

Media mediated emotional expressions in the consumer design decision

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Abstract: *Objects have a very high significance, not only because of their utilitarian function, but also because of their psychological impact. Relationships are established between people and objects. Science and technology have generated standardization, but, through an irony of fate, humanity does not suffer from a lack of choice, but from an excess of choices, of options, a specific dilemma to industrialization, when the advantages of diversity and individualization are nullified by the complexity of the design decision taking process by the buyer.*

Key-words: *media; decisions; consumerism; empathy; motivation; social sustainability; emotional / social / behavioral contagion*

1. Introduction

Objects made by humans enter their consciousness and shape it. Objects have a very high significance, not only because of their utilitarian function, but also because of their psychological impact. Relationships are established between people and objects. The consumer maintains a possessive relationship with the object, bearer of signs, an object that define his way of life and influence the sense of continuity or discontinuity. Objects play a role in the structure of the situations and the reduction in time of our relationships with them, accelerates the pace of lives. “Owning tangible things is a certain human need. The products offer symbols of identity to their users and to the people around them. They make sense and are constant memories of who we are, where we are, our activities, our history and our future.”²

Objects also act as activating signs of memory and can remind us of our past achievements, our relationships and become concrete manifestations of our biography. In other words, they can become extensions of our self. Functioning as external memories, they assure us of the persistence of the identity and integrity of our being over time. As a result, we develop a strong emotional attachment to some objects because they have played a role in the memorable events of our past. Experiments have shown that memories that excited the emotion are richer in detail than neutral ones, which shows that emotions have a facilitating effect in the process of encoding information in memory and in consolidating memory, a neural process that creates traces of memory for updating.³

The more consciously or unconsciously the attachment of the sensory / aesthetic, cognitive / behavioral and personal / symbolic qualities of an object increases, the more the desire to possess that object, increases.

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² Chapman, J. 2005. *Emotionally Durable Design Objects, Experiences and Emphaty*, UK&USA: Earthscan, p. 181

³ Schaefer, Alexandre & Philippot, Pierre. 2005. Selective effects of emotion on the phenomenal characteristics of autobiographical memory. In *Memory* 13(2): 148-60.

Science and technology have generated standardization, but, through an irony of fate, humanity does not suffer from lack of choice, but from an excess of choice, of options, a dilemma specific to industrialization, when the benefits of diversity and individualization are nullified by the complexity of the decision taking process by the buyer. Given the fact that technology makes more technology possible, leading to a very fast pace of change, Alvin Toffler⁴ pointed out in 1973 that we would become the first civilization in history to use advanced technology to make the most transient and yet sustainable product: human experience. The concept of experience, in which the subject and the object meet and merge with each other, is a key issue in the design / design of products with emotional resonance, significance. This is because experience is a process in which all faculties are activated, especially emotions. The senses do not provide access to absolute truth, because the environment is not just what you see, hear, feel, smell or taste. Experiences only make sense through personal memories, personal faith structures and personal choices. And even then, the individual is the one who gives meaning and reason to the world and experiences. The individual is the screenwriter of the personal world. By giving this meaning, he creates his world. The meaning is specific to the context.

Edward Bernays⁵, pointed out that you can persuade people to behave irrationally if you connect products to their emotional desires and feelings. This means that irrelevant objects can become strong emotional symbols of how the consumer wants to be perceived by others. To understand the consumer, it must be understood that modern man often tries to get rid of his frustrations by investing in self-satisfaction. As stated by Paterson in his book, modern man is eternally ready to complete his self-image by purchasing products that compliment him. If you identify with a product, it may have therapeutic value. It improves your self-image, you will become a more confident person and you will suddenly have this confidence to go out into the world and do what you want successfully.

According to Chapman⁶, consumption is a process of defiction. Most products help to build the necessary context for the meaning of our existence, it gives us a utopian, idealized and slightly fictitious vision of how the world could be; they are fictitious in that they describe imagined futures - alternative versions of reality that users want to be a part of. But for these realities not to be just a passing experience, the products must be supported by richer, longer and more complex stories / fictions, in order for the consumption process to be both satisfactory and lasting. In this context, the consumption process can be called a process of de-fictionalizing the world, because once the fictions are explored, demystified and known, the debate ends in essence and new fictions are sought.

