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Published

2011

Journal Title

Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal

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Living with Design Objects: A Qualitative Study of iPod Relationships

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Abstract: Since its introduction in late 2001 Apple Inc's iPod, and subsequently their iPhone, have grown to become social and technological phenomena. Widespread adoption of the iPod has changed music consumption, remaking the music business in the process. The iPhone has had a similar impact on mobile telecommunications, changing how people consume information. Apple's design-centric approach results in products that occupy premium market positions and in turn generate high profit margins. To consumers products such as Apple's iPod represent significant investments of disposable income and personal attention. Users invest significant amounts of "psychic energy" in these products, using them constantly, lavishing them with attention, accessorising and protecting them from harm. This set of practices is part of the general movement from the world of designed commodities, to the singular and personalised object. Yet, herein lies a contradiction. For all the value users place in their iPods and iPhones they are eminently "iReplaceable". With the release of the latest model these products can move rapidly from the status as a cherished object to that of one that is waiting to be replaced. This masterful cultivation of the fickleness of consumers and their willingness to invest such objects with strong meaning is clearly highly profitable for companies such as Apple, but raises urgent issues of waste and sustainability. Drawing on a longitudinal qualitative study of iPod users, we explore this key contradiction and how users gain and lose emotional attachment to these products and how these practices are part of a product's emotional lifecycle with the design economy.

Keywords: Industrial Design, Material Culture, Attachment, Emotional Design, Sustainability

THIS PAPER ANALYSES selected themes extracted from a research project into uses of the iPod to explore the experience of the designed commodity from the user perspective. It seeks to fuse and apply aspects of material culture and consumption theory with insights from design studies in order to understand patterns of design consumption. Based on an initial analysis of interview transcripts which illustrate aspects of attachment, detachment and the life-course uses of our participant's iPods, we use three exemplar cases to show how the nature and quality of attachments is embedded within the larger picture of the uses, practices, personal stories and style of engagement each person has with their iPod. Our data shows that despite the consistent and strong design features of the iPod and the larger family of Apple products, the uses any iPod is put to vary widely and depend on a range of personal circumstances of a person's reception of the iPod. These personal dimensions of use, reflecting differing styles of engagement with the product, have an influence on practices of replacement and add-on consumption. As well as illustrating such aspects of the texture and nature of everyday connections between people and design objects, we believe that our research findings may have implications for broader questions

of the ethics, economics and sustainability of consumer practices within the context of the design economy.

The iPod: from the Generic to the Singular Design Object

On 23 October, 2001, Apple Computer Inc. revealed the iPod to an incredulous computer industry. MP3 players had been on the market for some time but the iPod was notable for a number of reasons including an unprecedented storage capacity of 5 GB and a considerable price tag of US\$400. Since then the iPod has become one of the most successful consumer products in history and, with its' related family of the iPhone and iPad, has made Apple one of the most valuable companies in the world (at the time of writing). As a result of this market penetration the iPod and other "iDevices" have become iconic. That is, they more broadly stand for much more than merely being a 'music player', 'mobile phone' or 'computer'. The Apple brand, established through the visible elements of its advertising images, packaging and various brand mythologies, stands for a whole way of life: urban, connected, detached, cool and, perhaps, 'in fashion'. Our study suggests, however, that this aspect of its formal, constructed narrative does not necessarily determine its usage patterns. Being presented to the consumer in a style of packaging which is both extremely elegant and suitably respectful of the objects exalted reputation, the iPod might also appear a strong candidate to be the perfect fetish commodity. To a degree this argument is attractive, but part of the story we uncover is one where over time people begin to live with this object in mundane ways, incorporating it into their routines, living with it, and using it in various ways which in many cases leads to a defetishisation of the commodity.

