Understanding the caring practices of users

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Abstract: This paper explores how people extend and preserve the life of specific objects and domestic spaces through 'caring', drawing on early findings from an empirical study conducted by an interdisciplinary team of researchers at Sheffield Hallam University. Researchers from across the design disciplines of fashion, product and interiors explore the attitudes of users towards care routines by profiling and comparing the specific practices, customs and rituals that are adopted in the care and maintenance of products and domestic spaces in regular use.

During the 20th century the cultural and economic value of products dramatically changed as the availability and affordability of mass-produced, low cost goods increased in the marketplace (Walker 2006). As a consequence, the emphasis on product care and maintenance has become less important, and is fostering a "careless" society in which a growing lack of skill, knowledge, and motivation means that users do not routinely engage in the appropriate care practices that are known to help extend the life or use of particular objects and spaces. Although in general terms consumer products have come to be considered disposable, it is argued that through 'good' design there is an opportunity to establish an emotional bond or attachment between user and product that together with associated practices of care can help sustain and extend product lifetimes (Chapman, 2005; Walker, 2006; Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008). However, while the designer may be able to enhance the relationship between user and product, this paper highlights a range of unpredictable care practices that exist amongst consumers, which can affect these intentions. Motivated by a desire and the perceived need to encourage users to engage more with care and maintenance routines as a means to preserving the life of products and environments, this research reveals user-centred insights that may help designers to support and encourage better maintenance and 'care' practices.

Introduction

It is well known that the life of a product can be strongly affected by the treatment it receives during use (Cox, Griffith, Giorgi & King, 2013). Undertaking simple repair procedures; using appropriate cleaning products and processes; testing and maintaining working parts and components etc. are steps that can be undertaken by users to preserve the life of products and domestic spaces. Although regularly used products and spaces "…depend upon our care and attention in order to survive" (Chapman, 2005, p.72), for many, contemporary life is demanding, and the time, dedication and attention that may be needed to care for products and domestic spaces, is limited.

It is important to recognise that product lifetimes vary enormously. While some items are developed to be disposable, for example medical supplies and paper plates are discarded for reasons of hygiene and safety (Walker, 2006), other products are developed for longer lifetimes that operate within a variety of market needs and consumer expectations. However, regardless of the perceived lifetime of a product, factors considered during the design process can potentially lengthen or shorten its life during use. For example in the design and development phase, a product lifetime may be reduced because of the decision to use inferior materials and cheaper manufacturing processes for construction; or more perceptually, product aesthetics governed by seasonal trends, can sooner or later become outdated (Walker, 2006). For the user these design/development/manufacturing decisions can complicate their understanding of actual/expected product lifetimes, and

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challenge preconceived ideas around the correlation between brand and price as an indicator of a long lasting or durable product. However, while users may find it difficult to establish the actual lifetime of a product, as Cox et al., (2013) observed, people in general only expect products to last for as long as they are needed without breaking down, and they do not necessarily expect the item to last any longer than this. This means that the value that is placed on the durability, and the functionality of a product can be different. While functionality plays a critical role during use, durability (to extend the life of the product beyond expected time periods) may prove to be a less important consideration.

While these observations point to a complex picture of needs and beliefs, it could be argued that to meet even minimal expectations of use some form of care by the consumer is required to ensure a product or space remains functional. Norman argues that products should be developed for pleasure, for use and for meaning, and that to potentially improve our engagement with products during use, a product should embody four components; "function, understandability, usability, and physical feel" (2004, p.70). While this is a useful framework, it places the emphasis of responsibility on the designer to develop a product that meets these intentions. However, an alternative proposition would be that responsibility is shared between producer and user. Users, it could be argued, have a duty of care to engage with appropriate care and maintenance practices that are known to help retain the functionality of products and domestic spaces throughout their lifecycle. (Gwilt, 2014). This research begins to investigate if care practices are a regular feature of peoples' lives, and if not why, and how can they be re-engaged?

