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Nils F. Nissen

Melanie Jaeger-Erben (eds.)

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## Objects, Things and Stuff; Exploring the Awareness of Materiality in Longer Everyday Product Relationships

**Green, Clare**

Institut Supérieur de Design, Rubika, Valenciennes, France  
EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales), Paris, France

**Keywords:** Product Longevity; Person-Product Relationships; Stuff; Sustainable Consumption; Materials Experience.

**Abstract:** In designing for longer product lifetimes we should consider our relationships not only with “products” but with “things” and “stuff”. The role of materiality in longer relationships with everyday artefacts may not have attracted as much attention as other factors, despite environmental relevance. This paper investigates awareness of stuff in the sense of unimportant everyday artefacts and also stuff in the sense of the material make-up of these artefacts. We highlight findings related to material awareness as a component of longer everyday product relationships.

The findings around the role of the materiality in longer product relations reveal an ambiguous picture. Firstly the awareness of the material aspects of the everyday products commented on is very unevenly distributed. Comments related to material qualities of objects as well as the material presence of objects as physical entities are missing from many personal narratives collected. At the same time, an awareness of material, in the sense of the actual physical presence and nature of an object appears important in many of the longer everyday relationships commented. Relations to materiality in the research can thus be grouped into two distinct sections; firstly how materiality is present and appears to positively contribute to longer product relations, and secondly how materiality may go unnoticed in relationships with everyday objects.

Being conscious of stuff as material may not constitute the majority of current behaviour (and may not be easy to encourage) but may be increasingly important in the context of product longevity.

### Introduction

Designers tend to describe their activity as creating “products”, a designer would rarely refer to creating “things” or “stuff”. Nevertheless, most of what designers create enters our lives to become the things and stuff that fill our homes. In order to design for longer product lifetimes it is important to consider our relationships with everyday artefacts which might be better defined as things or stuff.

This paper explores the role of materiality in longer product relationships. We investigate awareness of stuff in the sense of unimportant artefacts in our everyday lives and also stuff in the sense of the actual material make-up of these artefacts. Part of a doctoral research project, this paper highlights findings related to material awareness as a component of longer everyday product relationships.

### *Objects, products, things or stuff?*

Literature around product relations reflects the relative status of the different ways everyday

artefacts can be referred to. This choice of words may be worth questioning in the context of designing future material artefacts.

Discussing sustainable object relations, Cupchik (2017) talks of the dynamics that could transform ‘a design product into a personally meaningful object’. The word object in the english language is generally reserved for important and singular relations, but also the problems these present (eg. Objects of Desire, (Forty, 1992), Objectified, (Hustwit, 2009). In relation to the sphere of design, perhaps naturally the reference is always to ‘products’. In product longevity research for example, strategies propose designing ‘resilient products’ (Haug, 2016), or for ‘product attachment’ (Mugge, 2008). This reflects the link of the activity to producing things, reflecting a probable lack of consideration in design practice for the second phase of the life of products: the life after the sale, with the consumer (Findeli, 2010).

The artefacts within our homes are more generally referred to as things, as in the seminal work 'The Meaning of Things' (Csikszentmihalyi, M & Rochberg-Halton, E., 1981). Things are also what might be a problem, Ian Hodder for example examines the 'entanglement of humans and things'. Odom et al. question 'why we preserve some things and discard others' (Odom et al., 2009). In these two cases they are what might ensnare us, and also what could be thrown away, a lesser status than products, with more negative connotations.

After things come stuff. Miller (2010) writes that stuff is 'ubiquitous and problematic...it somehow drains away our humanity' and 'has a remarkable capacity for fading from view'. The fact that stuff is also matter and material, and what things are made of (Markosian, 2015) suggests that design for longer material relations should probably focus on things or stuff rather than products.

### *Materiality in longer product relationships*

As the notion of materials experience is now widely researched it is important to specify what this study is not about. The focus of this research is not about the abstract qualities of materials, (Karana et al., 2010) or material as metaphor (Olsen, 2003). Equally this study is not about comparing one type of material to another within materials experience, nor material choice.

