

10.1 Case study: the Linus blanket and Alessi's 'transitional' objects

Objective

This case study shows how the design strategy of contrast and balance can effectively create tensions based on opposite psychological needs that coexist in our personality. For instance, while we change profoundly and substantially in our body and mind as we grow up, infantile compulsion and attitudes survive in the background, despite our tendency to suppress them for social acceptability. Many consumer products exploit this contrast between the adult-self and the child-self that cohabit in us. A great example is comfort objects.

Background

The theory of transitional objects was proposed by the psychologist Donald Winnicott (1953). The theory posits that some objects play a critical role for children during the phase of their life when they become aware of themselves. This typically happens when they also become increasingly less dependent on their mothers. The separation comes with anxiety and frustration, and children cope with these negative feelings by growing an attachment to comfort objects, with which they develop a motherly relationship. Teddy bears and stuffed animals are typical examples. The concept was then popularized in the Peanuts cartoons, through the now proverbial 'Linus blanket'.

According to many surveys, a significant number of adults use Linus blankets, teddy bears, and other comfort objects, suggesting that personality keeps some infantile traits as we grow.

Designers have often exploited these psychological characteristics by creating products that talk to our childish side. We can find designs by the Italian design company Alessi among the most noticeable of these attempts. At the beginning of the nineties, Alessi brought to the market a series of kitchen tools as part of the product line 'family follows fiction' (a pun on the more famous Bauhaus slogan 'form follows function', see <https://www.lpwk.it/collections/channel/f.f.f.-family-follows-fiction>). These tools come in various forms that recall stylized human beings, animals, fruit shapes, or bizarre and fantastic characters. The absence of sharp edges, plastic materials, and vivid pastel colours characterizes these objects. Alessi kitchenware includes salt and pepper dispensers shaped like little human figures, funny ghosts as bottle caps, a devil-shaped bottle opener, dancing corkscrews that look like ballerinas, a fruit bowl that looks like a hand protruding from the table, a penguin-shaped teapot, and a lemon juicer resembling an alien monster (fig. 10.1a).

Alessi's experiment applies the contrast and balance strategy in several ways. The psychological contrast is evident in the already mentioned juxtaposition between adult and child traits of our personality. Alessi's designers explicitly referenced the theory of transitional objects in developing these products (Verganti, 2008; Polinoro, 1993). Alessi tools play with our imagination and second our natural tendency, even as grown-ups, to see a stylized representation of living beings in inanimate forms. This 'animism' is what makes it possible for us to see a human figure in a corkscrew that has two symmetric handles, one on each side, surmounted by the bottle opener part. The handles look like arms, the bottle opener the head, the structure containing the screw the body, and the screw itself the legs.



Figure 10.1a - Some examples of kitchen and table tools created by Alessi (on the left Juicy Salif by Philippe Starck, on the right Anna G collection by Alessandro Mendini).

Contrast is also applied at the pragmatic level by introducing the violation of a taken-for-granted kitchen rule. How often have you been reminded when you were a kid by your parents that you were not supposed to touch kitchen stuff?

Finally, Alessi's tools remind us emotionally that cooking and preparing dinner for family and friends is a playful and loving act that can be supported by transitional objects that remind us of a motherly relationship between the people we are about to feed and us.

Other transitional objects have been developed in the digital and hi-tech world, such as the Tamagochi, which offered surrogate pets, or social robots created to simulate emotional interaction.

The automotive industry also offers many examples of cars that incorporate contrasting features. The Honda Element was created as a sporty and playful car that could appeal to young families and particularly to fathers. The car had to balance the unconventional juvenile look with features such as safety and a lot of storage space for the family. Another example is the Mini, which combines sporty and speedy driving style with a childish and feminine character.

Instructions

Inner child theory is an example of dynamic theories that see our personality as constantly evolving amidst a system of opposite traits, such as feminine/masculine or introvert/extrovert. Our personality results from contrasting and balancing these opposite forces, sometimes exceeding on one side of the continuum. Products that play with this tension tend to contrast these dual characteristics while balancing the two traits' different needs. For instance, in the case of Alessi, the childish form makes a kitchen tool fun but does not compromise its functionality, or the toy-like thermoplastic material does not make the tool any less unsafe.

Follow these instructions to appreciate how contrast and balance work in other products:

1. Find another two examples of transitional objects or, more broadly, of products that talk to opposite traits of our personality (extrovert/introvert, feminine/masculine, childish/adult).
2. Identify the opposite traits and describe the characteristics of the products that help to highlight the contrast (shape, colour, materials, functionalities, etc.).
3. Observe how the design balances these opposite requirements in the actual use of the product.

References

Polinoro, E. (ed.), 1993. Family Follows Fiction workshop. Published by Centro Studi Alessi, freely available in Italian and English at this link http://www.laurapolinoro.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/LIBRO_FFF.pdf

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