. Second, selected product examples of various brands are examined, in order to illustrate how product and brand identity is communicated through visual references in product design. Finally, the results and implications of the suggested approach are discussed with respect to brand identity creation.

2. Conceptualising product identity

The starting point for the discussion in this paper is the idea that products are perceived as having ‘identity’, and that products are differentiated by their individual identity, as well as by the identities of their respective brands. Brands can use product design to build brand value through product identity, and products represent the brand through visual design elements, which create perceptions of product identity. Building on the perspective of branding [2], we propose that the creation and embodiment of identity is one of the key tasks of the design of the product. The visual design of the product, often referred to as styling, thus is a physical implementation of the brand, hence the term ‘tangible branding’ as used in this paper.

In marketing research, visual brand identity has been conceptualised through ‘recognition’ and ‘categorisation’ of brands. Visual design features contribute to brand value by serving as references for recognition of brand, allowing customers to attribute meaning to the brand related to heritage and character [7]. Furthermore, design elements of one product category can be transferred to a new product category within the same brand by modifying key characteristics of product-shape attributes [1]. Thus, products within the same brand may be perceived as sharing (part of) the same identity. In both of these examples, however, brand value attribution is confined to representational qualities of design elements, i.e. associations through meaning-making. This view implies that the visual aesthetic qualities of design elements themselves play no role in the process of identification.

In contrast, in this paper, product identity is conceptualised as a phenomenon, which depends on aesthetic as well as meaning-making experiences. We use a three-pronged concept of ‘product identity’ to frame how products contribute to creating perceptions of category, character and value through their visual design. We will introduce the concept of identity as used here through a story.

Imagine looking at a large crowd of people. First, you only see the many people, all blurred into a mass. Suddenly, however, your eyes notice a familiar face in the crowd. You have seen this person before; in fact, now you remember who it is – an old friend of yours, who you have not seen for years. Although time has passed, you still recognise the person’s facial features, the unruly hair, and their friendly, happy outlook. You remember the person’s positive attitude and generosity from the many times they helped you out in times of need, and you miss the friendship, which you treasured so dearly.

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