

Emotions in design process. How to find an emotional touchpoint with the user

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to discuss the importance of the emotional connection between the designer and the user in user - centered design process.

In order to find an inspiration, enjoy the process of creating product/service, designers should find a way to people's minds and hearts. Different principles could be applied when dealing with the emotional state of users and designers: ethnographic approach reveals an understanding of the users by exploring their natural environment, empathy helps designers to understand how it feels like to be the user, share the same thoughts and feelings, and participatory approach brings users and designers at the same table to share their personal experience and find an important touch points through the enjoyable process of co-creation.

In this paper principles listed above will be discussed as well as their practical implementation based on the case "Design and Psychiatric Care".

KEYWORDS: emotions, ethnography, participatory design, empathy, psychiatric care

Introduction

Emotions are the engine of the whole design process. They help to find an inspiration, identify the aim of the process, establish relationships between team members, find a connection between design team and users/participants and enjoy the process and the outcome.

One of the aims of this paper is to explore emotional relationships between the user/participant of the design process and the design team. Designers represent their own emotions from the own perspective on the issues that they are interested in (Gho et al., 1993). They should find a way how to engage users into the design process and make it pleasurable, enjoyable, trustful, honest and meaningful.

The main challenge is to find the important touchpoint with the user and to make the whole design process an interesting journey for both parties. There has been a lot of discussion about the emotional design but that was mostly about the final outcome: emotional aspect of the product/service (Gho et al., 1993; Battarbee, 2004). The relationships between design team and the user have not been widely recognized.

This paper discusses the importance of the ethnographic practices as a facilitator to establish an emotional connection between the user/participant and the design team; represents the concept of the empathic design with the main emphasis on the designers personal experience in the design process; participatory design as a way how to engage user in the co-creation process.

Apart from the theoretical representation, this paper illustrates the case study of the User Inspired Design course dealing with the Psychiatric care in Finland. '365 Wellbeing' was a pilot project based on the User Inspired Design course at Aalto University School of Art and Design held in 2011. The main theme for the project was 'Design and Psychiatric care'.

The team of four students conducted a research and designed a web-based service related to the rehabilitation process of the mental health care system. The key points of the process as well as important touch points between users and designers will be described.

Emotions in design process

In this chapter several design principles will be presented as well as some techniques that could be used when searching for emotional connections between users and designers. Based on the theoretical explanation, practical implementation will be presented.

Ethnographic approach

Ethnography is a research method based on observing people in their natural environment rather than in a formal research setting. Ethnography informs design by revealing a deep understanding of people and how they make sense of their world. It provides design team with holistically study people's behaviors and experiences in daily life (Aiga, the professional association for design, 2011).

Ethnography allows design team to:

- Discover meaning. People have a need for meaning in their lives. Obviously, everything what is done should have a meaning as well as the process of creating product/service.
- Understand norms. Ethnography reveals the ways in which cultural norms shape people's perceptions. Make communications powerful.
- Things need to be understood. Ethnography helps us learn how to communicate more effectively with target audiences, in a language and way they really understand.
- Observe reality. What people say is not what they do. Ethnography highlights differences between what people perceive they do and what they actually do (Aiga, the professional association for design, 2011).

One of the common ways of gaining user's knowledge is observation. Observation is a tool that helps designers to understand what users really do. By exploring a broader set of activities, one gains deeper insight into user's life (Lockwood, 2010).

While using observation technique, designers could face several challenges. First, it is always hard to start. To get into someone's life requires a certain level of trust. Gaining trust seems to be one of the main challenges. When you trust with people, it speeds up the whole process.

There are three main guidelines for developing trust:

- participants (design team and user/other stakeholders) should share the same goal and vision;
- participants should have a free flow of information and easy access to it. Sharing of the information gives a certain level of the ownership;
- nobody is perfect. People tend to make mistakes and it is crucial to understand that mistakes could facilitate the whole process and help participants to go forward.

To speed up the whole process it is important to get to know people, know their interests and the way of working. Dealing with multidisciplinary teams (is it obvious that during the process design team will communicate with people from different backgrounds) requires some level of patience. For designers it is important to be open and a bit naive, have some curiosity and be passionate about the topic.

It is important to stay in touch with the people involved in the design process. Thus, participants feel that they are a part of the entire process and not just people who have been used for gaining some particular information.

Another important point that has to be considered is privacy. Participants of the process have to be sure that the information they provide will be used only for the research purposes and not be displayed outside the project's context.