The emotional connection to a product or service causes people to act irrationally, and to buy what corporations want to sell. It is necessary to make a mention: According to the APA dictionary of psychology, decision making is the cognitive process of choosing between two or more alternatives, and the ethical / moral dilemma is a situation in which two moral principles conflict with each other; and consumerism is a myth according to which the individual will be satisfied and integrated in society if he consumes goods, products, services but which deprives him of fulfilling other cultural needs. So consumerism, through media, transforms economic decisions into moral dilemmas. In order to increase social sustainability: sustainability of empathy, meaning, desire and other metaphysical factors that influence the life of the product,

⁴ Toffler A. 1973. *Șocul viitorului*, București: Editura Politică, p. 18.

⁵ Curtis A. 2002. „Happiness Machines”. In *The Century of the Self*, Great Britain: BBC documentary.

⁶ Chapman, J. 2005. *Emotionally Durable Design Objects, Experiences and Emphaty*, UK&USA: Earthscan, pp.163-181.

the importance of emotion and emotional arousal in consumer decisions facilitated by the media, needs to be understood:

“Imagine a world where people and objects coexist, living epic tales of adoration, love and, above all, empathy - a sensual realm where the walls raised to separate meat from the polymer shatter giving way to a future for consumers, without law and without supervision. Born and made - people and things - develop a unity that eventually allows them to coexist for vast periods of time in complete symbiosis. Imagine a world where products are designed to support the investment of emotion - appreciable products, devices and tools that not only support but also amplify the feelings of attachment.”⁷

