

THE BEAUTY DILEMMA

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Many researchers and practitioners of Human-Computer interaction (HCI) acknowledge the idea that it needs more than usability and usefulness to design truly pleasurable experiences with products.

Certainly, usability is needed, but the users' desires go beyond the prevention of the negative, such as problems and failures – they seek for the positive, pleasurable, stimulating and inspiring. This calls for a shift in focus from the mere task accomplishment to the users' needs and aspirations, to their Self – a shift from usability to the more holistic User Experience

Beauty is definitely an important topic within the field of User Experience. Often, only the additional acknowledgment of beauty distinguishes traditional usability from User Experience. However, the idea of enriching the users' experience by adding beauty might not be realized that simple: although beauty is appreciated while product use it often is disregarded while product choice. The present paper's objective is to point out the dilemma that arises when beauty meets a technical product in a choice situation.

The value of beauty

Beauty plays a special role among product attributes as it represents the central channel for the formation of the user/product relationship (Bloch, 2003; Hollins & Pugh, 1990). Due to its visual and highly affective nature, beauty is instantly perceived. Unlike most product attributes, which require time to be noticed or discovered, beauty is present from the very beginning. Thus, a first, immediate impression and accordingly an evaluative response towards the product are strongly based on beauty (Lindgaard, 2007). In turn, this immediate evaluation is an important starting point for further inferences about the value and quality of the product (Hassenzahl & Monk, submitted). Moreover, beauty is also important in the long run. Although the main purpose of most technical products is surely not just to be beautiful, the prospect to see and use an ugly product everyday seems horrible. A lack of beauty might be a constant nagging drawback of an otherwise well-working product.

The "dark side" of beauty

Lay Rationalism

Although the value of beauty seems obvious, there is some doubt that people acknowledge it in the moment of choice – or as Hsee and Hastie (2006) argue: people may systematically fail to choose what would maximize their happiness.

One possible cause is the misprediction of one's own future experience. In other words, people simply underestimate the impact of beauty on their later experience of a product. But more surprising, even people who are able to identify the personally most satisfying option often choose a less satisfying one. This phenomenon may be explained by "lay rationalism", a tendency to focus on objective, "hard" rather than subjective, "soft" attributes while choosing (Hsee et al, 2003). Although people know soft attributes to be important for their future experience, they are also afraid of being overwhelmed by emotions or spontaneous preferences evoked by, for example, beauty. To avoid an "unqualified" choice, relying on hard facts seems to be a safer strategy, as in general, making the best choice is understood as making the most rational choice. "Rationality" in turn is associated with hard facts or even better, numbers. Moreover, it simplifies matters to concentrate on objective numerical attributes. Comparing the soft attributes of products, such as "design" or beauty, is more complicated and needs more effort as long as it requires an evaluation based on very personal criteria. Answering the question, whether "Adam is more beautiful than Bert" is much more difficult than comparing both men's monthly income. Accordingly, in an unpublished study we found that people who chose a predominantly beautiful product rather than a predominantly usable product experienced the choice as more difficult. This may stem from the difficulty to evaluate and compare hedonic attributes, due to their "fuzzy" character.

Another facet of "lay rationalism" addresses the centrality of different product attributes. Attributes that are not related to the *primary* objective or function of a product tend to be discounted at the moment of choice (Hsee et al, 2003). Nevertheless, these peripheral attributes can be important for latter product experience. For example, picture quality is a more central and sound quality a rather peripheral attribute of a television set. For a pleasurable experience picture *and* sound has to be good. However, in product choice people rather focus on the picture quality alone. Therefore, they may end up with a high quality picture but mediocre overall experience.

This is where the "beauty dilemma" starts: Neither can beauty be expressed as numerical value, nor is it the primary objective of an interactive product. Thus, although we might be aware that beauty is able to enhance our experience, its chance to be fully acknowledged in the moment of choice is quite low. This is due to its soft and peripheral nature. The desire for a sober, cool, rational choice may overrule beauty in interactive products.

Of course, one can attach a personal numerical value to beauty ("Adam is a 7, Bert a 10") to objectify it, but those ratings may not be seen as having "universal" validity or meaning. Thus, the choice maker can not be sure that his or her choice is regarded as the best choice by others as well. But the social acceptance of a choice is important. This leads to another aspect of the "beauty dilemma," the difficulty of justifying product choice primarily based on beauty.

