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Symbolic meaning attribution as a means to design for happiness

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Abstract Material possessions with happiness-related symbolic meanings can provide a contribution to subjective well-being (happiness), because they remind owners of memories, achievements, or aspirations. Such possessions provide an anchor for personally meaningful narratives, help in the construction and communication of self-identity, represent personal values and achievements, etc. Capturing this richness in a design process is challenging, because meaning is person and context-dependent, and the effects on happiness are subjective. In order to provide inspiration for designers to create products predisposed to symbolic meaning attribution, six happiness-related symbolic meanings were identified. Based on those, 16 design directions were developed. To communicate the six symbolic meanings and the 16 design directions, a toolkit for designers was created, composed of a deck of cards and a website. This paper serves as an introduction to a workshop where the toolkit is applied, and it explains the process and the rationale behind the card set and website that make up the toolkit.

Keywords *Symbolic meaning, Positive design, Happiness, Design tool, Design workshop*

Introduction

In its classical definition, design is problem-driven. However, an emerging, more comprehensive understanding of design frames it as opportunity-driven: Positive Design aims to design for meaningful, valuable, and engaging experiences, without necessarily having a problem as a starting point (Desmet & Pohlmeier, 2013; Hassenzahl et al., 2013). Drawing from research on Positive Psychology, Positive Design focuses on individual well-being and on the opportunities for improvement towards positive states of feeling and being. It aims to have a long lasting and holistic impact that contributes to human flourishing. The Positive Design framework (Desmet & Pohlmeier, 2013) proposes that personal significance, virtue, and pleasure are fundamental ingredients to consider when designing for happiness, which offer different foci for the design. In particular, Positive Design focuses on enabling meaningful activities and experiences which support the fulfillment of personal goals and desires. Past research has indicated that engaging in certain activities can be an effective way to increase happiness (Lyubomirsky & Kurtz, 2008; Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013), which can be supported by experience-enabling products (Desmet, 2011; Guevarra & Howell, 2015). We propose that the role of material goods in happiness can be extended to consider the symbolic meaning of products, arguing that the narratives they hold can also be a valid way to support happiness.

In this paper, we present the theoretical background that supports a workshop for designers in which a toolkit (deck of cards and website) will be used and discussed. Specifically, the SIM toolkit ("design with

symbolic meaning for user happiness") is presented. In addition, the symbolic meaning framework and the design directions it supports, which are communicated in the toolkit, are explained. Finally, a workshop to apply the toolkit is described, and possibilities for future research are discussed.

The role of symbolic meaning in subjective well-being

Product meaning can be both concrete and symbolic (Friedmann & Lessig, 1986; Kleine & Kernan, 1988; Mugge, 2007). Products have certain functions, and specific affordances that allow users to categorize, use, and communicate about them. Product meaning, in this sense, is commonly understood and shared. Differently, the *symbolic* meaning of products stems from individual and cultural filters that give a connotation to products, their use, and their communication. The symbolic meaning we describe in this paper refers to personally significant abstractions (e.g., memories, achievements, aspirations). Such symbolic meanings give the associated products the quality of having notable worth and relevance for the owner.

Past research on happiness has proposed that, in general, material possessions have a limited impact on subjective well-being, because people have the tendency to adapt quickly to products, which may result in a hedonic treadmill effect (Ahuvia & Wong, 1995; Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2011). However, certain symbolically charged possessions defy these assumptions (Yang & Galak, 2015), especially when these possessions prolong and allow the re-consumption of certain experiences (e.g., souvenirs)



Figure 1. The cork of a wine bottle drunk by a couple on their first date, preserved in a three-dimensional frame. It represents a special moment in an intimate relationship.

(Love & Sheldon, 1998), represent and mediate relationships (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981), help build and communicate one's identity (Ledgerwood et al., 2007), or provide an anchor for personally meaningful narratives (e.g., heirlooms) (Jung et al., 2011). In order to understand in more detail how material possessions can have an impact on happiness, six happiness-related symbolic meanings were identified in material possessions (Casais, Mugge & Desmet, 2016). Based on Ryff's model of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989), rich narrations of personally meaningful objects were analyzed based on their happiness-related symbolic meaning: 1) positive relations with others, 2) personal growth, 3) purpose in life, 4) environmental mastery, 5) autonomy, and 6) self-acceptance. While these six symbolic meanings are constructed through human interactions, life experiences, and thoughts, material possessions can play a role in their representation, encouragement, and recollection. Below, we will elucidate the six symbolic meanings and provide examples of material possessions for each. (While each example was described as being closely linked to one symbolic meaning, they are non-exclusive, being able to represent multiple happiness-related symbolic meanings.)