This study concerns materiality in product longevity, and specifically in longer product relationships. This could also be described as awareness of things as material entities and as matter. (Verbeek P-P. & Kockelkoren, P., 1998, Verbeek, P-P., 2005)

### **Research methods**

Exploring relationships with the artefacts around us that 'fade from view' presents difficulties in terms of research protocols. Here experimental approaches linked to the field of design user-research were used. Four separate studies were carried out, two involving cohorts of product design students and two with non-designer adults aged between 40 and 60 years old. Two studies took the form of inventories, in the first case, with 40 design students, as a sketched and annotated list. In the second case the inventory took the form of an interview with participants talking the researcher through key objects in chosen room of their homes. The third study, with a group of 50 design students,

was based on in-situ self-documentation (Lee, 2014) in the form of a diary of everything touched in one day, followed by in-depth descriptions of a number of the objects listed. The fourth study with a group of 8 adults aged between 40 and 60 years was in the form of a Design Probe (Lee, 2014, Mattelmaki et al., 2016) and also involved noting everything touched in one day. This protocol was inspired by research by Zucotti (2015) and gives the advantage of recording interactions with objects that might otherwise go unnoticed, giving participants the opportunity to refer to this list to reflect on object relations.

The transcripts from the interviews of the second study as well as participant notes from the other three studies were analysed using an iterative process allowing recurring themes to be clustered. Over 100 different types of object were commented on in the context of longer everyday relationships covering the wide variety of things we interact with in the domestic environment. Clothes and textiles were commented on in a few cases, but were not the main focus of this research.

### **Material presence**

In relation to the research questions around the role of the materiality in longer product relationships the findings reveal an ambiguous picture. The presence and awareness of materials in this study highlight paradoxes inherent in everyday stuff. Everyday things may be those that no longer hold our attention, becoming unnoticed and invisible and potentially neglected (Highmore, 2002). At the same time our everyday experience is constituted of the physical reality of products and their materials (Karana et al., 2017). Karana et al. use the expression 'materials experience' and identify four different experiential levels for this experience: sensorial, interpretive, affective and performative. Our findings in relation to the longer product relationships studied relate mainly to sensorial and performative levels, but also show that this materials experience is sometimes totally absent.

Comments related to material aspects of objects, and in some cases to the material presence of objects as physical entities are missing from some personal narratives. At the same time, an awareness of the material (in the sense of the actual physical presence and nature of an object) emerges as an important part of many longer everyday relationships

commented. Therefore relations to materiality found in the research can be divided into two distinct groups; how materiality is present and appears to positively contribute to longer product relations, and how materiality goes unnoticed in many relationships with everyday objects.

### *Individual diversity*

Our study appears to show that the conscience of material qualities of things is very diverse, even within cohorts that could be considered homogenous (such as product design students). The self-evaluation of fast moving consumer goods in our studies illustrates this diversity. In the student cohort, the number of these products recorded varies between 3 and 34. In the adult probe group (fourth study) between 2 and 22 of these objects were noted down as touched in one day. Whilst these differences might reflect different product behaviour, it may indicate differing object awareness. Equally, in the probe group, the status of these short-lived physical objects in personal comments varies from non-existent to important-to-keep. This heterogeneity appears to be confirmed in related literature.

Lockton & Ranner (2017) highlight the inherent complexity and heterogeneity of behaviour in real peoples' lives. This may be even more the case for the low-level, peripheral everyday interactions, which are likely to be highly personal (Bakker, 2013). The relationships with everyday things can be seen as a form of individual accommodation to the domestic environment, of careful tuning and adjustment which may be far removed from collectively recognised ways of doing things (Thévenot, 2001).

### *Ambiguous material presence*

Our study shows that the ambiguous presence of material entities takes different forms.

Student inventories (1st study) highlighted that participants initially found it very difficult to think of 10 everyday objects that mattered to them, despite the fact that subsequent studies (eg. study 3) indicate that they touch on average between 50 and 100 non-fixed and non-disposable consumer durables per day. (Fixed objects such as large furniture and built-in appliances were excluded from the studies.) The fourth study also highlighted that even when objects were more systematically noted, very few objects were qualified by participants as mattering or for keeping.

A recent study into keeping behaviour (Guillard, 2013) gives insights into why keeping might be seen as a problem. Guillard writes about a form of consumer behaviour named TTG (the 'tendance à tout garder': the tendency to keep everything). Reasons given for keeping things are: anxiety, retentiveness, materialism, nostalgia, guilt, procrastination and altruism. The largely negative connotations of these reasons illustrate why we may not always be comfortable admitting 'keeping' things or stuff.

Another interesting observation from the first study was that despite participants being asked to note down specific possessions, around 30% of the things included were not specific material entities. 20% of the objects could be described as object categories rather than specific objects and a further 10% could be described as 'object groups'. This latter case seems to match the notion of 'stuff' in the sense of (unidentified) material that makes up larger things or fills up various regions of space (see Markosian, 2015). These inventories containing a majority of categories or groups tended to also take the form of illustrations of self identity, suggesting that objects in self-symbolic roles may necessitate less physical presence.