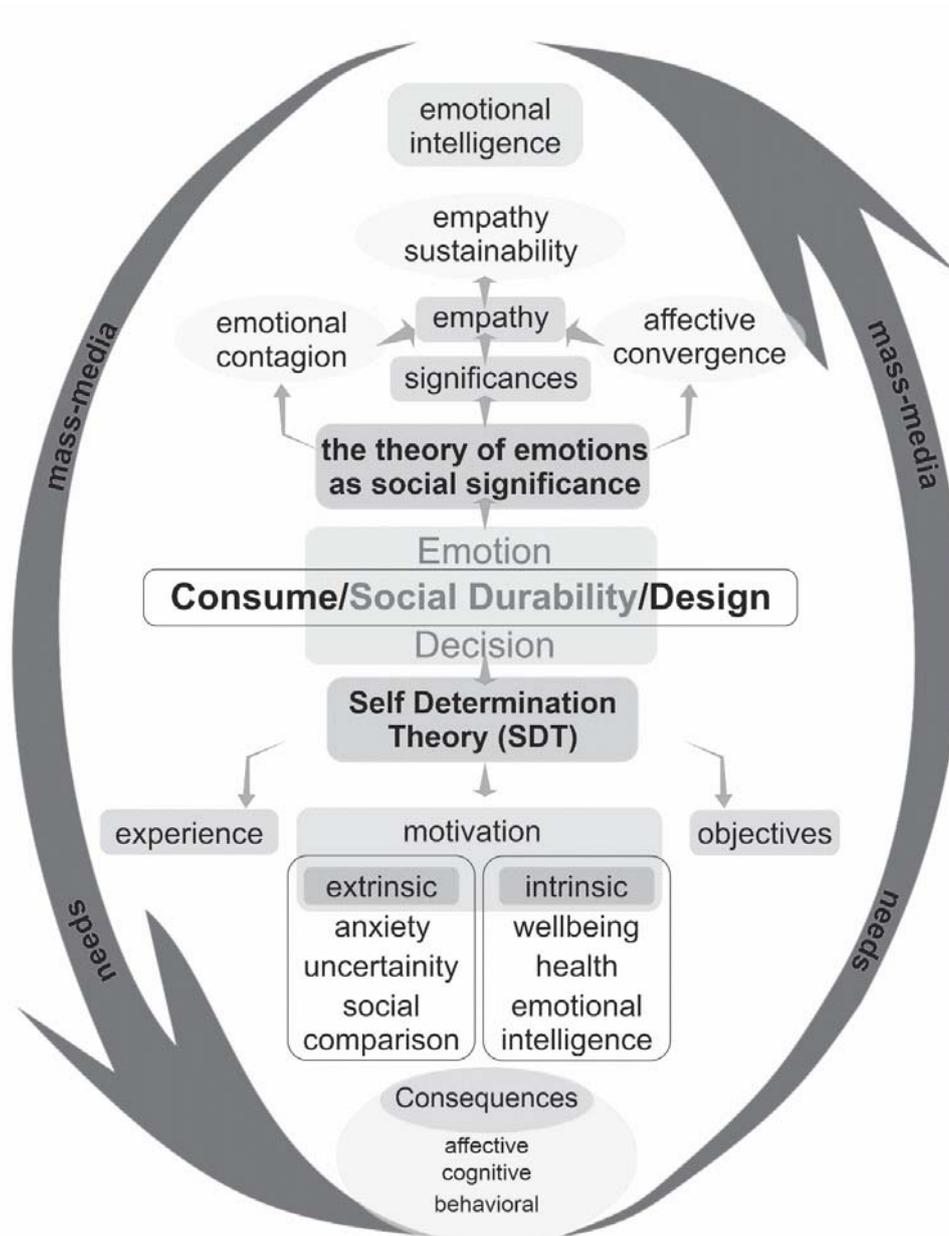


Fig. 1. Map of the keywords

⁷ Chapman, J. 2005. *Emotionally Durable Design Objects, Experiences and Emphaty*, UK&USA: Earthscan, p. 163

The attached graphic from Figure 1 explain visual the relation between the concepts that build the social durability, framed by decision and emotion in the context of consumerism and design: it is a database of keywords. All of these concepts and their branches are outlined by the human needs and the influence of media. In its broadest terms, social sustainability encompasses personal responsibility, quality of life, health, well-being and happiness, democratic participation, and cooperative behavior. Sustainability prioritizes context over object, just as meaning is context-specific. In *Design for the Real World*, Victor Papanek advocated an approach to design that is “ecologically responsible and socially receptive.”⁸

2. Empathy in design

Empathy has a lifespan. Most products are able to create even a small amount of empathy at the time of purchase; however, from this point on, the longevity of the product depends soberly on the sustainability of that empathy. Like anything in this unstable world, empathy has a lifespan, governed in this case by the type of relationship that is obvious between the user and the object. Therefore, waste is a symptom of expired empathy, a kind of failed relationship that leads to one being thrown away by the other. It is important to see beyond the physical, while respecting the meanings of a product. In essence, consumers acquire meanings, not objects; objects simply provide a way to perceive meaning.

As a creative industry mass-media, using design and divergent thinking is necessary to understand more about the sustainability of empathy, meaning, desire and other metaphysical factors that influence the life of the product.

Given the studies that show a positive correlation between the immediate effectiveness of a lie in solving a social dilemma and its novelty and the fact that products provide immediate and direct answers to user operations, if the concept of lie is replaced with media, we might think there is a positive correlation between media effectiveness and advertising in solving a social dilemma and emotional resonance with objects in order to increase social sustainability.

According to Maslow, the motivation of consumers in the developed world is determined primarily by the social needs of the ego and self-actualization. Such a vision is based on humanistic theories of human nature through which creative expression is a sign of self-actualization. Self-actualization is a state of happiness, spontaneity and authenticity without neurosis that involves fulfilling the full potential of individuals in socially approved ways⁹. It is believed that creative products, together with their creators, bring happiness, entertainment, efficiency, beauty or understanding to an appreciative world. The generation of creative products, intellectual, artistic or otherwise, is often seen as a manifestation of one of the highest achievements of personal growth and development¹⁰. Products, consumed objects allow users to express their creativity.

Ryan & Deci¹¹ identifies three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relationships. Competence refers to an environment that promotes a sense of empowerment and the ability to achieve a goal. Autonomy is a sense of will and self-determination to act, but it implies an interdependence, as people build a conception of their self, through interaction. It

⁸ Papanek, V. 1972. *Design pentru lumea reală*, București: Editura Publica, p. 346.

⁹ Maslow, A. H. 1973. “Creativity in self-actualizing people.” In *Readings in human development: A humanistic approach*. New York: Harper, pp. 107-117.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*

¹¹ Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. 2000. Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and well-being. In *American Psychologist* 55: 68-78.

has become clear that the process of satisfying needs through objects is social. Finally, the need of relationships refers to the feeling of belonging and significance to a social group, which provides a sense of security. Psychological needs can be seen as behavioral factors, and physical needs as observable living conditions reflected in objects.

