# Emotional Design Theory: Donald Norman

Human brains are complex in the way they are constructed. It is indeed difficult to understand how people relate their emotional lives with the physical objects. This paper will address three levels of emotional design about product design. Research reveals that a lot of complexity exists in the way human beings perceive the beauty of a product with its performance. Herbert Read stated in his book in the early 1900s that "It requires a somewhat mystical theory of aesthetics to find any connection between beauty and function” (Tidwell 2011). Most people may prefer working with beautiful products as opposed to the ugly ones. Moreover, they will find attractive objects working better than others. Donald Norman came up with three levels in his theory of emotional design to explain how product designs relate to people's motor system.

Human beings have evolved over the years as a result of effective interaction with rich world systems. Further, they have borrowed many things from the environment, which has affected the cognitive system and the entire body systems. An efficient system controls motor operation and chemical neurotransmitters (Chapman 2005). All body responses serve as signals that affect how the body responds emotionally. The body muscles, posture, gestures, body movements, and facial expressions communicate the emotional state of an individual.

In the earlier years, psychologists failed to explore the positive aspects of emotions as they found them to cause anxiety, anger, and fear. Fortunately, the modern science recognizes the power of emotions, which differentiates human beings from animals. Emotions play a crucial role in people's lives. If one can access situations critically, it may help in decision making. Modern research reveals that positive emotions involve creative thinking, curiosity, and critical learning. Isen, Daubman, and Nowicki (1987) found that happiness facilitates creative thinking. In this way, it motivates critical problem-solving process, where one can engage in ‘out of the box’ thinking.

A relaxed mind will effectively focus on relevant problem-solving process to address any difficulty. By doing so, it will enable a person to escape the danger of stress and depression. When one is happy, his or her brain is broad to live, and it can encourage imagination. Hence, there is a close relationship between emotions and aesthetics. In product design, beautiful objects can make people feel good and have creative visions (Adamson 2013). In this way, their lives become more comfortable and better.

Naturally, when using an attractive product even if it fails in performance, an individual may be motivated to keep trying to correct the fault. This trial and error process leads to the attainment of a desirable result, which makes life more convenient. Conversely, when using an ugly product without even examining its performance in use, an individual may develop a negative attitude towards it. As a result, it makes one have a narrow mentality towards life. In response, it is difficult to solve a problem effectively in case of malfunction of a product (Fukasawa & Morrison 2007). In such a way, Donald Norman came up with three levels of processing in emotional design to explain the aesthetic in product design. The three levels include visceral, behavioral, and reflective.

## Visceral Design

This design has to do with the first impression. It is a subconscious level of reaction in the motor system. It is a swift reaction, usually beyond human control. Moreover, it makes instant judgments of what is right and wrong, safe or dangerous, and immediately sends the signals to the muscles that in turn alerts the brain. This design marks the beginning of active processing. For instance, when an individual is visiting a fashion exhibition of clothes and accessory, a good feeling can build up in his or her mind even before getting there. In this case, one starts to focus on the way he or she will appreciate new designs and the people who will be in attendance. Conversely, visceral gives a bad attitude when a person thinks of going to a given place, and he or she has to pass through a major dumpsite of the city. In such a way, an individual may become preoccupied with the bad odor and the filthy scene that makes him or her detest passing by the dumpsite.

Visceral is primarily concerned with the appearances. It focuses mainly on visual things that often make people look attractive. Furthermore, it works for different cultural values and personalities (Robins & Holmes 2008). The design also relates to the first impression that an individual gets after looking at something. Donald argues that attractive visceral designs of products make one feel good and excited. Importantly, this level relates to natural existence. For instance, we found ourselves in an environment where there are animals, physical features, and other natural features. Naturally, we learned to coexist with them and found ourselves receiving emotional responses from our surroundings that get interpreted at the visceral level. We tend to like sweet tastes and appealing bright colors that get automatically judged by the visceral design. Therefore, this level evaluates our likes and dislike by considering the first impression.

