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Proposal Essay

EMOTIONAL DESIGN.

PERSONALISATION.

PSYCHOLOGY OF CHOICE.

Introduction

Sometimes the simplest moments can trigger a whole chain of thoughts about complex processes. My personal experience began at the airport, where, while waiting to board a flight, I noticed a shelf with books. Among the many flashy covers, several white ones stood out - minimalist, calm, attractive in their silence (Fig. 1). I approached, picked up one of them and felt how the softness of the cover and the lightness of the format literally "invited" me to take it with me on the road. This decision was instant and emotional: I chose the book not because I had studied its contents for a long time, but because visual and tactile signals worked faster than logic.

This episode became the starting point for my research. I wondered: how often are our decisions guided not by rational calculations, but by emotions? How exactly do visual language, form, and personalisation influence our behaviour as users and buyers? What mechanisms does design trigger so that we feel products as "ours"? In this essay, I explore three interrelated concepts: emotional design, personalisation in design, and the psychology of choice. I will analyse how they work in theory and practice, using both personal examples and cases from the professional environment.

Emotional Design

Why do some objects immediately evoke our affection, while others go unnoticed? Why do we sometimes feel more attached to an old chair or a book with a tattered cover than to new, technological devices? Can a product – a soulless thing – have character, be “friendly” or “cold”? These questions become especially relevant when we talk about emotions in design.

Emotions shape our world perception. As Donald Norman emphasises, "we scientists now understand how important emotion is to everyday life, how valuable" (Norman, 2004, p. 8). He explains that without pleasure and joy, without fear and anger, our lives would be

incomplete. In design, emotions give products not only functionality but also meaning. Emotions help create deep attachments, making the experience of interacting with things memorable.

The term “emotional design” was coined by Donald Norman in 2004 in his book *Emotional Design: Why We Love (and Hate) Everyday Things*. Norman was the first to systematically explain how emotions become part of the user experience and why attractive products perform better.

Emotions can be seen as the result of a complex interaction between the body and mind. Gerald Cupchik, in the book *Design and Emotion*, emphasises that emotions act as “a sentient boundary between stimulation from the external physical or social worlds and the internal bodily world” (Cupchik, 2004, p. 3). They give events and objects personal meaning. As Cupchik (2004) further notes, we don’t just respond to the shape and texture of things — we understand them through the lens of personal stories and memories.

This is especially evident in design. We often intuitively ascribe character traits to products: “This car looks aggressive,” “this cup feels cosy.” As Govers and colleagues point out, designers can intentionally create “personalities” in products by giving them traits such as “friendly” or “masculine” character (Govers et al., 2004).

To explain how emotions work in design, Norman proposed a model of three levels of perception: visceral, behavioural, and reflective (Norman, 2004).

The visceral level is the immediate visceral response to shape, colour, and texture. An object is either attractive at first glance or repulsive. This level was at work at the airport, when my attention was drawn to the minimalist white covers amid the visual chaos of the book display. They stood out for their simplicity, clarity, and calm, while other covers shouted about themselves with bright colours and complex compositions (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Personal photograph of a minimalistic book display at the airport, showing Penguin Archive covers.

The behavioural level is related to the functionality and usability of the product. When I picked up the book, I felt the softness of the soft-touch coating, its convenient size and light weight - all this made the interaction pleasant. The behavioural level of design is the pleasure of use, the moment when the product meets or even exceeds expectations.

The reflective level refers to long-term associations, the meaning that the user attaches to the object. The book I spontaneously bought became for me not just a text to read on the flight - it remained in my memory as a symbol of an emotional state, a reminder of a short moment of solitude and calm in the hustle and bustle of travel.

Emotions can be a powerful driver of choice, but also a source of risk for brands. An example of the negative consequences of neglecting the emotional connection is the case of Tropicana.

In 2009, the brand redesigned the packaging of orange juice, removing the familiar image of an orange with a straw and replacing it with an abstract image of a glass of juice (Fig. 2). Although the new design was “clean” and modern, it destroyed the established emotional anchor for consumers. Sales dropped by 20% in a few weeks, and the company was forced to revert to the previous design (The Branding Journal, 2015). This case clearly shows that changing the visual code without considering users’ emotions can lead to serious losses.