Justification

No one would question the relevance of beauty when choosing an evening gown or jewelry. These products main purpose is to be beautiful (and to make their owners shine). But most of the time, technical products have a primary function, such as "making a telephone call", and beauty is

understood as a dispensable add-on. As a consequence, only task-related attributes are considered, although subjective, more debatable attributes will be important for experience and long term satisfaction as well. Tractinsky and Zmiri (2006), for example, asked people about their personal choice criteria for a PC-based entertainment system. Here, people specified primarily pragmatic attributes, such as “usability”. However, this was not in accord with the actual choice of a mp3-software, where a higher influence of design attributes was observed (on a group level). Studying choice for mobile phones provided similar results. We asked people to choose between two mobile phones, whereof one was pretested as more beautiful than the other. Additionally, both phones were described as outstanding on one pragmatic attribute respectively, the matching of the pragmatic attribute and beauty was balanced. Given that both pragmatic attributes were of the same value, the two phones differed only with respect to their beauty. Overall, the more beautiful phone was chosen more frequently. However, only very few people stated beauty as crucial for choice. In the majority of cases, the pragmatic attribute was stated as main reason for choice. Often, reasons were centering on the pragmatic attribute, and beauty was mentioned as somehow relevant as well. Relativizing the consideration of beauty by emphasizing the relevance of pragmatics can be interpreted as a result of the difficulty to justify attributes that go beyond the central. This assumption is supported by results of an unpublished study, where choices of mobile phones were analyzed depending on the individual need for justification. As expected, participants with a high need for justification chose a predominantly pragmatic phone more often than participants with relatively low need to justify their choice. Though the pragmatic phone was chosen more frequently, its choice was connected to lower values for positive post-choice affect, probably as a result of choosing against one’s own preferences. In an additional experimental condition, we confronted participants with the message that “due to a mistake the chosen phone was not available anymore and they actually would receive the non-chosen phone”. For people who instead of their real choice received the pragmatic product overall affect was negative. On the contrary, for people who chose the pragmatic product, maybe due to thoughts about justification, overall affect was positive. Thus, it is likely that the latter chose against their true preference and the involuntary change to the hedonic phone accords with their real preferences. Moreover, in another mobile phone choice scenario choice rates varied depending on ease of justification: providing conditions which simplify justification (for example, through ambiguity) led to an increased choice rate for the predominantly beautiful phone.

Appeal

In the main, striving for justifiable choices is a commendable ambition. We surely don’t want people stop thinking about their reasons for a choice. However, we want to encourage people to scrutinize if the rationale that underlies their choices does really correspond to their personal preferences. Otherwise, one may end up with the less satisfying option. In addition, one has to take into account the specific characteristics of the choice situation. Sometimes, we just adopt choice rules that have proven accurate in another context, without considering the differences between varying situations. It might be reasonable that people don’t care too much about the beauty of a kitchen sponge or a cleaning mop and rather concentrate on pragmatic aspects, such as cleaning power. However, using this as a general rule may lead to suboptimal choice if the focus is on experience.

Consequences

The disregard of beauty in product choice - due to a desire for rationality and justification – can be problematic for several reasons.

First, usage is less emotionally appealing than it could be, with a more beautiful product. In the context of work, this might have direct consequences for technology acceptance and usage (e.g., Igbaria et al., 1994). Moreover, the bond between user and product is relatively weak (or at least qualitatively different) for predominantly pragmatic compared to predominantly hedonic products. Products which are mainly characterized by pragmatic attributes are relatively exchangeable: as soon as there is an alternative product with better attribute values, the old one may be replaced without regret.

Another problem emerging from the difficulty to justify hedonic choice is the difficulty to promote especially beautiful products. Of course, beauty is appreciated when using the product, but as discussed above, that's not enough as a selling point. For the promotion of beautiful products one has to pay attention for pragmatic aspects, because these will be used as the "official" reason for choice. Otherwise, it may be the case that although the best designers have been asked to create a truly beautiful product, people won't buy it because of trouble to justify their purchase from a pragmatic point of view.

To conclude, research and common sense emphasize the importance of beauty as experiential quality aspect of technical products. Beauty has value; beauty is a symbol; beauty makes us feeling good. However, this might not be acknowledged appropriately while choosing a product. In comparison to other attributes, the attribute "beauty" seems irrelevant - it is soft, peripheral and needs to be justified. This is the starting point for the "beauty dilemma" – the discounting of beauty despite its experiential qualities.

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