Using Debated Definitions of Affordances for A Qualitative Discussion of Campus Affordances

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The goal of human factors is to examine and improve the relationship between individuals and their environment. This presentation will be a qualitative review and discussion of everyday environmental cues and affordances located around the University of Central Florida campus. The goal will be to discuss the relationship between the design of perceptual affordances and the user's interpretation of the object's intention. In general, affordances explain how perception guides an individual to respond to an object or situation. The theory of affordances is widely debated in the literature. As a result, two definitions of affordances will be compared and contrasted. The main arguments of interest are the classic approach to affordances (Gibson, 1977) and the modern approach (Stoffregen, 2003). Gibson coined the term "affordances" and argued that objects have action potential with an inherent meaning and that the environment offers something to the person. Stoffregen, on the other hand, has argued that there are emergent properties in the human-environment system that result in behavior and that objects have no inherent meaning. Examples of affordances will be explained, compared, and contrasted under both viewpoints.

Additionally, several examples of campus affordances will be shown that demonstrate good and poor design. The design aspect of affordances will be examined with Norman's (1988, 1999, 2002) approach. Norman referred to affordances as "perceived affordances" and argued that the designer of objects concerns himself and controls the perceived affordances of the system. Norman urged for the usability of objects, including objects that have never been seen before by the user. Suggestions for design improvement will be discussed. Overall, the environment may be designed in ways that afford certain actions, but it is up to the individual to perceive the environmental cue and the intended action. I will argue that the intended action should be evident to the individual and if what the user perceives and what the designer intended mismatch, this can result in "poor design." In summation, this presentation will review the debates about defining an affordance, provide examples of affordances from the University of Central Florida campus and how these definitions would vary in describing objects, and make an argument about the design and usability of the objects.

Keywords: affordances, design, usability