Fig. 2. Comparison of old and new Tropicana packaging designs (The Branding Journal, 2015).

An example of the effective use of emotional design is The Social Swipe social campaign, created by the agency Jung von Matt in Germany for the charity MISEREOR. The goal of the campaign was simple and powerful: to show people that their donation can change someone’s life – and do so in just a few clicks (D&AD, 2015; World Summit Award, 2015). The world’s first interactive billboards promoting the use of credit cards were installed in airports. By

swiping their credit card through a special slot on the poster, a person “cut” the bread, symbolising buying food for a hungry person, or “broke” the bonds of a prisoner, thereby helping him to free himself (Figure 3).



Fig. 3 Visuals from The Social Swipe campaign: bread slicing and tied hands cutting (D&AD, 2015).

This small act caused an immediate emotional response. People did not just donate — they physically felt their contribution, saw its result in real time. The campaign enhanced the feeling of personal effectiveness and involvement: the action was simple, instantaneous and visual.

Emotional design in this case worked on all levels: visceral (an effective change of image), behavioural (pleasure from a simple and understandable action) and reflexive (pride in participating in an important mission). The campaign achieved its goal — increased involvement and increased the number of donations precisely due to the competent use of emotional involvement (D&AD, 2015).

So, emotional design is not just about the aesthetic pleasure. It’s an activation: A way to create a profound emotional connection between the user and the product, the person and the idea. When a designer makes a conscious effort to play on how a user

feels, they end up with not just beautiful objects or products, but lasting, meaningful stories which will stay with someone for a very long time.

Emotions in design are receiving increasing attention in this worldwide context of growing technology and automation. In the era of artificial intelligence, when many processes are optimised by machines, the unique task of a designer remains the creation of a human experience: an experience saturated with feelings, meaning and individuality. The emotional response caused by a product becomes a competitive advantage, since it is emotions that form memory and long-term attachment (Norman, 2004).

Personalisation

But how do we evoke this emotional response? One way is through personalisation.

Personalisation in design is about making a product or message feel personal to us (Kontra Agency, 2023). It's not just about adapting interfaces to user preferences or customising content. It's a strategy to enhance emotional connection through personalised attention. As Kontra Agency's research emphasises, "people crave experiences that feel uniquely crafted for them" (Kontra Agency, 2023). In an era of information overload, the ability to make a product "their own" is becoming one of the most important competitive advantages.

From a neuroscience perspective, being addressed personally or recognising one's name activates areas of the brain associated with self-perception and empathy, particularly the medial prefrontal cortex (Lieberman, 2007). When a person sees their name or is addressed directly, their attention level sharpens, trust increases, and engagement deepens. As Susan Weinschenk points out, "A person's unconscious constantly scans the environment. This

includes their own name”, so the person responds instantly without even realising it (Weinschenk, 2011, p 97).

One of the most successful examples of a personalised approach was Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke" campaign, launched in Australia in 2011. Instead of the traditional logo, popular, rare, and emotionally significant names began to appear on bottles (Figure 4). This turned buying the drink into a personal ritual: people sought out bottles with the names of friends, loved ones, or their own. According to *Marketing Week*, 51% of consumers reported feeling a stronger emotional connection with the brand after the campaign (Apte, 2020).



Fig. 4. Coca-Cola Share a Coke personalised bottle (The Coca-Cola Company Media Centre, 2025).

I have personally experienced the power of this approach twice in my life. As a student in Kharkiv, I stood in line for hours to have my name printed on a can of Coca-Cola at a special machine installed in a park. The joy and excitement turned the can into a memorable symbol that I still keep in my parents' house. Recently, I was surprised that Coca-Cola revived its campaign. When I was in Dublin, I saw a bottle with my husband's name on it – a rare Slavic

name for a European country – and although I didn’t need the drink, I bought it, feeling the warmth and joy of this small personal story (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Personal photograph of a Coca-Cola bottle with husband’s name.

