

If kettles are from Venus and televisions are from Mars, where are cars from?

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Abstract

Understanding the way, in which people relate to the products they interact with, is of great interest to designers. This relationship can be attributed to product personality – the set of characteristics displayed by a particular product. Adequate functionality is now expected, so product personality is derived more from supra-functional characteristics - appearance, feel, brand and symbolic meaning.

A pilot survey was conducted to elicit users views of owned products, as well as influential factors for future purchases. The target users for this survey were homeowners who shared their home environments with others. Three product types were chosen - electric kettles, televisions and cars - ranging from the mundane to the complex.

The survey investigated the common assumptions that domestic electrical products are purchased and used by women, electronic products are purchased by men and used by both sexes, and cars are purchased and used by both sexes. Significant differences were found in the personalities that users ascribed to owned products particularly in implied gender. Kettles were considered either male or female, whilst televisions were male, with cars being considered either male or female – irrespective of the gender of the owner.

Introduction

The title of this paper refers to the popular book “Men are from Mars, women are from Venus” (Gray 1997) which uses this metaphor to posit ideas about how the two sexes interact with each other. Whilst the authors do not take this extraterrestrial proposition literally, it does serve as useful shorthand to highlight gender differences.

People relate to products in individual and interesting ways. Different people relate to the same product in their own particular way, depending upon its characteristics and their own. Material possessions often serve as symbolic expressions of who we are. The clothes we wear, the household items we buy, the car we drive all enable us to express our personality, social standing and wealth (Solomon 1983, Dittmar 1992). The nature of a product can be described as a product personality, and it is this that determines the relationships that users develop with different products.

...men and women want to know that the product is “theirs”. As evidence, many consumers clearly are psychologically uncomfortable utilizing products and services which do not seem made for them... Therefore, if marketers wish to broaden their product’s appeal across gender lines, they must reposition their product with respect to gender (Milner and Fodness 1996).

The gender and product personality traits impact upon perceived functional performance of a product, but it also involves supra-functional factors (appearance, brand, symbolism and sensorial experience). These supra-functional factors will interact with the functional aspects and with the users themselves in a variety of ways, but for this interaction to be satisfying for the user the various aspects have to be complimentary, consistent, coherent and mutually reinforcing, or the outcome will be confused and unfulfilling. Not all the relationships that people have with products that they own will be satisfying – there are many ways in which a product and the user come into contact. Fortunately, there is much to be learnt from user/product relationships that are less than ideal.

The ranges of characteristics that make up product personality include implied product gender. Sparke (1995) has written on the effect that the gender of the consumer has on their perception of products, referring to women being perceived as ‘passive consumers’ and men as the ‘active producers’. Gender ‘boundaries’ have also been explored with respect to purchasing behaviour (Cockburn 1997, Cockburn and Ormrod 1993). Iyer and Debevec (1986, 1986b, 1989) explored the perceived gender of products following the established psychology based sex-role inventory of Bem (1974).

Some products may be obviously gendered in a way that connects with potential users, whilst others may be neutral. Some elaboration of terminology may be helpful here. Products can be female (evoke stereotypes of women or female creatures) or feminine (associated with use by women), or male (evoke male stereotypes) or masculine (associated with use by men). The distinction is a subtle but important one, particularly in the case of cars, the most complex product in our study. But products do not have to be gendered, or exhibit gender characteristics at all, and the degree to which these characteristics are demonstrated can also vary. As with human sexuality, the spectrum between the extremes is broad and diverse.

The survey focused on three mainstream product types – electric kettles, televisions and cars. The first two are usually shared within the household, whilst cars may be shared or used solely by individuals. These three products were also chosen because it is a common assumption that purchasers of kettles tend to be female, the purchasers of televisions tend to be male, whilst cars are purchased and used by both genders. The three product types were also chosen to explore a range of user/product interactions from the simple to the more complex. In terms of the frequency of use, there is little difference, but the nature and complexity of the interaction differs, with peoples’ relationships with their cars being the most complex.

Method

The pilot study was a questionnaire survey conducted with 66 respondents. The aim was to elicit individuals’ views of products that they used regularly, possibly sharing them with others within the home environment. The major of respondents were homeowners, as research has indicated that homeowners tend to invest more heavily in domestic appliances than individuals who rent property (MINTEL 1996).

The questionnaire was divided into four sections. The first section elicited personal data on the participant (age, occupation, sex). This enabled a participant profile to emerge to assist in data analysis.

The next three sections focused on each of the three product types. Each generated data about the respondents existing products and established how they had been purchased. The respondents were asked to list five words they most associated with their product, as well as the best and worst aspects. What were the major purchasing factors in the past and for the future?