### *Material entities*

The appreciation of the specific material qualities of an object appears to contribute positively to a lasting object relation. This appreciation of material qualities of objects and their specific materials is generated by three main factors, identified as components of longer everyday object relations (Green, 2019). These are 'using/doing', 'feeling on me' and 'appreciating time'. These three components represent three different paths by which people can become aware of the materiality of an object.

The component 'feeling on me' particularly seems to relate to awareness of the physical quality of the object as a whole. Comments collected indicate a particular awareness of the physical object in terms of weight or size judged as appropriate. Equally the material awareness can be in terms of compactness, capacity and volume. In some cases these material comments suggest slight differences with what might be expected. Examples of these cases of low-level incongruity: a purse that is almost too small, or a toiletries bag that seems to grow to accommodate new things stored inside. These experiences could be seen as a subtle, ongoing level of surprise in product experience (see



Ludden et al., 2008, Grimaldi, 2017). These appear to be qualities that are felt, quantified and validated in body actions, for things that are often carried with us, manipulated and checked for weight.

### *Material qualities*

The specific material qualities of objects are related to components 'using/doing' and 'appreciating time'.

Personal ways of using, adapting, or taking care of objects generate knowledge and understanding of their material nature. Physical implication to prolong, repair and modify objects means taking the physical nature of the object into consideration, and increasing related knowledge.

Throwaway objects that have been kept are a good illustration of the second theme 'appreciating time' in our study. For these generally very banal objects the material qualities need to have been considered and judged, rather than simply taken for granted. The object is judged in terms of its material potential and durability.

In another form of appreciation of time, Zijlema et al. (2017) propose that the surface marks and traces on an object contribute to a general awareness of the object's past. In our study we could propose an extension to this concept: awareness or sensitivity to the materiality of an object contributes to the longevity of the relationship, and this awareness is in relation to activities with the object, marks and manipulation. The notions of graceful ageing (Chapman, 2005, Haines-Gadd et al. 2017), and embracing imperfection (Karana et al. 2017) suggest that the traces and marks on materials can enrich the relationship with an object. More pragmatically, our research suggests that traces and imperfections help to make the materials and their nature tangible to the owners of the objects.

### *Relationship longevity component*

The notion of products becoming 'materially yours' (Karana et al., 2017) refers to experiences 'with' and 'through' their materiality. The cases we highlight in this research relate mainly to experiences 'with' the materiality of objects: conscience of the physical entity and its' material characteristics. The concept of Emotional Durability (see Haines-Gadd et al., 2017) may not exactly match the everyday relationships in our research, as too much emphasis may be on

fewer 'special' products rather than the majority of our everyday stuff. Nevertheless Haines-Gadd et al. (2017) also conclude that strategies for emotional durability should go beyond only psychological extension and should also encourage prolonged physical interaction with products. Our research suggests that attention to, care of and awareness of an object's specific materiality, even in the case of the most banal everyday objects, contributes to relationship longevity.

## **Discussion**

Making objects more 'materially yours' seems indeed to have potential as a product (relationship) longevity strategy, but the awareness of materiality this entails should not be taken for granted and may not constitute normal behaviour in many cases.

For future research and for future design-for-longevity strategies it may be useful to address the problem of status inherent in product design. Thus future work should probably concentrate on things and stuff, not objects or products

Equally research into this subject raises methodology issues. As Daniel Miller states (Miller, 1998) - "there are many instances where clearly things matter to people even when in speech they deride them as trivial and inconsequential". There may be a form of embarrassment in admitting to everyday material relations and/or an inability to express low-level material experiences.

Future research should also address to what extent cognitive treatment of everyday experience allows for the less economic processes involved in more material awareness.

## **Conclusion**

This research raises questions around awareness of materials and materiality in the context of longer everyday product relationships. Questioning stuff relationships within longer everyday product relations may be useful, particularly in the context of product design for longevity. The findings in this study highlight both the ambiguity and importance of relations to stuff (materials) and stuff (physical entities). More research is needed to confirm whether being aware of what products are made of, paying attention to (materials) stuff, is indeed an important component in prolonging relationships with what surrounds us. Equally,

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understanding which physical entities are noticed or unnoticed may be important. Being conscious of stuff as material may not constitute the majority of current behaviour (and may not be easy to encourage) but may be increasingly important in the context of product longevity. There is a need to better understand these relationships to inform design strategy and encourage behaviour change.

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