Background

Maintaining the life of products was an integral part of the everyday up until World War II. People routinely engaged in practices recommended to protect and prolong the life of new products, and advice manuals, whilst not always followed, provided information that became commonplace in daily life (Strasser, 1999). Strasser argues that while Americans engaged in a consumerist culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, "…they mended, reused, saved and made do" due in

part to frugal living and an appreciation for the material value of goods (1999, p.22). However, these perspectives were not seen as "…a conscious virtue or as self-denial but as a way of life", that was instead led by a recognition for usefulness. (Strasser, 1999, p.28).

In the latter part of the twentieth century the need for durability was superseded by a desire for convenience and affordability that enabled people to buy products at ease; for leisure, and disposability. Recent technological developments in computing, mobile phones, entertainment devices and so on have only affirmed this custom. Consumers are promised goods that provide 'ease of use', are 'fashionable' and 'maintenance-free', that satisfy human desires rather than needs (Whiteley, 1993). In the predominant model of contemporary consumption it appears that users are not overly interested in extending the life of products, and in particular items purchased for their fashionability are often treated with little care during use because there is an expectation that they will be replaced before they become damaged or broken (Cox et.al., 2013). Furthermore, Cox et al. suggest that this means simple, preventative care practices, such as repairing shoes or using protective coverings are comparatively rare (2013). Shove (2003) argues that there is a "…niggling tension between the production, appropriation and maintenance of standardized and localized interpretations of normal practice", and it is this tension between the generic and the customizable that has, and continues to, plague our modern consumerist society. As improved product accessibility and affordability has made the disposability of products a standard practice, then it becomes harder to argue for the 'localized' care practices needed to preserve and maintain existing products and domestic spaces. People do typically keep some products for longer if they are considered to provide a 'functional service' (Cox et al., 2013) but is functionality the only reason for employing care practices?

Perspectives on care
While a 'care perspective or care thinking' is commonly connected to Social Policy, Health and Social Care (Barnes, 2012) there is little formal interpretation of this term in respect to the practice of design or how we think about designing. Design anthropologist, Elizabeth Dori Tunstall (2014) argues that while empathy

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may be encouraged through design as a way to challenge apathy, the value of 'caring' involves action. Acknowledging advocates of empathy such as Tim Brown at IDEO (2013), who suggest that empathy can enable designers to understand the experiences of others, Tunstall considers that empathy alone does not automatically involve the more positive act of caring.

Engaging with 'care thinking' may in addition lead designers to consider how users can be motivated to participate with care practices during use. Although Norman proposes that affection for a product is earned through the discrete interactions that are displayed between product and user, "…an object's special characteristics makes it a daily part of our lives, when it deepens our satisfaction, whether because of its beauty, its behavior or its reflective component" (2004, p.227), the user does not necessarily feel they have a moral or ethical responsibility to care. However, in times of economic uncertainty people are willing to buy products that they can "…keep and care for and enjoy for longer periods of time", which as Fulton Suri (2009) proposes reminds us of the value of "…taking care of the things we love, and growing our love for the things we take care of." While this perspective may be reminiscent of Strasser's depiction of pre World War II attitudes towards the use of preventative maintenance practices for 'useful' products, in contemporary society perhaps it is through the moral and ethical connections associated with, for example, duty of care with ownership, environmental issues and the much publicized social conditions of workforces that may motivate and re-engage care agendas.

Although a consumerist 'throwaway' culture is prevalent, people will often devote more time, money or attention when buying and using a product if it meets both functional and aesthetic needs. This coefficient is frequently associated with perceptions of 'special' (Cox et al., 2013). In much of the literature evaluating the bond between user and product, terms such as *special, cherished, valued,* and *treasured* are frequently used to describe the user's emotional attachment towards objects and spaces that are considered important or long lasting. These ascribed terms can also be used to reference products that have 'unknown' lifetimes, and it is difficult to determine whether the objects are used

regularly or infrequently. However, products that provoke emotional and personal responses can become "…precious to us and worthy of our care" (Walker, 2006, p.49). This suggests that an object, or space, has to be valued, be special, or cherished in order to motivate the user to care; can 'ordinary' products and domestic spaces that are in regular use elicit caring practices too?