## Behavioral Design

Donald states that the functional aspect of a product matters more than just its appearance. He argued that visceral design is the domain of graphic arts, whereas the behavioral one is the tool for usability engineers. About the function and performance of a product, the manufacturer must have a deep understanding of the user's needs to produce a quality product (Lin 2007). In this level, the physical appearance is not crucial as in the case of visceral level. This level is where most human acts take place. It involves the manufacturers meeting the expectations of their customers by having products designed in the most appropriate designs. Therefore, the goods should satisfy its promise to users.

Notably, a well-designed product must pass the behavioral test. If a manufacturer comes up with a given design of a pen, it must write. If it does not, the product is designed to fail. As manufacturers and designers come up with new products, they need to pay attention to how the new features will affect their usability. Behavioral level highly involves enhancement and innovation of products. Enhancement means upgrading the existing product rather than creating a new one, whereas innovation indicates assessing complex difficulties that are new in the market. When these two aspects are efficiently tackled, the performance of a given product becomes fruitful.

## Reflective Designs

Donald states that this level allows for interpretation and understanding of things, which would enable people to reason and reflect on themselves. Although it is the highest level of thought, people can apply reflective thinking deeply. By doing so, they can rule out the other two levels of processing. This design defines a product by considering its appearance and performance. It also relates to the long-term aspect of the design rather than its functions only. When we combine the three levels, we can come up with an efficient product design. This level also determines the general impression of the product to the user (Isbister 2006). Here, the customer's relationship with the product can help them change their old perspective. For instance, if they come into contact with a product that is not appealing in appearance, after using it and realizing its effectiveness, they are likely to like it. This way is expensive for a company to win customers, but in the long-run, it will bear fruits.

## How Visceral, Behavioral and Reflective Levels Function in Product Design

The three levels determine the effectiveness of a product design in our lives. The efficacy of the products people use is influenced by their affective state since we assign meaning to the goods instantly using the visceral level. When the emotional state is positive, people may find a product attractive and useful for their use. A happy individual will have a pleasant mood while attending to minor problems (Anderson 2012). For example, when a driver experiences a flat on the road, he will carefully change the tire and keep moving. Conversely, a person having a bad attitude regarding the car model, when he encounters the flat, he will angrily blame the manufacturers for producing a poor quality product.

Positive mind arouses curiosity that allows an individual to engage in creativity and innovation. The designer must come up with a product that is fun to use and exciting (Emmison & Smith 2000). Furthermore, the details of the product must be clear and easy to operate for the user. In this way, the user can engage creativity in handling it and tackling any possible fault. Moreover, the user will also have a relaxed mind while using the product, which will improve the quality of their work.

In behavioral design, the manufacturer can observe the essence of the product design to their future users about the performance. The design ought to be meaningful to a user. For instance, the model of a laptop is different from that of an ATM because the manufacturers based their specified designs on the functions of these products. On this level, the manufacturer focuses on the ability of the model to make work easier (Pye 2010). Norman (2005) states that "After functioning comes understanding" it then engages reflective design. In modern technology, usability and interaction designers base their minds on user’s needs and interface elements. In this level, the visual background is only relevant in explaining the usability of products to the customers since appearance is significant at that point.

Reflective design is essential to manufacturers in large companies. It is also crucial in the branding of products and recognizing the cultural values of a given product. Moreover, it helps the manufacturers evaluate the quality of product design regarding durability (Faud-Luke 2002). It draws the manufacturer's attention and familiarity with the product to the user. The three levels interrelate whereby each level is dependent on the other. Norman (2002) gives various examples to explain this assumption. For instance, Motorola NFL coach's headset had to meet all levels of product design to achieve its effectiveness. Although the product has a tough image, it can be used in large stadiums and resist tearing off and throwing on the ground (McDonough & Braungart 2002). Here, the appearance, usability, and durability are all considered. It is not possible to have an efficient product design, without acknowledging the three levels of emotional design theory.