Product personality profiling (PPP) can assist in revealing individuals responses to products supra-functional characteristics (McDonagh, Bruseberg and Haslam 2002). PPP is a technique that has been adapted from market

research and psychology. Respondents are requested to imagine a product as a person with a particular personality and lifestyle (age, gender and occupation). The technique helps to reveal social value systems and emotional responses to products. In addition it encourages the respondents to consider products from a fresh perspective. This technique may be employed during most stages of product development, and is particularly useful when researching user needs prior to concept generation, as such data can clarify real needs and enhance the designing process.

Metaphors are frequently used within marketing, particularly in the car industry. The process of exploring metaphorical connections can be enjoyable for the respondent, but the real value lies within deeper analysis. Understanding the meaning behind the respondent's feedback and which attributes are indicators for the respondent, provides information for the product developer, to ensure that the intended product identity (the company perspective) and perceived image (the consumer perspective) are compatible (Karjalainen 2001).

The respondents were requested to imagine the product as a person and to describe the characteristics and lifestyle of that person. Respondents were also requested to consider their product as a creature and to justify their choices. A fast pace of response was encouraged to elicit a more immediate and intuitive response based on gut feelings rather than an overly reflective process. Respondents were also asked to state if the creature was male or female. Whilst the association with active, fast and aggressive creatures maybe be familiar to car designers and car purchasers (jaguar, cougar, puma, panda, beetle, mustang, cobra - are all names of production cars), it is unusual for them to apply the same associations to other products.

Analysis

The group of respondents ranged from 21–60 years of age with 40% of respondents being between 31-40 years of age. The majority of the group were female (59%). House ownership was high at 91%, as homeowners had been specifically targeted. The majority of the group shared their home environment with other people. A diverse range of occupations emerged, from manual/low skill workers (29%), academics (25%), semi-skilled (19%) and skilled/professionals (24%) to executives (3%).

Electric kettles

Most small electrical products, such as kettles, are perceived as mundane and purchasers are not prepared to invest much time in careful selection of such an inexpensive item (McDonagh-Philp and Denton 1999) compared to more expensive brown goods (stereo systems, televisions). Indeed, some respondents in this study remarked that it was unusual to spend so much time reflecting on such a prosaic artefact.

Females had purchased the majority of the kettles. The creatures associated with the kettles by both genders appear to be largely as a result of general shape or colour. Penguins and birds predominated. The female responses were more inventive than those of the males, with a wider range of creatures cited and some connection with the emotive effects of heat and steam (hissing snakes, fiery dragon). The creatures (and by implication the associated products) were described as male or female in equal numbers. This is somewhat surprising, as the kitchen environment and associated activities tend to be considered the female domain. It had been anticipated that the kettles would be perceived as mainly female/feminine. This was not the case amongst our respondents. In listing the first five words that sprang to mind when considering their kettle, male responses tended to include functionally descriptive words (boil, coffee, heat). Female responses included more references to ergonomics or appearances.

In listing the best aspects there was little difference in the male and female responses. Both gender emphasised aspects like style and shape over functional performance and features, whilst cost was relatively insignificant. The

major of females perceived fast boiling as a key feature, whereas male respondents were more concerned with the kettle working reliably. Significantly more female respondents were concerned that the kettle co-ordinated with the kitchen environment than males.

In the worst aspects, both gender concentrated on poor functional performance, with a significant emphasis on the difficulty of refilling the kettle. Females did identify concern with some long-term performance aspects, like de-scaling and cleaning, aspects largely ignored by male respondents.

For previous purchasing decisions, cost had been a major concern for males and less so for females. Females did place more importance on convenience and performance features (boil time, cordless operation) and visual aspects (colour, style) were a major factor for both gender. It emerged that in future, cost would be less significant than performance, although visual aspects would remain important.

The following table (Table 1) highlights a sample of the responses received regarding kettles. The authors had been anticipated that this product would be perceived as female. But this was not the case, as respondents viewed this product as equally male or female. Only one respondent made a reference to her kettle being a friend (participant E). The majority of respondents refer to their kettle being younger than themselves.

