

# **Product Communication and Consumer Experience by Emotional Design**

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## **Introduction**

It's not uncommon to hear comments like "Our largest problem today is introducing new products that do not appeal and that people do not buy (Barnes, 2006)." Good design is not simply about functionality or making a product easier to use. It's a central part of the business process, adding value to products and creating new markets. But the question is, how? Several years after the groundbreaking book on usability and user-centered design *The Design of Everyday Things* (Norman, 1998), Donald A. Norman published another eye-catching book *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things* (Norman, 2004), unveiling a fact that fans of Norman cannot afford to ignore: attractive things really do work better. This paper is not a reiteration of the ideas in Norman's second book, but proposes the rationales behind the emotion and design that are not touched on in his book, and the facets and messages that design experts may have underestimated in terms of the role of emotion on our experience of everyday objects. Specifically in this paper, I propose the rhetorical analysis of design language and discourse. In non-verbal communication, especially in the design arena, rhetoric plays an important role as in verbal communication. The design process is, in a sense, a construction of ethos, logos, and pathos to create a persuasive argument to consumers. The paper starts by tracing back two thousand years to Aristotle's theory of persuasion—rhetoric, followed by the distributed cognitive theory to examine ways in which design could arouse consumers' emotion when they interact with products: translating users' needs; incorporating messages in design; and designing user experience. Examples from Häagen-Dazs, Pizza Hut branding design and a computer game *Animal Crossing: Wild World* are used to demonstrate the importance of incorporating affections and arousing users' emotions in design.

## **Rhetoric in Design**

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Aristotle believed that persuasion is attained through three appeals: ethos, logos, and pathos. Ethos deals with the character or credibility of the source of communication. This could be any position in which the speaker—from a college professor of the subject, to an acquaintance of a user who experienced the product—knows about the topic. Logos is the proof of truth through reasonable argument, i.e., the use of reasoning, either inductive or deductive. And pathos, which has most relevance to this paper, is the stirring of emotion in the individuals (users or consumers in our context) being persuaded. This can be done through metaphor, amplification, storytelling, or presenting the topic in a way that evokes strong

emotions in the audience. Situated in the design context, pathos deals with ways to present the object to achieve the emotional resonance.

Deriving from rhetoric, rhetorical analysis is a methodology with a long tradition shared by scholars from varied disciplines. It studies the use of words and phrases to explain how arguments have been built to drive home a certain point the author or speaker intended to make. The general focus of rhetorical analysis is to methodically arrive at insights about the performance of a communication event (or assemblage of events) through an investigation of select features of the event (Zachry, forthcoming). In most cases rhetorical analysis deals with text or speech, i.e., how words are arranged to attain the argument. What I propose in this paper is that, in non-verbal communication, especially in the design arena, rhetoric plays an important role as in verbal communication. The design process is, to some extent, a construction of ethos, logos, and pathos to create a persuasive argument to users.

According to Norman, there are three levels of design: visceral, behavior, and reflective (Norman, 2004, p. 39). At the visceral level, physical features—look, feel, and sound—dominate. When we perceive something as “pretty”, that judgment comes directly from the visceral level. Behavior design is all about use. Appearance doesn’t really matter. In most behavior design, function comes first and foremost. Reflective design is all about message, about culture, and about the meaning of a product or its use. But consumers nowadays are much more critical at visceral and behavior level, so to design objects is to some extent to design emotion, arouse past experiences, create ideal current user experience, and enjoyable future recall. The ideal design occurs, first of all, at the visceral level and in a deeper sense at the reflective level. This means the design per se should not simply touch the users’ feelings solely by the appearance, but dig into possibly users’ personal satisfaction, memories, and other cues that may arouse their pathos. In this way, design is truly a rhetorical act by means of pathos.

### **Distributed Cognition and Emotion**

There is no way to escape cognition when talking about emotion. The term “cognition” is used in several loosely related ways to refer to the information processing of an individual's psychological functions. Cognition or cognitive processes can be natural and artificial, conscious and unconscious; therefore, they are analyzed from different perspectives and in different contexts, such as memory, attention, perception, action, problem solving and mental imagery.