## The Three Levels of Emotional Design About Two Products of My Choice

### 1963 Jaguar

At a visceral level, Norman (2005) believed that people are attracted to bright colors. Therefore, when advertising a product, the color and the font type used are crucial elements (Khalid 2006). For instance, the 1963 Jaguar was found to attract many customers due to its physical appearance. The customers were excited about the size, design, and color, which gave them a reason to go for it. Owning this model made consumers feel happy and fulfilled.

At the behavioral level, one would consider the usability of the product as opposed to its appearance. The 1963 Jaguar is not the best model to buy regarding performance as it is poorly constructed, which it makes it have poor quality. A knowledgeable consumer would not go for the model because it will not serve their intended purpose efficiently. At this level, the users must know how to use a vehicle effectively. Here, the owner of the car needs to know how to drive it, handle basic maintenance practices and understand how different parts work. The manufacturer is concerned with the user's experience and the way the product is likely to improve their life experiences. Additionally, the manufacturer expects to get a right feedback from customers for them to know the areas they ought to develop. For instance, in the 1963 Jaguar, the customers ought to give their response to the company concerning the poor construction of the car. In such a way, this level is essential as it allows customers to have a proper understanding of the product design to obtain efficient performance.

At reflective level, a buyer would consider the appearance and performance of a product as well as its usability. The 1963 Jaguar would not be an option for a consumer who believes all the factors in this level. Although it is attractive, it has a reduced performance level and short-term service. This level is also concerned with self-pride and social status (Black, Luna, Lund, & Walker 2017). If the car model was attractive, had an excellent performance rate, and the price was extremely high, some consumers would still purchase it to satisfy their ego.

### Global Knives

Notably, global knives have attractive designs that impress buyers easily. At a visceral level, a consumer may feel excited by owning the knife and enjoy using it (Norman 2005). The buyer may focus on the physical appearance, which will give him or her a pleasant mood while using the product.

Besides, the global knife is easy to use and understandable to customers. At the behavioral level, a consumer may feel that they can control the product, which will create some sense of fulfillment. Donald states in his YouTube video *Three Good Ways* that "Design Makes You Happy" such that the unique design of global knives improves its usability (Norman 2002). Users at this level feel excited about the performance of the product, which makes them use it happily.

Reflective design is the final level of emotional thought. Regarding product design, it would consider the pros and cons of using the knife. Apart from its attractiveness and usability, a user may examine its value and his or her sense of pride (Armstrong & Stojmirovic 2011). Therefore, a consumer would purchase the knife because it meets the three levels of emotional design to serve their intended purpose efficiently.

## How Norman Help Us Understand Product Design

## Undoubtedly, Donald Norman helps us understand the reasons as to why product manufacturers use different designs. They apply the three levels of emotional design to make sure that a product not only attracts consumers but also serves their intended purpose. In such a way, people can make informed decisions on the products to use in their daily lives (Hutchison 2007). By considering visceral, behavioral, and reflective designs, it is easy to come up with quality products in future career. Furthermore, the theory helps base the knowledge of product design with the appearance, usability, and lifespan of a product (Chick & Micklethwaite 2011). The product design must be able to improve performance in achieving the intended purpose of a user. Indeed, the theory is helpful to us as it can help develop practical product designs, which will be pleasant to our future customers.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, Donald Norman theory of emotional design is effective in the use and designing of products. Furthermore, it is easy now to understand the secret behind different product designs. From the analysis, people can view products around them differently. Moreover, one can appreciate what was in the manufacturers' mind before they designed their products. The three levels of emotional design critically analyze the reasons why we have different designs for cars, watches, ATMs, and pens among others. Manufacturers adopt different designs to suit the use of their customers by ensuring that they develop the most effective designs on products. Through this awareness, it is easy to learn the different factors that people ought to consider while purchasing products. Additionally, people can also appreciate the products they possess and critically analyze their designs about purpose. Importantly, one can make the right decisions in his or her future career when coming up with a product design. In such a way, it is important to have the user's effectiveness in mind, before allocating a given design of a product.

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