Table 1: Sample of profiles for kettles

	Sex	Age	Occupation	Kettle	Perceived Creature	PPP* Sex	PPP Age	PPP Occupation
A	F**	35	Research assistant	Siemens	Bird <i>Precise, Streamline e Effective</i>	M**	25	Doctor
B	M	41	Lecturer	Siemens	Cheetah <i>Sleek, Fast, Efficient</i>	M	35	Designer
C	F	28	Nanny	Morphy Richards	Turtle <i>Slow</i>	F	32	House wife
D	F	34	Art worker	Morphy Richards	Ant <i>No fuss, Does job</i>	M	45	Teacher
E	F	30	Pre-school assistant	Kenwood	Dog <i>Reliable, Loyal</i>	M	20	Model
F	F	41	Secretary	Tefal	Dog <i>Best friend</i>	F	35	House wife
G	F	37	House wife	Morphy Richards	Penguin <i>Body shape</i>	F	25	Masseur
H	M	50	Academic	Russell Hobbs	Mole <i>Shape</i>	M	20	Driver
I	M	29	Adminstrator	Tefal	Penguin <i>Shape</i>	F	25	Secretary
J	M	35	Technical instructor	Morphy Richards	Tiger <i>Potential to hurt</i>	M	30	Shop worker
K	M	50	Academic	Russell Hobbs	Armadillo <i>Shape</i>	M	17	Accountant
L	M	35	Director	Morphy Richards	Sea <i>ISlim, Smooth</i>	M	25	Fire fighter
M	M	37	Farm manager	Kenwood	Turtle	F	25	Engineer

* PPP = product personality profile (perceived profile of the product if it were a person)

** F = female M = male

Respondents perceived the kettles as docile, reliable, trustworthy creatures capable of doing a job with little fuss. Functional performance was important, particularly to meet minimum expectations – but other than co-ordination with the kitchen environment, no exceptional aesthetic considerations were anticipated. The only exception would be the Siemens (Porsche) kettle, which is distinctive (and significantly more expensive) than the others. That product also had the most interesting PPP result (refer to respondent A and B in Table 1). Quite why most respondents thought the kettle was younger than them is a mystery, but one worthy of further investigation. Maybe the lesson for kettle designers in a broad and largely undifferentiated product market is that commercial advantage will lie in distinctiveness and differentiation, in functional and/or supra-functional terms. The first cordless kettles achieved differentiation by functionality, but now the mainstream has caught up.

Televisions

In the survey 46% of the televisions had been purchased by males with 20% purchased by females only, 20% as joint purchases, and 14% received as gifts. When listing the first five words that sprang to mind in association with their television, the responses generally referred to the bulk and dominating presence of the television. Female responses were significantly coloured by negative emotional terms (e.g. boring, noisy and ugly), whilst male responses were more concerned with the utility of the product and the significance of the viewing experience.

For best aspects of their television, responses from both genders concentrated on performance and features, with picture size and sound quality being perceived as important. This contrasts with the size of the television enclosure being perceived negatively as bulky. The worst aspects identified also included poor reception, inadequate technology and the actual quality of the television programmes available. Female respondents referred to the anti-social aspects of excessive television use, but this was not a concern shared by the males.

For existing purchases, cost and features available had been the major determinants. For future purchases the same applies but with females placing slightly higher importance on screen size and operating features. For males, reliability and brand were also considered important.

For the male respondents, the most popular choice of associated creature was the bear, the justification being concerned with size, colour and solid appearance. A number of male respondents produced idiosyncratic responses to this question, with references to Cyclops, octopus and peacock. Such responses probably highlight the difficulty experienced by respondents in carrying out visualisations for products of this type. The majority of televisions are, after all, large silver-grey/black plastic boxes.

Some female respondents chose the bear as well, but associated it with comfort. The most popular choice of creatures for female respondents were dogs and panthers, reasons given include reliability and sleek appearance. There were a large number of references by female respondents to large and slow creatures (rhinoceros and elephants). These references were not particularly favourable and may be a reflection of the current proliferation of bulky wide-screen cathode ray tube televisions, which now occupy a significant amount of space within the home environment. The vast majority of respondents (88%) perceived their television as male creatures. In PPP questions, the equivalent person for the television was mainly perceived as male and frequently as a white-collar worker (bank manager or business man)(refer to Table 2).