Personalisation also occurs through the use of direct address. A classic example is the Soviet propaganda poster by Dmitry Moor, “Have you volunteered?” (1918) (Figure 6). Or the American equivalent, I want YOU for the U.S. Army (Figure 7). Direct appeal to the viewer destroys distance, makes the message a personal challenge, activating emotions of responsibility, duty, or guilt. Even a century later, such images evoke a strong emotional response: I feel that they are addressing me specifically.



Fig. 6. Soviet propaganda poster "Have You Enrolled as a Volunteer?" by Dmitry Moor (Red Avantgarde, 1918).

Fig. 7. U.S. Army recruitment poster "I Want YOU for U.S. Army" (Military History Now, 2016).

Modern brands have actively adopted this technique, reinterpreting it in a positive way.

Campaigns such as Adidas' "Impossible is Nothing" and Nike's "Find Your Greatness" use the direct appeal of "you" to create the illusion of a personal connection (Strava Partners, 2023) (Figure 8). Such slogans with a personal appeal become part of the emotional language of brands, reinforcing a sense of ownership.

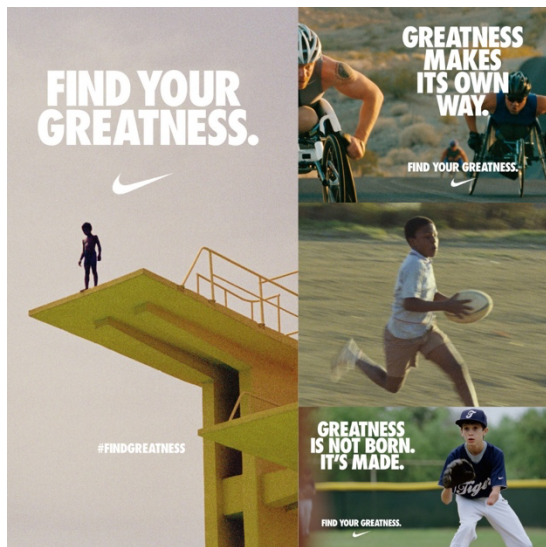


Fig. 8. Example of modern personalised branding campaigns by Nike (Strava Partners, 2023).

Personal appeal in design taps into the same core emotional mechanisms as product personalisation: it enhances feelings of importance, attention, and belonging. When packaging, interfaces, or advertising messages “speak” to us directly, we feel seen, understood, and valued (Weinschenk, 2011).

Personalisation has gone far beyond the physical product. In the digital space, it has become the standard for quality user experience.

For example, the Spotify platform creates a personalised *Spotify Wrapped* report for each user every year, visualising their musical preferences over the year (Spotify Design, 2022). Users willingly share these results on social media, perceiving them as a reflection of their identity (Figure 9).

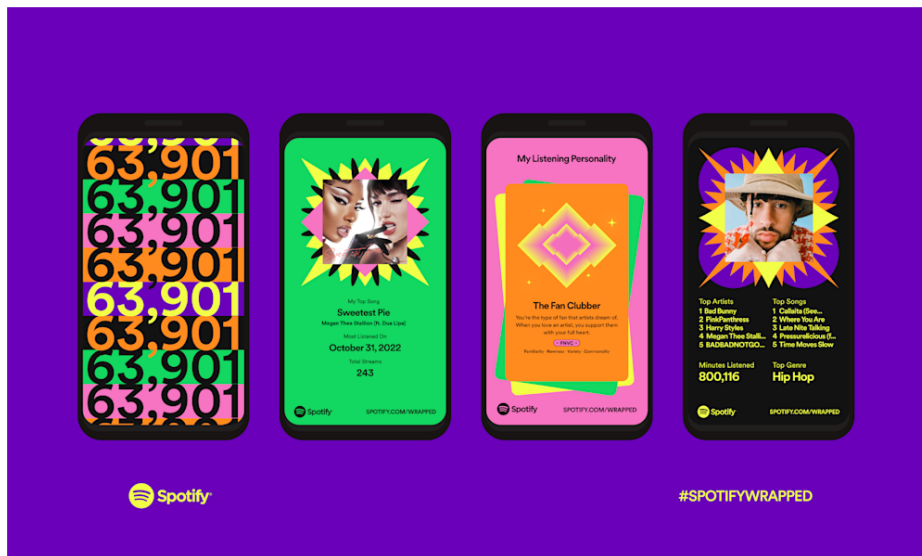


Fig. 9. Spotify Wrapped 2022 personalised user experience visualisation (Spotify Design, 2022).