Personal, reciprocal relations with others can have a very direct impact on happiness for the emotional and physical support they provide (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Moreover, they contribute to a sense of belongingness, which is an important part of human development (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Mellor et al., 2008). Material possessions can symbolize personal relations with others, for example, because they are given by the counterparts in the relationship as a gift (Komter & Vollebergh, 1997), because they were inherited as a family heirloom, or because they played a role in the relationship like marking an important moment (see Figure 1).



Figure 2. A set of military name tags that represents a difficult stage in a person's life, but also the acceptance of past experiences and the development into maturity.

Personal growth is a determinant of happiness that occurs when a person changes and matures from his/her experiences in life (Ryff, 1989). The effort to continuously develop, learn and improve from past and new experiences can be encouraged by material possessions, for the associations they evoke and the situations they afford. Specifically, material possessions can provide new experiences, a means for reflection on one's progression, help build a person's awareness of their maturity (see Figure 2), or they can support and represent the transition into new life stages.

Past research has pointed out that purpose in life is fundamental for happiness (Sheldon and Elliot, 1999; Seligman, 2011; Lyubomirsky, 2008). It contributes to a meaningful and worthy life, and to a sense of directedness (Ryff, 1989; Veenhoven, 2000; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Material possessions can represent in a tangible way important values that make life feel worthwhile, such as spirituality (see Figure 3), life achievements, and future aspirations.

Environmental mastery is the ability to create or adjust the surrounding environment to fit one's personal needs and values (Ryff, 1989). Material possessions can support this determinant of happiness and consequently gain this symbolic meaning. For example, material possessions can directly enable certain skills which contribute to a suitable environment for human flourishing (see Figure 4); or, for example, by facilitating and representing beneficial networks and partnerships.

The well-being determinant 'autonomy' regards having clear standards that resist external influence, and behavior that is regulated from within oneself (Ryff, 1989). Material possessions that support physical autonomy can promote a feeling of independence, and consequently, of psychological autonomy (see Figure



Figure 3. A figurine of baby Jesus, representing a religious belief, but also positive aspirations associated with it such as kindness, charity, and a sense of being part of something greater than the self.

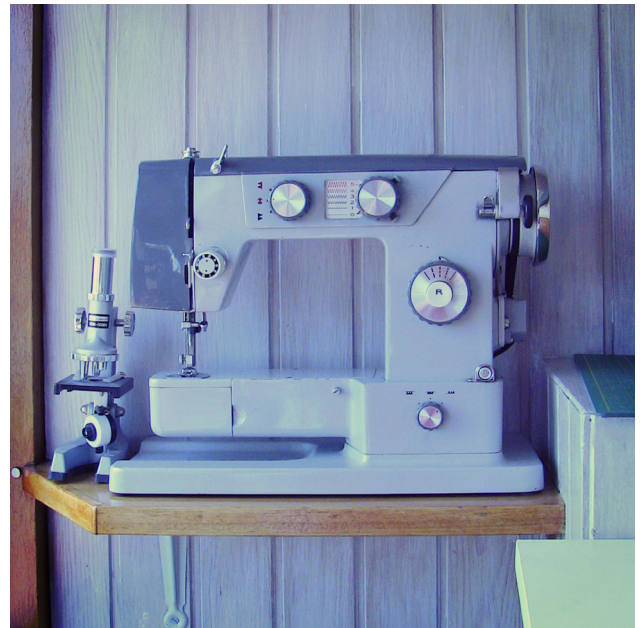


Figure 4. A sewing machine that supported a "Do It Yourself" principle of living, allowing the development of skills that contribute to environmental mastery.

5). Furthermore, material possessions that allow the expression of one's 'authenticity', such as a personal diary, may reinforce internal standards, and support self-governance and self-reliance.

Finally, a compassionate acceptance of positive and negative aspects of one's self is an important criterion for happiness. The well-being determinant 'self-acceptance' can be symbolized in material possessions that help build and express one's identity (see Figure 6), and that help to see and understand the individual as being a sum of good and bad experiences, of positive and negative traits.