Table 2: Sample of profiles for televisions

	Sex	Age	Occupation	Television	Perceived Creature	PPP* Sex	PPP Age	PPP Occupation
A	F**	34	Art worker	Philips	Shark <i>Elegant, Sleek, Efficient</i>	M**	25	Graphic designer
B	F	30	Pre-school assistant	Panasonic	Dog	M	30	Banker
C	F	50	Associate Dean	Philips	Panther	M	25	Stock broker
D	F	41	Secretary	Panasonic	Whale <i>Big</i>	M	21	Professional
E	F	35	Research assistant	Matsui	Elephant <i>Slow, Dull, Reliable</i>	M	55	Bank manager
F	F	33	Assistant supervisor	Sony	Dog <i>Large, Black</i>	M	45	Sales person
G	M	38	Account manager	Grundig	Bear <i>Sturdy</i>	M	30	Bank manager
H	M	44	Academic	Bush	Fruit bat	M	35	Businessman
I	M	50	Academic	Hitachi	Dog <i>Sits in corner</i>	M	30	Doctor
J	M	57	Computer engineer	Sony	Elephant	M	45	Retired
K	M	35	Technical instructor	Philips	Bear <i>Big</i>	M	25	Chef
L	M	29	Administrator	Sony	Peacock <i>Extravagant</i>	M	30	Businessman

* PPP = product personality profile (perceived profile of the product if it were a person)

** F = female M = male

The overwhelming impression of the respondents' choices here is one of solid presence and reliable (but dull) competence. The predominance of large animals as creatures (bears, whales) and middle-aged economic professionals as PPPs (bank managers, businessmen) is much at odds with the benefits that individuals gain from television ownership and use. The United Kingdom National Statistics estimated the average female in the UK watches 161 minutes of television, video and DVD per day, with males watching 175 minutes, with slight regional variations (National Statistics 2000), with access to at least five channels and up to 100 channels on satellite or cable. It is also the vehicle for viewing films at home on videocassettes and DVD. For most of us, it is our major source of entertainment and our window on the world.

As a consumer purchase the television is in the top five products by cost, commonly the second or third most expensive. In most of our respondents' minds, the overwhelming perception of televisions is one of oppressive size, sometimes ameliorated by reliability and competence. The current state of technology is that large widescreen televisions use cathode ray tubes and are extremely bulky objects. This will change as more compact LCD and plasma screens become cheaper and more available. This will be the opportunity for television designers and manufacturers. We can only speculate on the positive connections between our respondents association of televisions with males and male creatures – is this to do with technological awareness or just being large and seated in the way?

Cars

In many ways this aspect of the survey raised more questions than provided answers. Most of the respondents referred to their own car, rather shared vehicles.

In terms of purchase decisions about cars, it appeared that males make their own decisions about cars for themselves whilst females are more influenced by male advisors or had been involved in joint decisions. Males

made half of the purchase decisions, even though this survey population had a 60:40 female bias. The other purchase decisions broke down into 30% female decisions, 11% joint decision and a further 9% as gifts.

Comfort and reliability were the most frequent associations that respondents had with their cars. Speed was the most popular association for females, but did not have the same significance for males. Responses were generally diverse, with no emerging dominant associations coming to the fore. Questions about the best aspects of existing cars elicited a diverse range of responses, from ergonomic issues (comfort, ease of use) to appearance (colour, design) and reliability. The worst aspects for both gender concentrated on economy, cost and size. Females also voiced concerns about visibility from inside the car.

Cost and functionality had been the two main purchasing determinants for purchasing for existing cars. One of the most important factors for future purchases for both females and males is cost. Safety and reliability feature highly as well. Females placed slightly more importance on the value of features for future purchases.

In choices of associated creatures, the cat and the bear were the most popular responses from the males. Cats were popular because the cars were considered to purr or were agile, whilst bears were perceived to exude appropriately solid and chunky characteristics. Other popular creature choices were tiger and rhinoceros, presumably as more extreme manifestations of the same characteristics. Female responses were dominated by references to dogs and horses, associated with reliability and working hard. Other references were made to the panther (sleekness) and cheetah (sexy feel). Males predominantly viewed their creature (car) as male (67%), whereas females viewed their creature (car) as either male or female in equal proportions.

Table 3 provides samples of participant profiles along with their perceptions of creatures and people. Both creature and PPP responses become insightful when related to the profile of the respondent. The closer the match, the more likely the positive emotional bond between the respondent and the vehicle. The more interesting sample group is that from respondents whose own profile is different to the one they offered for their car, with differences in age, occupation and gender.

