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Design for Human Flourishing: Perceptual Mapping of Different Design Approaches towards Happiness and Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to categorize and organize some of the existing approaches to happiness and well-being in design, by means of a perceptual map of definitions, approaches and tools found in recent literature, in order to guide possible applications towards social innovation and positive behavioral change. By the use of conceptual mapping, we aim to create an initial frame of reference which could lead towards a better discussion of the impact of design in the quality of life of users of products and services, and possibly guide design choices in projects that wish to consider both objective and subjective well-being of the user as project parameters. From this perspective, it may be possible to develop products and services which can impact directly on interpersonal relationships and on values systems, in positive and more sustainable ways.

Key Words: Positive Design, Well-being, Social Innovation, Sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years the interest in discussing happiness and well-being has raised considerably, with a significant increase in the amount of publications with these terms in their titles or as one of their main topics. While this has been taking place in a variety of areas, the terms have been often mentioned in Design, but many times with different or interchangeable meanings, ranging from life satisfaction to hedonistic joy, with concepts that originate from a wide variety of sources, from cognitive psychology to the social sciences. The purpose of this paper is to propose an initial organizational scheme of different approaches to happiness and well-being in design, as a starting point for a deeper discussion on possible design choices in projects that aim at contributing towards the users positive emotions, as well as whether designers should intentionally take these dimensions into consideration when designing products and services. In order to achieve that, six different understandings of happiness or well-being will be examined in part 2, so that relevant categories can be defined for the creation and analysis of a perceptual map in part 3.

2. RECENT USES OF THE TERMS “HAPPINESS” AND “WELL BEING” IN DESIGN LITERATURE

The terms happiness and well-being are terms associated with a variety of meanings, with basic concepts which come from different areas, such as the Arts, Economics, Literature, Philosophy, Psychology, and Social Science, as well as changing cultural definitions, constantly being reinterpreted by people in their daily lives. Some of the authors and designers who have recently discussed such concepts from a design perspective base their ideas in sometimes very different foundations. For this reason a topological organization of a few concepts may be of great use as a starting point to clarify the discussion.

2.1. Donald Norman – Emotional Design

In his book “Emotional Design”, Donald Norman approaches emotions from the point of view of the usability field, borrowing concepts from cognitive psychology and cognitive science, defining emotion as the ‘*conscious experience of affect, complete with attribution of its cause and identification of its object*’ (NORMAN, 2004). He describes positive emotions – such as happiness, fun, pleasure, joy and excitement – as ‘critical to learning, curiosity, and creative thought’, and makes an argument for a connection between the aesthetics in product design and people feeling good. Norman also describes emotions as the result of processes in three levels of the brain: the *visceral level*, responsible for quick judgements; the *behavioral level*, the level of most human behavior; and the *reflective level*, where conscious thought and reflection take place. In a simplified scheme, the three levels are related to three forms of design, concerned with different aspects of a product:

- *Visceral design*, concerned with physical features, such as look, feel and sound;
- *Behavioral design*, relates to the pleasure and effectiveness of use, being concerned with function, understandability, usability, and physical feel;
- *Reflective design*, involving self-image, personal satisfaction, memories, and also the meaning of products.

All three aspects appeal to different kinds of positive emotions which could be associated with some concept of happiness, well-being or satisfaction.

2.2. Ezio Manzini – Sustainable Design

In a series of lectures on Sustainable Design in 2007, Ezio Manzini described well-being as a social construct, and situates the western idea of well-being as originated in the Industrial Revolution; currently as a dynamic set of articulated visions, all sharing one common characteristic, which is the association of the idea of well-being to an ever greater availability of products and services ((MANZINI, 2008). Later, in his book “Design when Everybody Designs”, Manzini describes the modern idea of well-being as ‘*liberation from the weight of everyday activities, where your own skills and capabilities are replaced by a growing series of products and services to be purchased on the market and received from the state*’ (MANZINI, 2015).

Manzini derives his understanding of well-being from a historical approach, and seems to be concerned with this construct within a socioeconomic perspective.