Designing with symbolic meaning: concrete design directions

Identifying the six happiness-related symbolic meanings provides a better understanding on how material possessions can contribute to happiness. Although this may already give inspiration for design, it only provides rather abstract insights. To provide more specific insights on how to design for these six categories of meaning, further research developed concrete design directions for direct use in the design process (see Casais, Mugge & Desmet, 2015). Specifically, individual sessions with designers and design researchers were conducted, focusing on



Figure 5. A blood measuring device which makes the owner feel capable of taking care of themselves, independent and autonomous.



Figure 6. A custom-made bass guitar that is used for self-expression and as a means to build one's identity throughout the years.

analyzing a selection of product examples that were considered potentially relevant for encouraging happiness. This analysis resulted in the uncovering and formulation of 16 distinct design directions (see Table 1). These 16 design directions resulted from several cycles of clustering and refining, which aimed for a manageable quantity, without losing complexity. In addition, it aimed for promising interventions that retained a generative quality, i.e., the ability to trigger ideas, rather than merely pointing them out. Lastly, it aimed for specificity, i.e., the ability to stimulate diverse ideas based on the context or user. Both aggregation levels (the categories and the design directions) are potentially useful to identify, communicate, and generate ideas about symbolic meaning – complementing each other and offering different levels of focus.

The SIM toolkit: design with symbolic meaning for user happiness

Providing designers with the six symbolic meanings and the 16 design directions in the form of lists can be considered insufficient to generate inspiration in a design process. In order to clearly communicate the six symbolic meanings and the 16 design directions to designers, a toolkit was developed composed of a deck of cards and a website (see Figure 7). The deck of cards aims to provide a dynamic and compact way to deal

with information, allowing the designer or teams of designers to manage, create hierarchies or pair up selected items. The website complements the card deck, offering the opportunity to dive deeper in the specific literature, and to have visual stimuli (product examples), which directly relate to the symbolic meaning and design directions. The website has the advantage of being able to be updated with new and diverse content and the latest research.

Specifically, the deck of cards contains two introductory cards that explain the research and provide summarized information about Positive Design (see Figure 8) and the research background; six symbolic meaning cards that explain the symbolic meanings and suggest certain design directions for each one; and sixteen design direction cards (see Figure 9) which contain on the backside eliciting questions to help the designer understand and relate the design directions to the user and the context of the design. In addition, the tool contains a website with product examples and relevant literature, linked to the cards via QR codes.

Workshop and other applications

A 90-minute workshop was prepared to accompany this paper, aiming to communicate the research and disseminate the SIM toolkit. Participants who join the

Table 1. Sixteen design directions to design for happiness with symbolic meaning.

Symbolic meaning	Design direction	Description
Positive relations with others	Support meaningful affiliations	by facilitating the practice of group/ community activities
	Embody characteristics of a group	by using unique characteristics of the groups the user belongs to (e.g. culture, profession)
Personal growth	Support active personal development	by providing a platform for active reflection on lessons learned and future expectations
	Embody personal growth	by focusing on adaptability to accommodate physical and psychological change
	Support acceptance and growth from past experiences	by providing a tangible representation of the passage of time
	Enhance memories	by offering a positive context or activity to reflect on memories of loved ones
Purpose in life	Encourage positive change	by providing an external trigger that suggests beneficial activities or behaviors
	Provide a sense of control	by allowing the user to manage personally significant goals, or to eliminate obstacles in their fulfillment
	Keep track of progress	by providing visual feedback on progress towards personally significant goals
Environmental mastery	Support multi-sensorial communication	by translating messages into a sensorial experience
	Provide a context for meaningful interaction	by making use of the context or limitations as an advantage
Autonomy	Destigmatize	by enhancing the aesthetic qualities of physically enabling products
	Design for mindfulness	by slowing down processes or disclosing mechanisms behind products to promote a mindful living
	Redirect the user's attention	by design an intervention that requires attention from the user to distract from negative situations
Self-acceptance	Allow shared transformation	by provide tools for user input at an aesthetic and/ or functional level
		by providing a tangible platform to wear, share or display personally significant ideas

Source: Casais, Mugge & Desmet, 2015.