Advertising has gone from promoting a product to what it does, or what it tastes like, to its social significance. Children are educated that what they consume is what will define them as individuals. Studies on the impact of advertising in general and on children in particular, usually focus on three types of effects: cognitive, affective and behavioral. The Valkenburg¹² study on cognitive effects focuses on children's ability to distinguish advertisements from television programs and their ability to understand the intent to sell of advertising; the emotional effects of advertising focus on children's enjoyment and trust in advertising. On other studies, Valkenburg has shown that children's responses to advertisements gradually become less favorable as they enter the operational stage. As children grow older, they become more and more irritated and skeptical as they watch commercials. Finally, the behavioral effects of advertising focus on the extent to which children are persuaded by advertisements. Because young children do not usually have the means to buy products, behavioral effects are usually measured by children's preferences for products or the demands they make in response to promoted products, according to the same studio. Their words in their parents' buying decisions have grown enormously - that is not a parent, who does not listen to the child. Children influence from household decisions - what we eat today to the holiday destination or the car bought by parents.

Other factors that may influence children's consumer behavior through parents include the socioeconomic level of the family, the frequency and type of parent-child interaction, and involvement with peer groups. Such factors can not only exert a direct influence on children's consumer behavior, but can also increase or inhibit the cognitive, affective and behavioral effects of advertising, argues Valkenburg.

3. Affective, cognitive and behavioral consequences due to emotional displays

Van Kleef & co.¹³, also deepen the issue of emotional, cognitive and behavioral consequences in groups due to emotional displays. Both affective and cognitive processes are essential in shaping the functioning of the group. Emotions are an intrinsic element of group life. Social interactions are the main elements of emotions, and groups create opportunities for such emotionally suggestive encounters according to the study of Kelly & Barsade¹⁴. Given that the emotions that occur during group interactions are often expressed in one way or another - either deliberately or accidentally, the question arises: how do these emotional expressions influence the functioning of the group? Guided by this framework, we analyze the effects of emotional expressions on affective and cognitive processes in groups and consider how these processes in turn shape consumer behavioral outcomes.

¹² Valkenburg, P. M. 2000. Media and youth consumerism. In *Journal of Adolescent Health* 272: 52-56.

¹³ Van Kleef, G. A., Heerdink, M. W., & Homan, A. C. 2017. Emotional influence in groups: the dynamic nexus of affect, cognition, and behavior. In *Current Opinion in Psychology* 17: 156-161.

¹⁴ Kelly, J. R., & Barsade, S. G. 2001. Mood and emotions in small groups and work teams. In *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 86: 99-130.

3.1. Theory of emotions as social information TESI

Theory of emotions as social information TESI, theory issued by VanKleef & co.¹⁵, explains how emotional expressions regulate social and organizational life by causing affective reactions meaning reciprocal and complementary emotions and feelings and / or cognitive inferences judgments about the source, meaning and implications of the sender's emotion to observers / receivers. Observers' behavioral responses to the emotional expressions of others depend on the relative power of affective and inferential processes, which is determined by motivation and the observer's ability to process information and perceived adequacy of emotional expression in light of social context.

3.2. Affective processes: emotional contagion and affective convergence

A considerable body of researchers has investigated various forms of reactions and affective processes to emotional expressions in groups. Hatfield & co.¹⁶ highlight emotional contagion, the tendency to “catch” the emotions of others through automatic, unconscious processes e.g., “primitive” emotional contagion and / or more conscious, deliberate processes e.g., social comparison¹⁷. Theorists have proposed that the resulting convergent emotional state affective convergence facilitates connection and coordinated action toward common goals named “group emotional tone” or “group emotion”¹⁸. The likelihood of emotions spreading among group members increases as group members score higher in terms of dispositional susceptibility to emotional, social and behavioral contagion are more dedicated to the team, engaged in collective activities rather than individual and identifies with the team.

When navigating group interactions, people can therefore turn to the emotional expressions of their colleagues to understand the socially complicated situation they are in, a cognitive process called: extracting inferences from emotional expressions. Individuals use the emotional expressions of group members to gain insight into their own level of performance, their group inclusion status, group norms, and group functioning as a whole¹⁹, and therefore they shop, they consume just to gain a positive insight.

4. The influence of social networks and media

In our "enlightened" society, the reduction of cultural values to economic value has become an ethical justification for our actions, unfortunately the expression "... purpose excuses the means, as the immortal Gambetta said" although the quote itself is a nuanced translation of Nicolo Machiavelli²⁰, has become, today, a model of life.

¹⁵ Van Kleef, G. A., Heerdink, M. W., & Homan, A. C. 2017. Emotional influence in groups: the dynamic nexus of affect, cognition, and behavior. In *Current Opinion in Psychology* 17: 156-161.

