

## 8.2 The art of noticing: benchmarking for elegance

### Objective

In chapter 8, we have seen that emphasizing consists of deliberately highlighting a feature, property, or aspect of a product to communicate a clear and novel message. We have also seen that emphasizing comes with some loudness and that loudness is typically impolite and obnoxious if it is exercised without a valid reason. Thus, emphasizing is a risky strategy that can work only if this loudness is gentle and restrained through an otherwise equilibrated design. The objective of this exercise is to observe existing designs and look for examples of good and bad emphasis.

### Background

To rate a design, we suggest you use a semantic differential scale approach (Osgood et al., 1975). Semantic differential scales are interval scales whose extremes are a couple of bipolar adjectives, such as:

Traditional				Contemporary		
-1	-2	-3	0	1	2	3

A design can be assessed through these scales based on a list of relevant bipolar couples. Relevance will depend on practical or cultural factors. For instance, the scale in the example can be relevant for most products. In contrast, more contextual scales can be defined around much more specific factors such as leaning-democrat versus leaning-republican, which make sense only in American politics.

In the following, we provide a list of generalist couples you can pick from to build your rating tool organized in four categories: Social values, Usability, Aesthetics, and Personality (tab. 1, adapted from Khalaj and Pedgley, 2014).

Social values	Usability	Aesthetics	Personality
Traditional/contemporary	Clear/confusing	Plain/ornate	Boring/interesting
Conservative/avant-garde	Immediate to use/takes time to use properly	Symmetrical/asymmetrical	Calm/exciting
Understated/show-off	Easy to clean/difficult to clean	Compact/large	Sharp/fuzzy
Elitist/democratic	Easy to wear/hard to wear	Geometric/organic	Introvert/extrovert
Typical/innovative	Easy to carry/hard to carry	Monochrome/multi-colour	Mature/young

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Table 1: suggested set of grouped bipolar adjective/phrase pairs (adapted from Khalaj and Pedgley, 2014)

**Instructions**

Pick up a consumer product for which there is a huge variety of available designs, ranging from the obvious/functional to the extravagant/symbolic. Good candidates could be women's shoes, sneakers, wristwatches, furniture items such as couches and chairs.

1. Identify a list of 7–10 applicable differential pairs that you will use to rate the design. You can pick from table 1 and/or create your own.
2. Browse the internet or a store and select 3 to 5 instances of the product that emphasize different characteristics, e.g., status, usability, etc.
3. Summarize your assessment in a differential profile as in the following example (make sure you put the adjective that is more associated with simplicity and lower energy) on the right. Be mindful the scales are relative to your sample, knowledge of the object, time, and place of the evaluation.

	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	
Traditional		*			#			Contemporary
Conservative		*						Avant-garde
Immediate use	*					#		Requires some time to use it properly
Plain		*			#			Ornate
Compact		*		#				Large
Mature				*	#			Young
...								...
....								...

\* = Braun watch designed by Dietmar Rams, # = Sport chronograph



Fig. 8.3a - Braun watch and a sport chronograph.

The example, although incomplete, show how the Braun watch and the sport chronograph have quite different profiles that target different users and needs. The example also illustrates how these two models provide opposite ways of emphasizing: the Braun model emphasizes simplicity and essential design, the chronograph emphasizes sportiveness and power.

Now, your turn.

1. Use the table to understand how different models:
  - a. Emphasize different features.
  - b. Are more or less consistent (e.g. a zig zag profile that is all over the places maybe be an indication of low consistency).
  - c. Prefer a low-energy or high-energy configuration but may depart from a consistent profile to add an accent on different features (for instance, the Braun watch is interesting because it reinterprets in a modernist form an otherwise quite plain and conservative watch design, similarly the sport chronograph is a modern and sporty design with an hint of classic allure).
2. Comment on the specific features through which emphasis is obtained in the design (e.g. in the Braun watch it is the use of vivid and unconventional colour such as the orange hand for the seconds and the little red on the top of the calendar window).

### References

Khalaj, J., & Pedgley, O. (2014). Comparison of semantic intent and realization in product design: A study on high-end furniture impressions. *International Journal of Design*, 8(3).  
 Osgood, C. E., May, W. H., and Miron, M. S. (1975). *Cross-Cultural Universals of Affective Meaning*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press