At the same time, Netflix uses personalisation even more subtly: the same movie cover can be different for different users depending on their previous viewing (Netflix Technology Blog, 2017) (Figure 10).

Profile Type	Score Image A	Score Image B
Comedy	5.7	6.3
Romance	7.2	6.5



Image A



Image B

Fig. 10 Example of contextual image selection based on the type of profile: comedy profiles receive images with Robin Williams, while romance profiles receive images of a kissing couple (Netflix Technology Blog, 2017).

Ascend2 research confirms that 64% of marketers consider personalisation the most effective strategy for improving customer experience (Ascend2, 2022). Personalisation not only increases conversion but also strengthens the emotional connection between the brand and the audience.

I view personalisation as an act of recognition: the brand does not simply offer a product; it recognises my uniqueness. This evokes a feeling of respect and gratitude, strengthening loyalty. But it is important to remember that personalisation must be sincere and unobtrusive. Excessive personalisation or excessive data collection can cause the opposite reaction - a feeling of control and manipulation. As Kontra Agency's analytics emphasises, successful personalisation is built on a balance between individualisation and respect for user autonomy (Kontra Agency, 2023).

Therefore, personalisation in design is not just a marketing tool. It is a tool for building profound emotional connections between a brand and an individual. It is turning cold communication into a warm, lived experience. It supports and promotes emotional connections through visual and tactile design, and it affects our actions directly.

But if emotion and personalisation make a product desirable, how exactly do we make purchasing decisions? Are we rational in our choices, or are emotions driving them without even realising it?

Psychology of Choice

Once a product has captured our attention and evoked an emotional response, the next step is the choice process. This is where the third key area comes into play: the psychology of choice. People light up complex cognitive and emotional pathways every time they make a decision, not all of which are strictly rational, logical processes. Our preferences are shaped by not just physically observing a product but also feeling (either emotionally or physically) the product, as well as any internal preferences or subconscious associations we have.

One of the most well-known phenomena in this field is the paradox of choice, extensively chronicled by Barry Schwartz in his book *The Paradox of Choice* (Schwartz, 2004). Schwartz contends that when options multiply, it does not get us closer to an optimal choice, but instead evokes anxiety, a sense of overload, and even paralysis of analysis. The more choices we have, the harder it is to make a choice, and the more likely we are to regret that choice.

This theory is consistent with an experiment by Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper (Iyengar, 2011). In the experiment, subjects were required to taste jam in a condition with six or twenty-four choices (Fig. 11). Those with fewer options were significantly more likely to make a purchase and reported greater satisfaction with their choice. These results suggest that limiting choice can enhance, rather than diminish, a user's sense of security.



Fig. 11. Illustration of the jam experiment showing choice overload (based on Iyengar, 2010).

Susan Weinschenk points out that most of our decisions are made automatically, without deep conscious analysis. Our brains look for “shortcuts”—emotional cues, visual accents, simplicity—anything that eases the cognitive load (Weinschenk, 2011). This makes choice design especially important: well-thought-out design can not only attract attention but also support the decision-making process.

I experienced this mechanism myself, as I mentioned earlier. Passing a bookstore at the airport, my attention was drawn to a collection of white books from the Penguin Archive. Their minimalist covers stood out against the colourful alternatives, and their physical characteristics—lightweight, convenient format—perfectly matched my current need (Figure 12). The choice was immediate and emotionally pleasing, highlighting the power of minimalist design in simplifying cognitive processing.



Fig. 12. Personal photograph of purchasing a Penguin Archive book at the airport.

My experience confirms the findings of research on choice perception. As Townsend and Kahn (2014) note, logical organisation and visual unification of the assortment allow users to perceive a multitude of options as less overwhelming, facilitating the decision-making process. The minimalist design of the Penguin Archive collection, with a unified stylistic code and clean visual accents, allowed me to perceive the books as a compact, coherent set, rather than a chaotic mass of alternatives. The principles of choice simplification are also actively used in commercial design. For example, Apple emphasises the limitation of the assortment and minimalist visual design of its products. All this minimises the cognitive load and helps the user make decisions quickly and confidently (Norman, 2004). Thus, competent design of interfaces, products and visual communication helps users overcome the

complexity of choice. It directs attention to the main thing, simplifies the decision-making process and makes the interaction more emotionally comfortable.