¹⁶ Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Rapson, R. L. 1993. Emotional Contagion. *Current Directions In Psychological Science* 23: 96-100.

¹⁷ Kelly, J. R., & Barsade, S. G. 2001. Mood and emotions in small groups and work teams. In *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 86: 99-130.

¹⁸ Sy, T., Côté, S., & Saavedra, R. 2005. The contagious leader: Impact of the leader's mood on the mood of group members, group affective tone, and group processes. In *Journal of Applied Psychology* 90: 295-305.

¹⁹ Van Kleef, G. A., Heerdink, M. W., & Homan, A. C. 2017. Emotional influence in groups: the dynamic nexus of affect, cognition, and behavior. In *Current Opinion in Psychology* 17: 156-161.

²⁰ Italian philosopher 1469-1527.

Having in mind TESI and emotional contagion together with the need of a social positive and constant insight, consumerism and advertising have become possible threats to conscience, because of the social significance of the objects. We are what we wear, the individual personality identifies with advertising fantasies and consumer ideals. Who we are merges with roles and images portrayed in the media. Prolonged exposure to media advertising has damaged the power of understanding in terms of subjective knowledge of being. The perception of the essence of reality has decreased in quality; what is called the spiritualization and commercialization of culture takes place. "The affront to human values through media advertising has left a well-updated consumer, but a poorly individualized personality."²¹ "Superficiality becomes the norm, greedy greed after immediate material accumulations takes the place of cultural fulfillment, while ethics and humanism lose ground to selfishness and wild competition for profit. It is a perfect humanoid product for the role of consumer, but unable to create or at least receive authentic intellectual, cultural and artistic values."²²

"In the midst of a major identity crisis, humanity will realize the lack of morality and humanity in a world based on media image and the satisfaction of passing property, rather than the ontological value of cultural experience, meaningful?"²³

False information spread through social media can ultimately affect consumers' feelings and attitudes towards a brand and its social position in his own group. As the use, popularity, and influence of social media increased, brands responded by using social media for marketing, convincing the user that he will strengthen his position in the group and gain power if.

However, the power of consumers to influence the significance of the brand has increased with the ability to share word-of-mouth eWOM communication remotely, using social media channels. The technology allows trust in foreigners due to the reputation capital gained by each user and consumer of the media. Whether the information is an opinion, a review or a story about a brand experience, the information generated by consumers told through social networks is considered to be more influential than the information disseminated through traditional communication channels²⁴.

5. Conclusions

Having in mind the fact that emotions are contagious and the affect converges, our reasoning has shown that emotional arousal in decisions has theoretical and practical implications. Positive emotions facilitate decision-making and increase social sustainability. Most products are able to create even a small amount of empathy at the time of purchase; empathy which has a lifespan. Therefore, waste is a symptom of expired empathy, an ended relationship that leads to one being thrown away by the other, fact that encourages consumption.

The emotional connection to a product or service causes people to act irrationally and to buy more and more things, action that have affective, cognitive and behavioral consequences.

The social environment determines whether the basic psychological needs of a human being are met. If the social environment ensures autonomy, competence and relationships, the individual, groups and communities can develop in a healthy way. But there comes the advertising, which went from promoting a product to what it does, or what it tastes like, to its

²¹ Toffler A. 1973. *Șocul viitorului*, București: Editura Politică, p. 22.

²² *Ibidem*

²³ Cronk R. 1996. „Consumerism and the New Capitalism.” In *Art on the Rebound, A collection of essays on art and Culture*, California: www.westland.net/venice/art/cronk/contents.htm

²⁴ Hennig-Thurau, T., Malthouse, E. C., Frieger, C., Gensler, S., Lobschat, L., Rangaswamy, A. & Skiera, B. 2010. The Impact of New Media on Customer Relationships. In *Journal of Service Research* 133: 311-330.

social significance; consumers acquire meanings, not objects; objects simply provide a way to perceive meaning, meaning outlined by the social environment. Media is a skillful manipulator of individuals emotional states and can shape their moral and economic judgments, persuading them to consume in order to receive a social positive insight.

What is understood is that emotional arousal has effects on decision-making in order to achieve extrinsic goals of self-complimentation, born from anxiety and/or insecurities through social comparison and intrinsic well-being and health facilitated by emotional intelligence. Emotional arousal can facilitate performance in the social environment or weaken it.

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