When we started our research in the field of psychiatric care, the most difficult moment was to start. In order to have a powerful start, design team needs to find a valuable contact. And we found. In our case, Nurse was very supportive and active from the beginning and we immediately decided to have our first meeting. The first meeting is always painful for both sides: probably people see each other for the first time, talk to each other for the first time but additionally they have to share their own experience and let design team step into their own live.

Our team decided to keep only one person responsible for all the external virtual communication (telephone calls, e-mails) since it's easier for participants and helps to avoid misunderstanding and keep the whole communication process "clean".

On our first meeting we described the goal of the research and the whole process which made our interaction with the user open and transparent. Additionally, we promised to give participants ability to follow our research online and actively participate in creation and prototyping phase. That helped to show the importance of user involvement and gave people the certain level of ownership. Is it important to keep in mind that all the information which is shared is protected. Thus, participants are sure that information they are sharing is secure.

Personal contact is highly important in the design process since it helps to establish an emotional connection with the user. It was noticed that staff of the clinic is curious and fascinated that somebody (especially team of young people) decided to tackle such a serious topic. People are willing to tell about their work and personal experience if they see that somebody is interested in it and if they feel that they can help and change the situation.

Designer's role here is to show participants that they are at the core of the project and their participation is meaningful. It might be that users feel that motivation, openness and trust that design team provide and first checking whether they should trust or not. I would call it "waiting for a green light". In every design project there is that fine line when design team feel that they has gained that certain level of trust so they can start the research.

Applying ethnographic approach design team decided to concentrate on interviews and observations since these techniques were considered as the most effective due to the specific topic. Interviews helped to understand the people by establishing personal contact, seeing and listening to stories how people think and work, experiencing their work conditions and atmosphere. Observations helped to see and hear more precise what is going on: on the one hand, emphasize on details and on the other, to see the holistic picture.

Therefore, ethnographic approach helps to establish that invisible connection with the user, feel the atmosphere by being at the core of the research. Having an emotional contact with the user/participant it is important to be open, passionate (everything is interesting!), have an eagerness to learn, provide users with the security, and have an empathy with the them (Whalen, 2011).

Empathetic approach

Empathy is the intuitive ability to identify with other people's thoughts and feelings – their motivations, emotional and mental models, values, priorities, preferences, and inner conflicts (McDonagh, 2006).

Basically, it is based on the principle that a designer steps into the life of the user, wanders around for a while and then steps out of the life of the user with a deeper understanding of this user (Kouprie & Visser, 2009).

Empathic design could be considered as an imaginative projection into another person's situation (Koskinen et al., 2003), or a particular kind of imagination (Fulton Suri, 2003). These terms 'projection' and 'imagination' imply that being empathic is a range of activities where designers should imagine what it would be like for themselves to be (in the position of) the user.

Every individual has his or her own unique experiences and these define his or her empathic horizon. The term 'empathic horizon' (McDonagh-Philip et al, 1999) is used to indicate the limits on a designer's individual ability to empathize beyond certain characteristics of his or her group, such as nationality, background, age, gender, culture, experience and education.

Next to ability, the willingness of the designer plays a role. Design empathy requires direct and personal engagement and is dependent on the designer's willingness (Battarbee, 2004). One can think of the designer's personal connection with the user that motivates him (e.g. a special interest into the user group, because it is familiar to him), his emotional state that hinders him (e.g. tired, or a workshop at the end of the day) or his commitment to the project (e.g. how much the designer is responsible for the project) (Kouprie et al., 2009)

It could be very hard for designers to identify themselves with the user. Thus, it requires a certain emotional connection with the user and his or her emotional state. Usually, the best way to gain empathy is to be a part of the story which user could share with the design team. The combination of the real story and designer's perception of it could provide design team with new meaning and show the different perspective.

The right atmosphere plays an important role. Physical atmosphere could provide designers with very strong emotions and sensations. Being into the context/field provide designers with the rich insights and helps identify themselves with the user. Apart from the physical atmosphere, getting 'under the skin' requires an emotional state (and mood) of being able to get 'into the others people shoes'. In order to have a deeper understanding of the user designers have to leave their comfort zone and deal with the unknown environment and experience.

In case of the "Design and Psychiatric care" project identifying with the user was harder than expected. Hearing personal stories of people dealing with mental health problems, experiencing the atmosphere and trying to feel what users feel was tiring and exhausting. Design team went out of the comfort zone. For me it was hard to keep the motivation: on the one hand I was interested in getting to know other world I haven't seen before and trying to bring my own experience, but on the other, it was very hard to see people dealing with mental health problems and hearing their stories. Being strong enough to handle the topic, one of the main challenges in such kind of projects. Applying empathetic approach, a person has to feel like the patient/nurse feels, think the same way, behave the same way and imagine the same situations in order to achieve "emotional" touch points.