Only decades ago did the proposition of distributed cognition shed light on emotion and design. The theory of distributed cognition, like any cognitive theory, seeks to understand the organization of cognitive systems. Unlike traditional theories, however, distributed cognition extends the reach of what is considered *cognitive* beyond the individual to encompass interactions between people and resources and materials in the environment (Hollan, Hutchins, & Kirsh, 2000, p. 175). Specifically, culture and cognition, and cognition in a social context are becoming key points in examining the cognitive processes, because people live in complex cultural environment. Just as it’s unwise to conduct analysis without context, it’s important to study cognition with the influence of society, history, and culture. This overarching concept of distributed cognition enhances our understanding of interaction between human emotions, artifacts and the environment. Realizing that human emotion is attributed to the system of

cognition interacting dynamically with artifacts would help us engage more user-friendly intellectual design. The extent to which users perception of the product relates to their past experience; how users perceive, recognize, acknowledge and begin to comfortably use the product; the extent to which their initial expectation and user familiarity direct their reaction to the product; how users from different cultural background perceive, comprehend and react to certain features; and finally how those findings could be translated into user-centered design practices to cater for audiences with different background fall into the scope of distributed cognition.

So on the whole, rhetoric to design is like the methodology—the strategy to present the argument in order to persuade consumers; distributed cognition to emotion is like the inner mechanism—how to operationalize the methodology to attain the optimal design effects. The two frameworks cannot stand alone in term of emotional design; rather, they are complementary with each other. In the next section, I'll talk about the implications of rhetoric and distributed cognitive theories to emotion and design.

### **Engaging in Emotion and Design**

The design arena is experiencing the transition from functional to ergonomic and ultimately to emotional and affective design. Rather than painfully persuading users' acceptance and acknowledgement to certain products, design experts may want to incorporate their understanding of users into their design expertise. Today's consumers are rarely satisfied with products that have only functional and ergonomic attributes; they demand that they experience delight from the artifacts that surround them, and this is becoming the critical factor that determines a product's acceptance or success (UK Engineering Design Center, 2007). However, to design products that are appealing and arouse pathos in the minds of users is not a daunting task, as long as the design company and designers know their users and products inside and out.

#### *Translating users' need*

Good designers may tell a story in users' words rather than imposing their ideas. They must know users, their minds, needs, and desires. How will users perceive the product at the first sight? How will the appearance of the product appeal to them? Do the sense, sound, taste, smell, or haptics arouse their emotional response? How the appearance relates to their past experiences? Will the experiences arouse their memories? Also, will users from different cultures sense the product differently? Will users' demographic differences affect their perception of the product? In a word, to design a product is in a sense to design user experiences and translate users' needs into action.

A simple but good example of a design practice is the flower plug as a temperature indicator designed by a Korean designer Mi-Soo Jung (please see figure 1). The flower plug was designed to let the user know when the bath water was just the right temperature by changing color from light pink to beautiful deep purple. Once the flower is purple, it is safe to step into the water without the fear of it being too hot. The rationale behind the design is that a nice warm bath is soothing to the soul, and it helps to unwind mental strain after a long stressful day and to relax and forget about everything for some time. The small flower also adds to the ambience the

relaxation experience in the tub bath. This design takes full advantage of users' needs and translates the needs into soothing, relieved, and convenient design practice. The non-verbal communication of the flower design presents to users the powerful rhetorical argument and entices users' purchase impulse.



Figure 1. Flower plug. (source <http://www.abluestar.com/blog/flower-plug/>)

Another design which comes from SUCK UK, a manufacturing and wholesale company in the UK, is called “MyCuppa Tea/Coffee” (please see figure 2).



Figure 2. MyCuppa Tea/Coffee. (source <http://www.suck.uk.com/product.php?rangeID=76&showBar=1>)

As we can see from figure 2, inside the mug there are several bars indicating the boldness of tea or coffee. When adding the milk, users may make their tea or coffee according to the chroma of the bars. It could be “milky,” “classic British,” “builders brew,” or “just coffee/tea.” Though geared toward functionality, this design adds a tint of delight and entertainment to the coffee/tea making. Think of a lousy morning or sleepy afternoon, making coffee and playing with the thickness of milk might add the day with some color. Adding milk in the mug is no longer a repetitious everyday routine, and consumers may not worry about the taste if adding too much or too little milk in their coffee/tea; rather, they can enjoy the pleasure watching the gradual blending of milk and coffee/tea till their ideal taste.

We hear that love can blind people, that when angry people are unable to see straight, and that sadness can make the world look bleak (Niedenthal, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2006, p. 195). The above two design examples both try to make people feel good about life, either soothing or pleasurable, and therefore have a positive attitude towards the products. It's not difficult to infer that those two design inspirations are from keen observations of life. Though it's difficult to visualize the inspirations and concepts into design practices, the visualization is not intimidating because as long as we truly understand users' needs, cognition, emotional values, mood, feeling, impression, experience, and expectations, there is always a way.