In a foundational essay in the field of material culture studies, Kopytoff (1986) argued that it is objectual things, not just people, which have social lives. Kopytoff called this an object's biography, which in a simple way is the story of its existence. This biography can chart the process by which a designed artefact becomes a commodity and in turn how something with merely exchange value becomes imbued with cultural and personal meanings. An object becomes a commodity when someone invests in making it or harvesting it, or packaging it for consumption. In other words commodities are given value by attention, by effort, by sweat; and, this value that can be exchanged, sold, traded. However, something interesting can happen to a commodity after purchase and exchange—it can become de-commoditised, going from being common and generic to singular. To its owner it becomes, in a sense, priceless, one of a kind. Kopytoff argues that the counterdrive to the commodity realm and the process of widespread commoditisation inherent in western economic culture is identified to be singularisation. Whereas commoditisation tends to reduce all things to exchange values (i.e. essentially monetary value), there is a strong cultural and psychological imperative to make some things singular, powerful and meaningful—in Belk's (1988) sense, to externalise oneself, one's aspirations and one's drives, in things external to oneself. The world of the advertised commodity offers a perfect set of resources to accomplish this. In the Durkheimian sense, there is a drive to make sacred certain objects in order to render them culturally resonant within the larger cultural universe. Kopytoff argues this can happen at both a cultural level—in the case that particular things become iconic, and also at an individual level. At an individual level, in a world where commodities are abundant, people are constantly engaged in a private battle against homogeneity, which is frequently an impetus for a type of transformation involving customisation.

One common tool for customisation related to the building and maintaining of personal identity is music and for many people iPods (and iPhones—we see them as inextricably intertwined) have become the material repositories of musical identity and expression. Bull (2005; 2007) documents the impact of the iPod on the urban experiences with specific focus on the mobility and auditory aspects. He shows how users “mediate the urban landscape”, controlling mood and experience through the person soundtracks. But what of the products themselves? The iPod is expressly designed for upgrading and replacement. All of its data are backed up via the iTunes software on the user’s personal computer. If lost, damaged or upgraded a replacement iPod can easily take on all of the settings and data of the old device and become indistinguishable from, or even better than, the original. This renders such a material object ephemeral in the face of the perennial user experience. In this paper, we delve into the relationship between iPods and their users by asking a series of pertinent research questions. What can this relationship teach us of the role mass produced products play in people’s lives? Are such costly items valuable to people in personal ways? What meanings do they accrete? How do they reach the ends of their useful existence? In short, what trajectories do these artefacts carve through human existence?

The Study

This study consists of a two-year longitudinal study of 20 iPod owners in which each participant was interviewed three times at intervals of approximately 6 months. We used semi-structured interviews that attended to iPod practices, but with particular focus on aspects of emotional attachment, lifestyle integration and disposal. During this period Apple released six models of iPod and three models of iPhone which served as additional stimulus for charting participant’s changing perceptions of their iPods.

Three participants have been chosen for analysis in this paper. Each illustrates different attitudes to technology and product attachment. These styles of engagement can be characterised as: (i) pragmatic yet loyal; (ii) pragmatic and technology orientated; (iii) possession orientated and status sensitive. We go on to discuss each participant in turn in the sections below.

Engaging with Design 1: Pragmatic Yet Loyal

Sharron was a female university lecturer aged over 35 years. Her iPod shuffle was a highly valued gift from her husband but also raised conflicts within her in terms of her self-identity. She saw technology pragmatically as a tool that can be useful, but not as an object of pure desire or as an end in itself. Because of this, we characterise her use of the iPod as pragmatic, with loyalty to the object developing over time.

Her husband’s gift enabled her to enjoy listening to podcasts of her favourite radio programmes, mostly current affairs podcasts, during her morning walks to work. Yet, simply being in possession of her new iPod required some adjustment to her self-image and how she imagined others saw her. She associated modern technology, such as iPods, with young people and felt this new device was not really “her” at first. It was a status symbol and emblematic of a younger, cooler generation rather than her middle-aged self.

Sharron: I saw it as part of a group, a culture of people in their early 20s or late teens who can't bear not to be constantly stimulated by noise, by chat, by text, by songs, by pop, by stuff all the time.

She felt this to such an extent that initially she refused to use her iPod on public transport. The iPod was a threat to her established public identity, a "betrayal of principles" as she put it. The mass-produced nature of the iPod was also a sticking point. Despite finding it aesthetically pleasing she thought of it as cold, impersonal technology, something a little inhuman. Quite consciously then, she chose to carry the iPod in a small, handmade Guatemalan purse to provide an appealing balance and contrast - a quirky aesthetic choice antithetical to the cool minimalism of the iPod style.

Sharron had already formed an emotional attachment to the iPod prior to the start of this study to the degree that she felt that she'd be upset if it were lost. This attachment had two components. Firstly, the iPod reminded of her considerate partner, which was a theme that recurred in most of the interviews with participants who had received iPods as gifts. The iPod becomes singularised in as much as it is the item that was given by the loved one. It might be easily replaced with an apparently identical model but would not be the same article. Here attachment is clearly made through associations incidental to the innate qualities and affordances of the artefact. It is not the properties of the artefact but how it came to be owned that is important. In the final interview it was evident that this attachment had endured. Despite her pragmatic attitude to technology this particular iPod remained important to Sharron, even in the face of newer, more capable devices.