Empathetic design brings personal experience into the private context (Mattelmäki et al., 2002). The feeling of security, motivation and interest of the participants helped to gain a certain level of trust. Trust is a reflection of the success in every design project.

Empathic understanding goes beyond knowledge: when empathizing you do not judge, you relate to [the user] and understand the situations and why certain experiences are meaningful to these people (Battarbee, 2004), a relation that involves an emotional connection (Battarbee et al., 2005).

Participative approach

Participatory design represents a way in which users could be engaged into the design process. It helps to come up with different solutions based on users personal experience and help design team to identify the main opportunities.

Unlike other approaches to understanding users, participatory design assumes that users should play an active role in the creative process: users envision the future by identifying the defining moments from their perspective. These moments can highlight critical touch points and the desired feelings associated with them, which serve as a foundation for emotional connections.

The main aim of the participatory approach to design is to bring value into the design process by providing the relevant and timely information. In addition to that, participatory design help designers to identify touch-points with the user and gain valuable insights.

Participatory design could be conducted in different forms, The most common form is a workshop. Workshops help design team to identify real problems, explore possibilities and make the whole process playful, engaging and exiting. Usually, workshop consists of specific set of tasks that facilitate the process of gaining insights.

Exercises (tasks) can be developed to express cognitive, emotional, aspirational, and procedural issues. They can also be developed to enable the embodiment of ideas. In creating the exercise, both the choice of words and images and instructions for the exercise must be considered (Gage, 2011).

Emotional exercises tend to ask people to describe an experience and use words that describe feelings: careful, alert, relaxed, etc. The images are tend to show people expressing emotion or elements which tend to drive elicit these emotions.

By identifying the key moments in users desired experiences, emotions associated with those moments, and the specific components that can provide these feelings, a foundation for applying the processes of experience design is established. The team can begin to focus their creativity and expertise to design for the desired experience. Opportunities to make an emotional connection become clear, actionable, and inspirational (Gage, 2011).

For the "Design and Psychiatric care" project design team decided to choose co-creation workshop as the main tool for participatory design. User's observations as well as opportunity areas were presented to the clinics staff in order to gain relevant insights and compose the concept. Design team conducted several workshops. The goal was to make sure that ideas are relevant and could be developed into the concept together with the staff. Several exercises were created in order to evoke some personal experience and moments associated with the topics. Creating ideas together gave participants a feeling of ownership and provide an exiting experience of being able to change the way they work and have an impact. Excitement, inspiration, creativity - all these attributes should support every workshop in order to get people fully involved and help them to open themselves. Insights gained during the workshops helped to come up with the final concept.

Connecting on this level gives all participants a new level of trust and sometimes a feeling of friendship. Such a playful atmosphere and ability to see their own world from the different angle brings an understanding to both: designers to deeper their knowledge about the users's world and users to understand the way designers work.

At the end of the project, trying to find the best way to describe and present the final concept, team decided to use storytelling approach.

Stories have a strong influence on peoples feelings and emotions. They help to describe the whole concept clearly, with the emphasis on the emotional experience of the person dealing with the mental problems. The story was told by one of the team members as he was the patient. Empathy was at the core of the concept. The presentation got a lot of positive feedback related to the relevance of the concept and the way of presenting. It has had a strong influence not only on the people dealing with the Psychiatric care but also other designers participating in this course. After the presentation, team got a lot of cheerful, valuable and excellent comments about the final concept.

Thus, applying co-creative participatory approach gives both sides: designers and participants/users the feeling of ownership and motivation to bring their own experience in order to create something valuable together.

Conclusion

Emotions are an integral factor in people's behavior (Battarbee, 2004). They are the starting point for the every process. Thus, the way people think and perform is directly connected with their emotional state of being.

In order to find an inspiration, enjoy the process of creating product/service designers have to find a way to people's minds and hearts. In this paper several methods were illustrated. Among them are ethnographic approach which helps to analyze people's behavior and interact with them in their natural environment; empathetic principle which reflects designer's personal experience and emotions in the context of the research, and participatory approach which is supporting creative thinking of participants, helps them to express their feelings and thoughts while being a part of the team.

Furthermore, these methods were illustrated with the real case example based on the Used inspired Course "Design and Psychiatric Care".

Applying these methods gives designers an opportunity to find a touch points with the users, understand their motivation, gain a certain level of trust, and enjoy the process.

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