2.3. Stefan Sagmeister – Happiness by design

In his 2004 TED Talk, Austrian graphic Designer Stefan Sagmeister describes happiness in a few different ways: the first from a consumer's point of view (being happy while experiencing design), and describes a memory of his youth, riding a motorcycle listening to music on a Sony Walkman – a moment of pleasure made possible by design objects; the second way in which he describes happiness is from a designer's standpoint, being happy while designing, a concept that relates to satisfaction and flow (SAGMEISTER, 2004). Sagmeister also talks about a third point of view, that of design as a tool to evoke happiness, describing whimsical and clever jokes that evoke surprise and fun. Sagmeister uses the term in a broad manner, ranging from pleasure to satisfaction and intellectual surprise and amusement, taking into account a great number of subjective experiences which can be made possible by design.

2.4. Ingrid Fetell Lee – The Aesthetics of Joy

Brooklyn-based designer Ingrid Fetell Lee, founder of “The Aesthetics of Joy” is concerned with empowering people to ‘find more joy in their daily life’. In a 2018 TED Talk (LEE, 2018), she notes how sometimes the terms joy and happiness are used interchangeably, describing joy as *‘an intense, momentary experience of positive emotion – one that makes us smile and laugh and feel like we want to jump up and down (...) it’s different than happiness, which measures how good you feel over time. Joy is about feeling good in the moment, right now’*. Lee claims that through Aesthetics one can arouse the senses in a transformational way, including not only beauty, but aspects of objects which are whimsical, surprising or stunning (LEE, 2016)

2.5. Marc Steen – Design-for-Wellbeing

Marc Steen, Senior research Scientist at TNO (an independent organization for applied scientific research in the Netherlands) describes Design-for-Wellbeing (DfW) as an approach to bring positive social change and to promote people's well-being, that includes social design and socially responsive design, and is different from the traditional problem-focused design process. Steen claims that although consumption does not necessarily create well-being, products *‘can enable people to engage in meaningful and fulfilling activities—especially if these activities involve using and developing one’s talents and skills, contributing to a greater goal, creating and nurturing relationships with people one cares about, or improving one’s health’*. Steen goes on to present two different views on well-being: the Aristotelian idea of *flourishing*, which can be described as the *eudaimonic* perspective; and the Epicurean idea of pursuing pleasure-giving activities and avoidance of pain, which constitutes the *hedonic* approach. On one side, the *eudaimonic* perspective involves the cultivation of virtues, engagement and meaningful lives, while, on the hedonic approach – even though the term has become known only for the maximization of pleasure and escape from pain – it also valued simplicity, *‘as well as fostering social relations, economic and psychological independence and resilience, and contemplation and reflection’* (STEEN, 2016). Steen claims that DfW should be examined from an *eudaimonic* perspective, arguing that traditional design already addresses hedonic well-being (by means of usability); and that DfW can address the notion of flourishing by improving external conditions and people's resources, creating virtuous feedback loops:

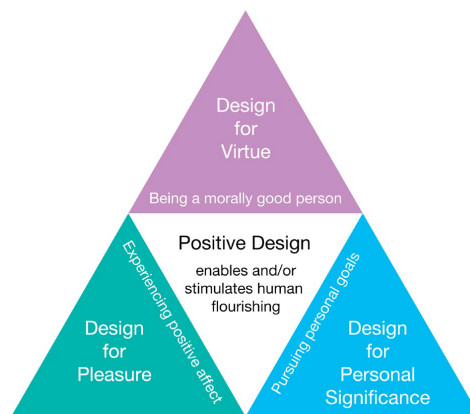
DfW projects can aim to improve external conditions in many different ways—for example, by proposing policies that promote active participation of minority groups in local politics or by placing garbage bins in the shape of basketball hoops in public spaces to nudge people toward throwing their garbage into these bins. They also can aim to improve personal resources by, for example, creating prostheses for people who are missing parts of their body or creating programs for soldiers to train them in emotional resilience.