The second attachment bond was the degree to which the iPod came to be embedded in her lifestyle. Her iPod shuffle became an important part of her daily routine, a common experience for many of the participants in the study. The most important setting for Sharron was during her daily commute to work which involved a mixture of walking and public transport. It came to represent normality for her, something brought into sharp relief during the second interview when Sharron related her experience of caring for her brother while he died of cancer. During this difficult two months she found herself completely unable to use her iPod away from her "normal" life. The iPod was too firmly rooted in the everyday, a reminder of the normality so painfully absent.

Sharron: And so I found that in my downtime I either wanted to switch off, which meant watching a lot of British crime television, or just go for a walk and not have music in my head. You know, not have the iPod talking to me. I never found a place for the iPod in just sitting and listening to switch off.

I remember saying a few times to my husband, next time on a Sunday at lunchtime I tell you that I'm about to turn 40 and I'm worried that I'm not doing anything with my life and I want to be trekking in the Andes and I don't want to just be in my suburban garden at the weekend weeding. Slap me about the head and remind me that the most precious thing in life is ordinariness, actually. Great experience is wonderful. But actually this stuff, this ordinary stuff is so valuable. ... I so craved when I get back home and I walk to work and I'm interested enough to listen to my documentaries I have on my iPod. Normal routine.

One year later, in the final interview, Sharron confirmed that the iPod had again become part of her routine, normal existence.

Sharron: the iPod primarily is part of that routine again. Walking to and from work and that is mainly when I use it. ...I went to the beach for a week. I didn't even take it, because I knew now, from experience...when I'm in a new place or doing something different I simply don't use it. I want to be able to hear the environment.

Sharron is therefore someone who accepts artefacts deliberately and with some reluctance but thereafter demonstrates a high degree of product attachment. The iPod became firmly woven into everyday life, an indispensable participant in normality. We might say the life trajectory of this iPod shuffle is prominent and enduring for this user. This significant degree of lifestyle integration has fostered enduring attachment, augmented by the additional association with a loved one. Mnemonic function and physical function enhance attachment and maintain singularisation.

Engaging with Design 2: Pragmatic and Technology Orientated

Marvin was a young male university student for the first half of the study but graduated and was working as an industrial designer for the final stage. In each interview he talked enthusiastically about technology, design, his habits and his feelings about it from a designer's and a user's perspective.

Originally intent on purchasing a "cheap MP3 player" he impulsively persuaded his sister to join him in buying an iPod mini each. A little later he also bought a second generation iPod shuffle. His attitudes towards these two devices developed in quite different directions. By the time of the first interview Marvin had owned both of his iPods for several years and they had each come to serve different niches in his lifestyle. He used the iPod shuffle primarily whilst riding his motorcycle, clipped inside of his helmet and sometimes during exercise. He was pleased with its appearance and utility but had accidentally left it in a taxi, apparently diminishing its emotional attachment. As Mugge et al. (2008) suggest, not using a product for a period of time lessens attachment. When done deliberately this is a divestment ritual (McCracken, 1988), a mechanism by which meaning is silently erased from the article. In this case the loss was accidental but the result seems the same—Marvin felt little apparent sense of loss for the original iPod shuffle. It has remained commoditised, a useful accessory that can be readily replaced.

This contrasts quite markedly with the trajectory of Marvin's iPod mini. The mini eventually found its niche connected to a set of speakers in his workshop. By this time its battery had deteriorated and would not hold a charge, meaning that it was only functional while connected to an external power source. Despite this loss of function Marvin had become attached to his iPod mini and spent some effort trying to replace the battery, in the process inflicting cosmetic damage. It sustained additional cosmetic damage from spray paint and other contaminants in his workshop which seems only to have enhanced the attachment. Firstly he was impressed with its "persistence" and the fact that the aluminium casing shed much of the dirt and paint that fell upon it. Secondly its very lack of mobility made it more difficult to change the music loaded onto the hard drive. This had fixed the music on the device making it a historical record of Marvin's music tastes at the time it was last synchron-

ised with iTunes. He likened this to “cartridge media” in several of the interviews and had obviously thought quite deeply about the topic.

Interviewer: So this has become a bit of a closed system at the moment?