### *Incorporating messages in design*

Products cannot speak, but good design can. Good design passes messages to consumers without uttering them. One common message that design speaks is consumers' emotional resonance, which has profound implications for branding design: when we mention Nike, we may think of the strong sports action "Just do it"; when we see McDonald's, we may think of the tagline "i'm lovin' it", transmitting the message to consumers that people love McDonald's food. Another interesting branding design is from Häagen-Dazs, the ice-cream company. In China, one of the most popular advertisement tagline for Häagen-Dazs is "love her, buy her Häagen-Dazs." Twelve years ago in 1996 when the company opened the first shop in Shanghai and launched its advertisement campaign featuring this tagline, this tiny piece of love message aroused waves of emotional resonance in the younger generation and it becomes so popular that even today, Häagen-Dazs is still a symbol for love, bourgeois, and exquisite life in China. From this example, we can see the power of choosing the right message to attach to the brand.

Sending the right message requires the understanding of consumers' backgrounds, social and cultural identities. People's emotion from different cultural groups may not necessarily the same. The advertisement strategy of Pizza Hut China, for example, incorporates Chinese customers' culture and customs into its brand's identity, and therefore receives big success—Pizza Hut now runs more than 200 restaurants in around 50 cities in China; and on December 1, 2005, Pizza Hut welcomed its 100,000,000<sup>th</sup> customer since it entered Chinese market (News report, 2006). It becomes a scene in China that almost every Friday evening and meal times at weekends, there is always a long queue in front of Pizza Hut restaurants waiting for seats. A look at their website may give us some cues of their branding.



Figure 3. Screenshots of Pizza Hut China homepage and menu page (source [www.pizzahut.com.cn](http://www.pizzahut.com.cn))

Chinese society is renowned for its neutral life style—juste-milieu or not going to extremes; people in China are educated to hide their emotions rather than express emotions overtly. This practice falls right into what Gould calls “neutral communication style” (2005, p. 108). Pizza Hut China is doing a good job at creating an amiable atmosphere at its Web site. The soothing and subdued color at its homepage caters exactly for the neutral communication culture of this nation (please see figure 3, the left picture).

In addition, though western culture associates red with danger, red might be the most important color in China—a symbol of celebration, joy, and good luck. It is used in many ceremonies, weddings and Lunar New Year. And the branding color *red* throughout Puzza Hut’s Web pages (please see figure 3, the right picture) matches with what Chinese people like best in their traditional concept relating to festivities.

Apart from the color scheme, Pizza Hut also uses another strategy to build its public image: family theme. Targeted at Chinese collectivist and communitarian culture, Pizza Hut China’s Web pages focus on collaborative behavior and group communication, and has images of groups of people having lunch or dinner at the restaurant. Except some time when they launch a new promotion or food campaign, it usually uses family pictures as their homepage background: be it during Chinese Lunar New Year, Christmas, or Easter. The background image is always a big family get-together, with grandfathers, grandmothers, moms, dads, and kids playing around (see figure 4).





Figure 4: Family theme at Pizza Hut China's Web pages (source www.pizzahut.com.cn)

For comparison, I also took two screenshots from Pizza Hut America's Web page here (please see figure 5). Vastly different from Chinese site, Pizza Hut America's homepage and subsequent pages features fast food, quick order, and online commerce.

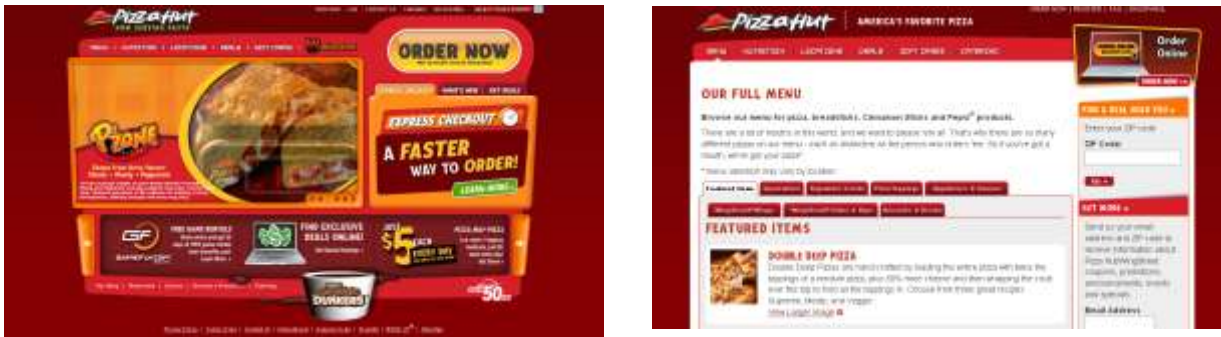


Figure 5: Screenshots of Pizza Hut America homepage and menu page (source www.pizzahut.com)

Though being a western brand, it tries every means to localize its taste and the perception in Chinese consumers' mind. The message that Pizza Hut China is devoted to creating is joy, good luck, family, and friends get-together. Their branding is a success in that they incorporate the message in design to arouse consumers' emotional resonance and paths.