Moreover, a DfW project takes into account that people can have very different motivations, abilities, needs, and preferences— and different ideas about what would constitute the good life for them. A DfW project would therefore stay clear from prescribing specific behaviors, which would limit people’s freedom. Rather, a DfW project would aim to create opportunities for people to use technologies in different ways and for different purposes, thus accounting for diversity and promoting people’s freedom and flourishing (STEEN, 2016)

2.6. Pieter Desmet and Anna Pohlmeier – Positive Design:

Delft TU Design professors, Pieter Desmet and Anna Pohlmeier proposed a framework for Positive Design, an approach which would unite three different components of subjective well-being into one approach, which would enable and stimulate human flourishing:

- Design for virtue (being a morally good person);
- Design for personal significance (pursuing personal goals);
- Design for pleasure (experiencing positive effect).



[Figure 1]: Positive Design Framework. (Source: Desmet and Pohlmeier, 2013)

In their work, Desmet and Pohlmeier cite definitions of flourishing, from different authors¹:

- ‘being in the high end of the subjective well-being spectrum’ (HUPPERT et al., 2009);
- ‘optimal human functioning and living to one’s full potential’ (RYAN & DECI, 2001);
- ‘having a sense of meaning, engagement, interest, and purpose in life’ (SELIGMAN, 2002)

Desmet and Pohlmeier also offer us their own definition of human flourishing: *“People who flourish are developing as individuals, live their lives to their fullest potential, and act in the best interests of society (DESMET AND POHLMAYER, 2013).* According to them, Positive Design is a form of design which explicitly aims at human flourishing, and is defined by five characteristics: it should be possibility-driven, strive for balance, accommodate a personal fit, promote active user involvement and offer the means for long-term impact.

The use of the term ‘positive’ is due to an intentional reference to Positive Psychology, as described by Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi in 2000, as well as a reference to a Positive, possibility-oriented approach, as described by Desmet & Hassenzahl, in 2012 (DESMET AND POHLMAYER, 2013).

In 2011, Desmet and Pohlmeier established the Delft Institute of Positive Design (DIOPD) at Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), in the Netherlands – defining its mission in the following manner: *“To initiate and stimulate the development of knowledge that supports designers in their attempts to design for happiness, for human flourishing.”*, arguing that the increase in material wealth witnessed since the Industrial Revolution did not *‘seem to result in an equal increase in subjective well-being... in contrast with*

¹ The definitions cited in this paragraph are (apud DESMET AND POHLMAYER, 2013).

the aspirations of many designers and design students to make a positive contribution with their designs to the individual user, and to society in general. (DIOPD, 2011)

The Positive Design Reference Guide, published by Delft TU in 2015, refers to different sources, both in Psychology and Design in order to understand happiness; In the fundamentals borrowed from Psychology, there are various concepts, such as determinants of happiness and happiness-enhancing activities, as described by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade in 2007, Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory, Concepts of Hedonism and Eudaimonia and the Hedonic Treadmill, Appraisal Theory, Russell's Circumplex Model of Affect, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory, Seligman's Well-being Theory (PERMA) and the Character Strengths and Virtues Classification (CVS), as well as Ryff's Dimensions of Psychological Well-being. From Design, the Guide incorporates frameworks, models and tools from different authors, that take into account Norman's levels of Design, as well as other categories that separate aesthetic, meaningful and emotional aspects of the user experience, or include new values such as virtue, pleasure, choice, gifts and personal significance. The research from DIOPD seems to be the most complete research currently available on the subject.