Marvin: Yeah, definitely. And I suppose in that way it’s coming back to cartridge format because it’s set, yeah. It’s like it’s written into vinyl, it’s not changing.

Perhaps a third factor is that the damage and blemishes had effectively eliminated its exchange value. It was no longer a commodity because no one else would have any use for it. It was singularised as a unique artefact only Marvin had any use for. Perversely this seemed to have enhanced its attachment. By enduring, albeit in a diminished role, it had become a respected part of the Marvin’s life. This suggests that physical function is not the primary driver of attachment for this participant despite his apparent pragmatism towards technology. Objects accrete attachment value by being an enduring part of the user’s life. This too is a mnemonic function in that such objects become a part of personal identity.

Overall, Marvin demonstrated a sophisticated and thoughtful attitude to all of his technology, something that is perhaps not unexpected given his industrial design background. He demanded that technology serve his purposes or fall by the wayside. Monetary value influenced his attachment but at the same time it is clear that usage patterns also had considerable impact. The iPod mini maintained a very visible trajectory—it became singularised quite early due to wear and tear and enhanced by its persistence in the face of mistreatment whereas the iPod shuffle lapsed in use and consequently never attained a great deal of emotional significance. Its’ perceived disposability lessened its attachment potential and it remained commoditised.

Engaging with Design 3: Possession Orientated and Status Sensitive

Annie serves as a fascinating counterpoint to both Sharon and Marvin’s habits and attitudes. She was a young female international university student who owned many varieties of iPod and had become fiercely loyal to the Apple brand even in the face of friendly criticism from her friends.

At the time of the first interview Annie already had amassed a considerable collection of five iPods and various accessories over a two-year period. Her favourite was an iPod nano due to its convenient size and pleasing feel. She used it while commuting and on campus. For her it offered the best compromise between practical function and cost. Losing it would not be too painful. Her more costly iPod video and iPod touch, on the other hand, were too expensive to risk.

Annie was extremely protective of her iPods and evidently took great care of them. Her grooming rituals (McCracken, 1988) took the form of attempts to maintain the devices in pristine condition for as long as possible. In the case of her iPod video she had never removed the protective packaging film from the top surface even though the film compromised the operation of the click-wheel.

Interviewer: Do any of your other iPods have screen protectors?

Annie: Yeah, just this one has one [iPod video]. But this comes with like the original.

Interviewer: Like the original cellophane cover?

Annie: No. It came like that and I didn't take it off, so I just leave it there.

Interviewer: So that surface has been untouched by human hands?

Annie: Untouched yeah. The same goes with the Touch because I don't want it to get out and stuff because I don't want to scratch it. So I just keep it like that.

It seems as if she was preserving her iPods for some future user. Her habits approached stewardship rather than consumption and this kept them firmly as commodities. They could not easily gain attachment because they were kept at an emotional distance. The only one that had gained some attachment was the iPod nano, the model that was cheap enough to not worry about. This sense of stewardship was enhanced by the careful thought Annie had given to future upgrades and disposal of obsolete models. She was aware of the release of each season's new iPod models and had plans in place for the disposal of her existing iPods, usually to family members.

Finding new homes for functional but outdated models renders their disposal conscionable. The iPod video was passed to a sibling. The iPod nano had stopped functioning and was kept in a drawer. Its position as most-used iPod had been taken by a third generation 32 GB iPod touch. She had kept the first generation iPod touch, denying her brother its use, though she didn't make clear why. Her latest iPod touch had become a games machine, filled with numerous game apps and she had become a keen collector of apps.

This constant stream of affordable apps provided novelty, renewing the appeal of the iPod. Despite this she remained aware of new models on the horizon, always ready to buy the latest model if she judged it different enough from her existing collection. Notwithstanding her obvious appreciation for the aesthetic and usability qualities of Apple products their primary function was symbolic—they were display objects. Annie identified and expressed herself through her possessions, including her iPods. They served to distinguish her from her peers despite being mass produced commodities. Her attitudes to other Apple products made this clear. At the time of the second interview she was considering the purchase of a Macintosh laptop and was deciding between the high-end MacBook Pro model and the mid-range MacBook model. Utility was seemingly of little importance to her in her deliberations—more important was the display value of the more expensive model. Yet Apple's decision to make the mid- and high-end models very similar in appearance annoyed her. For Annie it was clear that the primary function of technology is to establish and maintain status while at the same time avoiding the counterproductive appearance of pretentiousness. She cultivated an aura of cool, an off-hand mastery of technology and pop culture, cachet established, in part, by careful brand choices:

Annie: if you bring a MacBook Pro out people who don't know Apple, they're like, "Oh, that's the new MacBook." and you'd be like, "That's a Pro there!" But if you do that they'd be like, "Oh, showing off, you know." I don't like to talk much about this stuff, I like it to show itself to people. That's the reason why they spend money on these gadgets.