The psychology of choice shows that the emotional appeal of a product and the simplification of the choice structure work in tandem. Donald Norman emphasises that positive emotions that arise at the early stages of interaction improve cognitive processes, accelerating decision-making and making the consequences of the choice more pleasant (Norman, 2004). When a design evokes joy, admiration or a sense of satisfaction, the likelihood of a successful choice increases.

As a result, an analysis of the psychology of choice shows that most of our decisions are formed under the influence of emotions, intuitive reactions and perception of the environment. Rational analysis often comes into play after an emotional decision has been made, acting rather as a justification for the choice made. In design, this opens up opportunities and responsibilities: the right design of an interface or product can subtly direct the user to action, without suppressing their freedom, but supporting natural cognitive processes.

Conclusion

Emotional design, personalisation, and choice psychology are three fields of study that each make a unique contribution to understanding modern user experience. Although they are closely related, the differences between them are clear.

Emotional design focuses on initial reactions: it examines how shape, colour, texture, and interaction evoke immediate feelings and shape first impressions of a product (Norman, 2004). Personalisation in design appeals to the user's personality, creating the feeling that the product or service was designed specifically for them (Kontra Agency, 2023). Choice

psychology, in turn, analyses the cognitive processes that determine how users make decisions, especially in the face of an abundance of alternatives (Schwartz, 2004; Iyengar, 2010).

Despite these differences, all three fields do not exist in isolation. An emotional response can be the first step to engagement. Personalisation enhances this interaction, turning a standard interaction into a personal story, and a competent choice architecture supports the user, reducing overload and guiding the decision-making process. Together, they form a multi-layered system of influence in which each element reinforces the others.

When these elements are combined, a powerful mechanism for creating a user experience emerges that not only attracts attention, but also holds it, maintains confidence in the choice and forms a long-term emotional attachment. Emotions make a product memorable, personalisation makes sense, and a supporting choice structure makes it comfortable. This knowledge is actively used in both commercial design and social initiatives, confirming the importance of an integrated approach.

This interaction is especially acute in the era of digitalisation and automation, when the possibilities for manipulating user attention are almost limitless. Understanding cognitive and emotional reactions gives designers access to the deep processes of human behaviour, which poses serious ethical challenges. Where does user support end and the imperceptible management of their decisions begin?

These reflections lead me to a research question that I plan to develop in future research: Where is the ethical line between emotional engagement and manipulation of user decisions in the design of digital and physical products?

List of Figures

Fig. 1. Personal photograph of a minimalistic book display at the airport, showing Penguin Archive covers.

Fig. 2. Comparison of old and new Tropicana packaging designs (The Branding Journal, 2015).

Fig. 3. Interactive billboard from The Social Swipe campaign by MISEREOR (D&AD, 2015).

Fig. 4. Coca-Cola Share a Coke personalised bottle (The Coca-Cola Company Media Centre, 2025).

Fig. 5. Personal photograph of a Coca-Cola bottle with husband's name.

Fig. 6. Soviet propaganda poster "Have You Enrolled as a Volunteer?" by Dmitry Moor (Red Avantgarde, 1918).

Fig. 7. U.S. Army recruitment poster "I Want YOU for U.S. Army" (Military History Now, 2016).

Fig. 8. Example of modern personalised branding campaigns by Nike (Strava Partners, 2023).

Fig. 9. Spotify Wrapped 2022 personalised user experience visualisation (Spotify Design, 2022).

Fig. 10 Example of contextual image selection based on the type of profile: comedy profiles receive images with Robin Williams, while romance profiles receive images of a kissing couple (Netflix Technology Blog, 2017).

Fig. 11. Illustration of the jam experiment showing choice overload (based on Iyengar, 2010).

Fig. 12. Personal photograph of purchasing a Penguin Archive book at the airport.

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