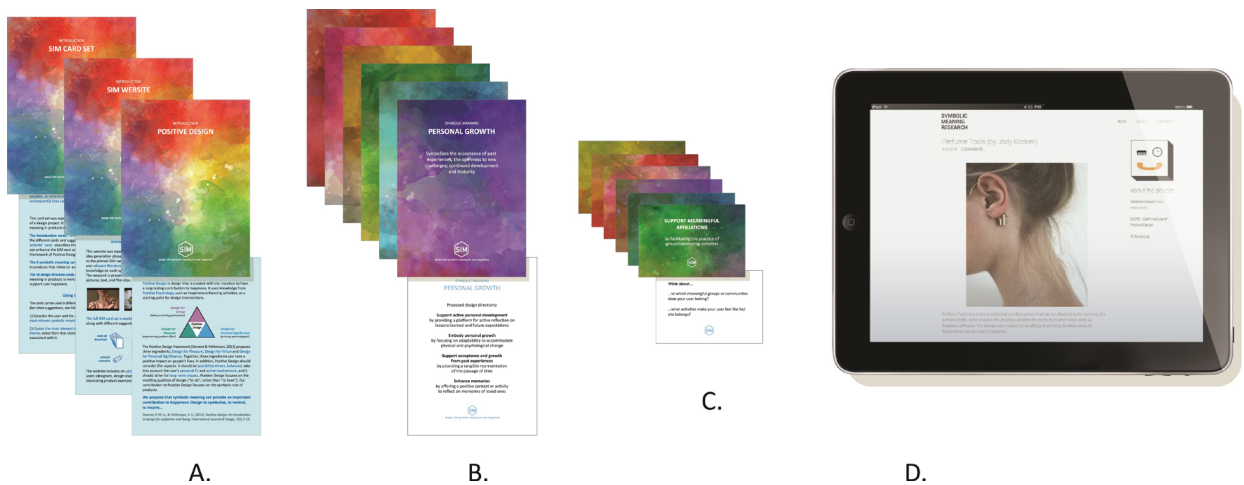


Figure 7. Tool "Designing for happiness with symbolic meaning": a) introductory cards; b) symbolic meaning cards; c) design direction cards; and d) website.