### *Designing user experience*

A. G. Lafley, CEO of P&G said, "We have to create a great experience every time you touch the brand, and the design is a really big part of creating the experience and the emotion. We try to make a customer's experience better, but better in *her* terms. If you stay focused on experiences, I think you will have a lower risk of designing something that may measure well in a lab but may not do well with the consumer" (personal communication, June 2005). This is an exclamation of user-centered design oriented at better creating user experience. The reasons to switch from designing products to designing user experience are, first of all, it is users who ultimately determine the survival of the product; second, users' likes/dislikes and decision-making is aroused by their experience when using the product, which is the decisive factor that determines the product's thriving. It would be a success if the product could facilitate great user experience and it would be even better if long after using the product users could still recall the nice experience. The fundamentals for designing good user experience go back to my first point—translating users' needs, and more specifically, understanding users. We may understand users by learning from their past experiences, current encounters, and expectations; we can listen to what people say; we can interpret what people express, and make inferences about what they think; we can watch what people do, appreciate what people know; and decipher what people dream. People may desire, may satisfy, may share, may envy, may be proud of, may despise—good or bad, we are humans, so the design element could represent those feelings.

Here are a few quotes from one of the entries titled “Please write 100 reasons why you love *Animal Crossing*” from an online forum (<http://www.ndsbbs.com/read.php?tid=58476>) exclusively talking about the computer Game *Animal Crossing: Wild World*:

- “I like animals’ facial expressions and personalities, and I love spending time with them.”
- “When my animals wear the clothes that I designed, I have a sense of accomplishment.”
- “I can use a lot of furniture to decorate my house, DIY various themes.”
- “I was surprised when I received the bottle letter from over the sea and balloons over the sky.”
- “As in reality, animals will leave you, the same case with even the best friend. Animals always leave you secretly, but when you know that they are leaving, you can do something to move them and ask them not to go.”
- “The dialogue between animals are so cute, always makes me laughing.”

*Animal Crossing: Wild World* is a computer game that you can play either alone or online with friends. The author of the paper is not a game fan at all—this is her third PC game she’s ever played. But she liked the game, because it opened up a whole new level of human-animal emotional interaction.

*Animal Crossing* uses a real-time clock and if the gamer doesn’t play the game for a long time, when s/he resumes the game s/he would find some animals had left the town and left the gamer farewell letters. The gamer may come across an animal exclaiming, “Where did you go? I haven’t seen you for a year!” when s/he is wandering in the town. Maybe only a few people can remember the gamer after a long time in real life, but animals remember every gamer in virtual world!

Another factor that contributes to the success this emotional design is the enormous depth of items to discover and collect. The game features hundreds of furnishing, instruments, carpets, wallpapers, costumes, fish, bugs, paintings, fossils, and songs. You can decorate your house according to your wish. If there is something you don’t have, you can swap with others, or you can make money by doing part-time job and buy the stuff you want. You can chop off the trees, plant new ones, rearrange your town as you like; you can shake trees to find if there is something surprising there; and a lot more. Gamers can have the freedom to desire in the game.

In a word, *Animal Crossing: Wild World* takes full advantage of emotional design and creates exquisitely sentimental user experience. The rating of this game is high—the North America review score in Nintendo World Report was 9.5/10. A good game must be good at aesthetics, interaction, performance, features, and usability, but a great game lies in the sentiment the game designers attach to the characters and to what extent the sentiment could influence players to facilitate user experience.

## **Conclusion**

The emotional elements in design are big assets that may entice consumers’ purchasing desire. Beauty, fun, and pleasure work together to produce enjoyment and a state of positive affect.



Products will not be smart or sensible until they have both intelligence and emotions. Emotion enables us to translate intelligence into action. This paper utilizes rhetoric and distributed cognition, the two rationales behind emotion and design to build its own rhetorical act—why we need emotion in design, and how we make use of this awareness to incorporate the notion into design practices: by translating users' needs; by incorporating messages in design; and by designing user experiences.

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## Biography

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