She was acutely aware of the risks such purchases presented. If clumsily handled such product displays could backfire leading to the air of someone who was trying too hard.

In summary, Annie is deeply attached to the Apple brand and iPods in particular but much less so to specific models. Their function as status indicators means that their value decays

with the release of new models. Their life trajectories tend to be very limited unless they can be passed on to another family member. Her iPods are always commodities. Many are retained not out of any significant emotional attachment but because they have little or no resale value.

Discussion

From these three narratives we can identify a number of general themes. Each participant placed high value on their iPods but for quite different reasons, and as a result the life trajectories or biographies of their iPods varied widely as well. Annie had the greatest number of iPods and clear, strong attachment to the brand, but individual iPods remained largely commoditised and held sway only for as long as they served as status objects. The only exception was an iPod that achieved a pleasing balance of practical and aesthetic function and low cost. It was used more than the others and gained some degree of emotional attachment in the process.

In contrast, Marvin exhibited little attachment to the cheapest of his two iPods while his more expensive iPod mini gained attachment through constant use despite a deterioration of practical function. The mechanism for attachment is similar to Annie's bond with her iPod nano—constant and enduring exposure. Sharron's iPod enjoyed the longest and most prominent life trajectory. No other models contested its prominent position and it played an important role in her daily habits.

Mugge, et al. (2008) list four qualities that determine product attachment: pleasure of use; self-expression; group affiliation; and memories. Pleasure of use was a common factor in all three participants' iPod use. Ease of use and pleasure in their appearance enabled them to become part of their owner's lives. Self-expression, in the sense of personal identity, played a part for some users, especially the status sensitive Annie. Sharron overcame the alienating aspects of her iPod that seemed, at first, counter to her identity and self-expression. Group affiliation seemed to have played little part in Marvin's and Sharron's iPod experience—they were largely unconcerned with the opinions of others. However this was the strongest factor in Annie's ownership and yet this served to limit or even eliminate attachment. Of all these factors memory had the strongest bearing on product attachment. All three participants formed their strongest emotional bonds with the iPods they spent the most time with. These iPods became part of the fabric of their lives through regular use. In a sense this degree of lifestyle integration is a form of self-expression, a reinforcement of identity.

Factors that prevented or diminished attachment were loss of practical function—iPods that ceased to function entirely rapidly dropped from use and seem to be quickly forgotten. Despite this, physical function can be overridden by other functions, and especially symbolic function. Products don't have to continue functioning perfectly to gain attachment value. The greatest impediment to long-term attachment was clearly the status value of latest generation iPods. As iPods were made obsolete by newer models Annie rapidly lost interest in them. A large part of their function was symbolic—newer models could easily take over their practical functions.

Conclusion

Having discussed and outlined the findings we are able to draw based on this examination of three exemplar cases, we would like to point to a number of broader themes that our larger study suggests.

First, we wish to suggest that the field of design studies can draw usefully upon the explosion of work in the social, business and philosophical sciences which have in the last few decades begun to focus on the objectual facets of social and economic life (Appadurai, 1987; Dittmar, 1997; Miller, 1987; Woodward, 2007). In 'following the object' with anthropological attention, they can helpfully inform conceptualisations of the user-product relationship which should be of concern for scholars within design studies.

Second, and as a corollary, our study suggests that designed objects will have different disposal and replacement pathways depending on their modes of use, acquisition and attachment. No universal pathway of attachment exists, likewise no universal process of disposal can be found. Furthermore, patterns of use inform processes of disposal and replacement.

Third, by including aspects of attachment, disposal and enhanced use patterns, our study gives an insight into the consumption of iconic, yet disposable and life-limited objects, which in turn allows us to speculate on related matters of waste, cost, sustainable consumption and ethical consumption. Designers and design studies need to take into account such details of use in order to enhance user experience, and to emphasise the ethical dimension of their designs. Users of products like the iPod and iPhone are increasingly likely to demand these dimensions from their designers and brands. By necessity, the green iPod may not be too far away!

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