Table 3: Sample of profiles for cars

	Sex	Age	Occupation	Car	Perceived Creature	PPP* Sex	PPP Age	PPP Occupation
A	F**	44	Administrator	Vauxhall Astra	Dolphin <i>Powerful Friendly</i>	F	40	Middle management
B	F	25	Administrator	Peugeot 206	Panther <i>Sleek</i>	F	20	Secretary
C	F	52	Receptionist	Peugeot 106	Cat <i>Purrs</i>	F	40	Secretary
D	F	52	Office manager	Vauxhall Corsa	Labrador <i>Reliable</i>	F	48	Office worker
E	F	40	Psychotherapist	Vauxhall Corsa	Pug dog <i>Small, Ugly</i>	M**	35	Bank clerk
F	F	33	Assistant Supervisor	Toyota Previa	Elephant <i>Very big</i>	M	35	Taxi Driver
G	F	33	Lecturer	Vauxhall Vectra	Bull dog	M	56	Dentist
H	M	29	Administrator	Fiat Punto	Ant <i>Small Powerful</i>	F	18	Beautician
I	M	35	Technical Instructor	Citroen ZX	Bear	F	22	Student
J	M	57	Computer Engineer	Peugeot 206	Cat	F	18	Typist
K	M	42	Tyre Fitter	Landrover	Tiger	M	40	Director
L	M	41	Lecturer	Seat	Stingray <i>Snout</i>	M	35	Design Professor

* PPP = product personality profile (perceived profile of the product if it were a person)

** F = female M = male

The PPP creature associations divided into two main groups – one concerned with speed, movement and/or agility (cats, dolphin, tigers) and one concerned with solidity, safety and reliability (dog, bear, elephant). A third but less popular connection was with no-nonsense power and aggression (rhinoceros). Most respondents who had a positive relationship with their cars viewed their PPP persons as younger than them, sometimes much younger and not necessarily of the same gender. In that respect, we can speculate that males can be seen using cars that are male, female, neutral or masculine, but not feminine, whilst females can exploit all five possibilities – male, masculine, neutral, female and feminine. It would be presumptuous to assume this from our pilot study, but we do consider this worthy of a further investigation, targeting car use. We also suspect that there are significantly deeper levels of subtlety in response about cars that our survey failed to elicit, and that a higher level of detail about responses, choices and specifications is needed to clarify this. The current range of VW Golf vehicles goes from lowly oil burners to high powered all wheel drive super-cars, so knowing that someone drives a VW Golf is knowing only part of an extremely complex story.

Reflection on survey methodology

The interpretation of the responses from the PPP task is not an exact science as it relies upon subjective data and interpretation of feedback – all of which is qualitative and culturally based. The approach tends not to produce statistically secured data. However, such data is often perceived more designer-friendly than statistical data. For the PPP technique to elicit useful information, the respondent needs to imagine the product is a person, with a personality and particular lifestyle. There is a subtle distinction between imagining the product as a person, and imagining the person who would typically use that product. With unsupervised questionnaire surveys this misinterpretation can easily occur. Out of a sample of 66 questionnaires in this survey, 21 gave valid feedback on the PPP task in relation to cars, with 29 being discounted and a further 15 respondents failing to provide any response at all. One way to overcome this misinterpretation would be to administer the questionnaire in person and provide a prior briefing to the respondent. Though this would be time consuming for the researcher, it may reduce misunderstandings and increase the number of useful responses. It would probably have the consequence of reducing the number of survey respondents. With individual users or a small group, an intimate dialogue, ideally with a designer involved, can prove extremely beneficial but care would need to be taken to ensure that the smaller number of participants is representative of the wider population.

Conclusions

This survey involved a number of approaches. It is evident that the metaphorical approach to PPP would have benefited from a higher degree of individual supervision. Such exercises need to be administered and supervised in a consistent way to aid analysis. The authors recommend that for large group studies it would be more effective to provide a range of creature and personality/lifestyle profile choices to assist the respondent and simplify the analysis for the designer. It is also advisable to follow-up each completed questionnaire by a discussion on a one-to-one basis with respondents. This would provide the opportunity for the designer to explore the real meaning of each response. Relying on assumptions can prove costly for product development. Designers should not rely simply on their own interpretation, they need to clarify and validate their analysis through direct contact with consumers.

Our survey also indicated that for some products, supra-functional aspects that may not be of particular concern for the user. Designers and design researchers cannot assume that all users develop emotional bonds with their products especially if those products are perceived as mundane. Having said that, is it not our role as designers to create delight factors in even the most mundane products?

Returning to the title of this paper, electric kettles may be from Mars and Venus, but nobody is really concerned about their exact origin. It is only Martian kettles that evoke any strong emotional attachments. Televisions are clearly from Mars, but more elegant Venusian ones would be more popular if we could afford them. Cars are altogether more complex. The Venusians (women) have most options, and although the Martians (men) have slightly fewer options, they do seem to exercise more influence on the choosing and purchasing process. The intimate relationship between people and their cars, the second most expensive domestic purchase for most of us (after the home itself) will continue to be a source of fascination and cosmic significance. Further exploration and analysis of the characteristics of product personality as embodied in cars will engage this enquiry in the next stage.

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