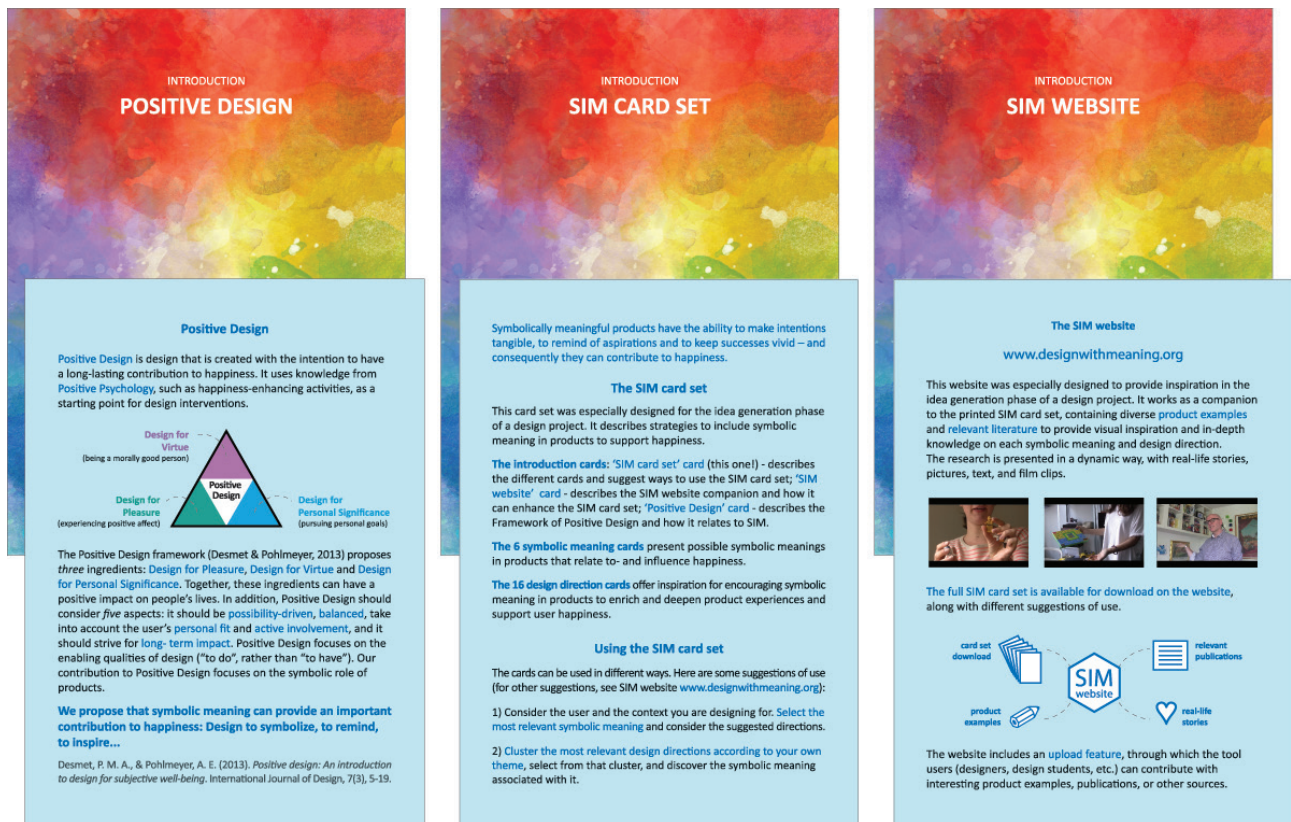


Figure 8. The introductory cards, which provide a summarized explanation about the research background and about the SIM website.

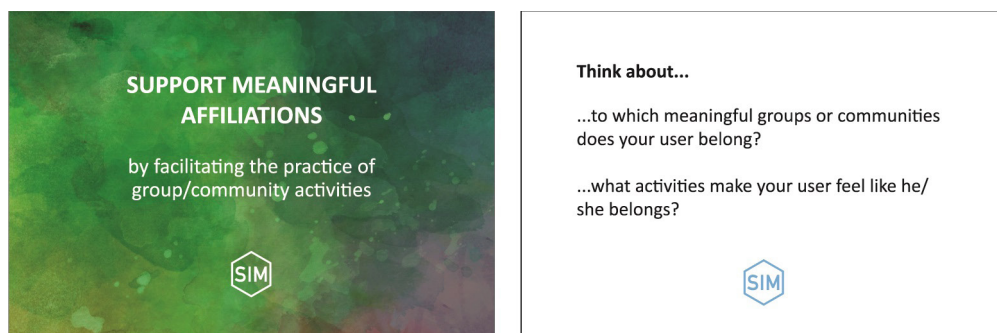


Figure 9. An example of a design direction card (here represented in real size of 5 x 8 cm).

workshop will be able to better understand Positive Design and the role of symbolic meaning in users' happiness. Using a hands-on format, the workshop asks for participants to share and discuss their ideas and to apply the newly acquired knowledge in design cases.

The workshop is structured in four parts: In part 1, the research and the toolkit are introduced, and the participants are asked to choose a symbolic meaning card, to link it to an object they own, and to share the stories. In part 2, groups are formed and allocated a category of object (e.g., clock, lamp) in the form of a picture, and asked to redesign the product to make it more predisposed for symbolic meaning attribution. The groups are instructed to select a symbolic meaning, and choose one of the proposed design directions. After answering the eliciting questions in the design direction card and brainstorming, participants are instructed to browse the product examples in the website for visual inspiration. Finally, the groups present their ideas. In part 3, a discussion is stimulated using discussion cards containing questions, such as "What the pros and cons of the toolkit?", "Are all the symbolic meanings inspiring?" In the last part, part 4, the facilitator wraps up the workshop, summarizing some of the outcomes of the design exercise and of the discussion.

This workshop format was thought to include all elements of the SIM toolkit in a structured and condensed way. In the real-world, the SIM toolkit was formulated to be used in the generative phase of the design process at companies and design agencies; however, it can also be applied for evaluation of concepts or to redesign existing products. The SIM toolkit was developed to inform and inspire designers to develop products open for symbolic meaning attribution, which can have a positive impact on users' happiness. It can be applied in different types of products, like connected IoT (Internet of Things) products; and at different scales, like community projects.

The SIM toolkit can also be used in other contexts, such as design education, to inform future designers about possibility-driven design. For example, it can be introduced in a design classroom in the form of a game or integrated in other interactive teaching techniques. Furthermore, the toolkit can be applied in user research, to understand better the link between happiness and material possessions.

Future research could test the toolkit in the actual practice of design agencies in order to provide valuable feedback on the toolkit, and the product concepts and prototypes resulting from it. Furthermore, more research is needed to explore its relevance for other types of design interventions, such as services or other intangible goods.

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