3. CONSTRUCTION OF THE PERCEPTUAL MAP:

3.1. Martin Seligman's Well-being Theory

In order to operationalize the notion of Well-being and avoid a monistic construct, psychologist Martin Seligman (SELIGMAN, 2011) defines well-being as constituted of five elements which can be measured independently and are pursued for their own sake, while contributing in a specific way to overall well-being. The five elements are:

- **Positive emotion:** the "pleasant life", subjective aspect of happiness, including variables such as pleasure, comfort, warmth, and relating to the present.
- **Engagement:** also a subjective aspect of the experience, encompassing notions such as the feeling of time stopping, of being completely absorbed by a task and losing self-consciousness. It can only be referred to retrospectively, not in the moment it is experienced.
- **Meaning:** an element with both subjective and objective components, referring to how meaningful an experience is to the individual, but it can also be measured in an objective manner, using logic and history.
- **Accomplishment:** the pursuit of mastery and achievements for their own sake, it's an element which can be measured objectively.
- **Positive relationships:** with both subjective and objective components, it refers to the presence of quality relationships in someone's life.

Seligman argues for the importance of having a theory which does not limit itself to the subjective experience of positive emotion, but which can also address objective aspects; he makes a proposition which could be applied to design approaches in very interesting ways:

Public policy aimed only at subjective well-being is vulnerable to the *Brave New World* caricature in which the government promotes happiness simply by drugging the population with a euphoriant called "soma." Just as we choose how to live by plural criteria, and not just to maximize happiness, truly useful measures of well-being for public policy will need to be a dashboard of both subjective and objective measurements of positive emotion engagement, meaning, good relationships, and positive accomplishment. (SELIGMAN, 2011)

Defining the goal of Positive Psychology as measuring and building human flourishing, Seligman proposes that well-being be measured so that it can be applied to public policies, so that we can ask ourselves questions such as *"How much will building this new school rather than this park increase flourishing?"*. If we extend this notion to design choices, as already indicated by Desmet and Pohlmeier, Positive Psychology could be a powerful tool in order to understand how to create solutions which not only make people feel

aesthetic pleasure or are easy to use, but to create design solutions which can improve overall quality of life.

3.2. The choice of axes for the perceptual map.

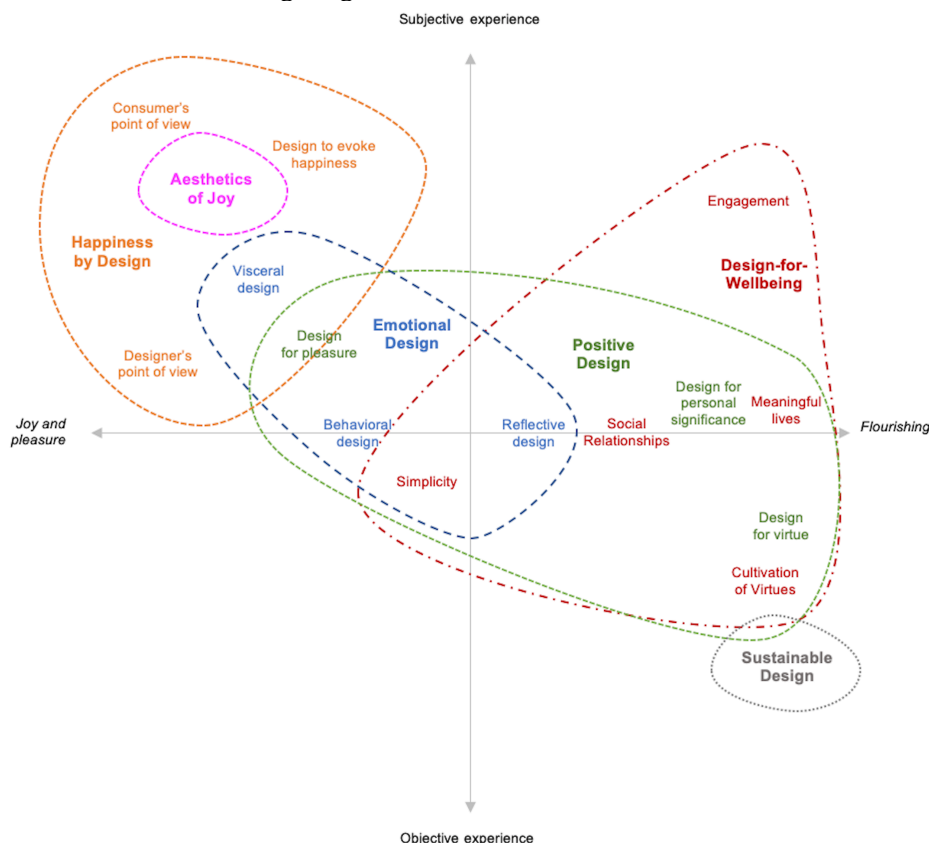
From the analysis of the six approaches described above, a few concepts which could constitute interesting axes for the topological mapping begin to emerge:

- **Theoretical Base:** Cognitive Psychology vs. Philosophy vs. Social Sciences
- **Quality:** Eudaimonism vs. Hedonism, meaning: joy vs. life satisfaction
- **Meaning:** Pleasure vs. flourishing
- **Cognition:** Visceral vs. behavioral vs. rational/reflective
- **Perception:** Pleasurable experience vs. pleasurable state.
- **Timeframe:** In the moment vs. In the memory (past) or in predictions (future)
- **Nature of the experience:** objective well-being vs. subjective well-being

From these possible oppositions, and considering Seligman's proposition, two axes were derived, considering the different understanding of the idea of happiness and well-being:

- **The meaning of happiness:** flourishing (including meaning, relationships, achievement and accomplishments) vs. joy and pleasure
- **The perspective of the user:** objective vs. subjective experience

With those axes in mind, the following diagram was constructed:



[Figure 2] Conceptual map of design approaches towards happiness and well-being

The perceptual map allows us to better understand differences between approaches and to make more appropriate comparisons between them. It makes evident that the time perspective is likely to influence the idea of happiness one is referring to: if the design is focused on more objective experiences, they seem to value more long term aspects such as overall life satisfaction, while those which value positive emotion in the moment seem to rely more on the subjective experience of use.

On the joy and pleasure side of the map are situated the approaches which are more focused on the aesthetic dimension of design, giving a strong value to the artistic and creative aspects. On the flourishing side of the map, approaches seem to be more aware of the social role of design, as well as its capacity to generate meaning. Both sides appear to value the functionality and ease of the user experience. Some of the approaches, such as positive design and Design-for-Wellbeing, seem to be very promising in trying to integrate the objective and subjective experiences that a product can provide to the individual or group of people using their solutions.

5. CONCLUSION:

In this paper, six different approaches of design centered on the idea of “happiness” and “well-being” were examined. From the descriptions, a few categories were extracted in order to constitute axes for the creation of a perceptual map. Taking into consideration the theory of Well-being from Positive Psychology, the categories “joy and pleasure vs. flourishing” and “objective experience vs. subjective experience” were chosen to be positioned on the axes. Finally, the six different approaches were positioned on the map, indicating their approach to the criteria which create well-being for the user.

From the map, one can observe that there are approaches which lean more to an experience of joy, surprise and amusement in the moment of use; while on the opposite side of the diagram there are approaches which focus more on the overall improvement of quality of life, considering variables such as meaning, virtues, and relationships. If we take Seligman’s proposition to use the elements of well-being in order to make better public policy, and apply it to the design of Social Innovation, the positive impact of solutions on people’s lives can be intentionally designed and measured, generating better solutions which go beyond conventional design approaches.

This map was created using approaches which specifically mention or focus on aspects of happiness and well-being. It provides us with a better notion of the impact that design can have on well-being and the kind of experiences which could be measured, whether they are subjective or objective, and if their greater impact is in the short or long term. As a next step, other design methodologies could be examined using the chosen axes, in order to either discuss their impact on well-being, as well as derive improvements which could generate results with a more positive impact on users and society.

At a time when design solutions are being scaled to millions of users very rapidly, and are present in our everyday experiences, it becomes very important to reconfigure our design tools and methods, in regards to their impact on people’s happiness and well-being. As well as social innovations, social networks and services could be designed in a more conscientious manner, and be measured for their positive impact on society as a whole.

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