Methods

The idea that many people place a greater emphasis on functionality and reliability, over durability (Cox et al., 2013), points towards a need to better understand how products and places are cared for and maintained, and to explore the types of preventative care practices that are adopted by people. In the '*Caring for Places and Things*' pilot study an interdisciplinary team of design researchers focused on methods for revealing the ways in which caring is, or could be, embedded and expressed in the daily encounters between people and products and domestic spaces. Within our communities there are specific products and spaces that are regularly cared for and maintained by people, and through data collection methods including surveys, observations and semi-structured interviews, the research team explore users perceptions and applied practices towards the care of products and spaces in regular use. By understanding and comparing variances in knowledge, skill and attitudes between different users, and specifically where care knowledge and skill is acquired, it is hoped that the data will begin to identify what individual and community care practices are in current use, and point to the requirements that are needed to support and promote an increased engagement with care and maintenance routines by individuals and communities.

In order to explore peoples' perceptions and experiences of caring for products and domestic spaces both quantitative and qualitative approaches were selected. A series of online surveys and face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with male and female users representative of a broad range of ages and socio-economic groups. The interview respondents were approached through established networks and selected to represent a wide spectrum of users at different life-stages. Each respondent was

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provided with a short background statement so that it was clear that the intentions of the study were to understand the care practices associated with items and spaces in frequent use. Terms such as 'special', 'cherished', 'treasured' were avoided so as not to trigger emotional engagement responses. Respondents were required to focus on the caring practices associated with either: a) a garment, or b) a domestic space, or c) a product that was routinely and regularly in use. It was decided not to highlight that the study was also interested in perceptions of product lifetimes and sustainable design, since it became apparent in question development and trials that this focus had a tendency to lead respondents to choose items or specify approaches perceived as being environmentally friendly.

Findings

Although in the early stages of the pilot study there are some observations that can be made, which may provide indicators for further analysis. Common themes have begun to emerge that identify some of the 'value' attributes that users associate with a specific garment, domestic space or product. At the same time we are beginning to notice areas of concern or difficulty that are encountered by users in respect to care practices, which may or may not be apparent to the design community.

It is commonly believed that providing and improving care information at the point of purchase is critical, and making sure that this advice is clear and simple is an important step in assisting users at home (Cox et al., 2013). However, existing studies that explore the benefit of product labeling in user care decisions have shown mixed results. This, it is argued may point to the potential to explore alternative delivery systems for the communication of care techniques beyond the traditional label. In a study conducted by van der Merwe, Bosman, Ellis, van der Colff and Warnock (2014), although the majority of survey respondents recognized the life of a textile product could be extended by following the care instructions provided, less than half of the respondents carried this through to a practical application. This observation was reiterated in our early findings, where only 40% of the survey respondents who chose a garment as their representative item followed

care instructions. This would support an alternative strategy from Manzini and Jégou (2003) that care may be better managed through external services and facilities that would reduce the need for dedicated space and equipment in the home, and drive the development of efficient, high quality outside services. However, it is becoming clear in our study that while it appears people may not follow formal or manufacturer's advice, many people rely on existing experiences, which may be self-taught or come from knowledge that has passed down through family members (Shove, 2003). In discussing the reasons for washing clothes, Shove argues that typically users wash clothes for personal comfort and pleasure, and to meet social expectations for wearing clean clothes, however today laundering is increasingly linked to keeping clothes, "…looking and feeling as good as they did when they were new" (2003, p.125). In our survey findings it was apparent that this was a view held by many of the respondents with more than 71% of respondents adopting a thoughtful, practical approach to the laundering and storage of a garment worn more than 7 times in a month, so that its condition was preserved.

Similarly, people appear to have a considered approach to the caring of domestic spaces that are in regular use. 69% of respondents specified a kitchen or bathroom as the space that they allocated for care, with 47% of respondents carrying out routine care practices typically more than 12 times in a month. In line with Shove's (2003) observations with the washing of clothes, it seems that the skills required to care for a domestic space are typically learned from members of the family with 97% of our respondents learning caring skills at a very young age from the mother. However many users are prepared to question and challenge existing practices especially when it comes to choosing between regular and environmentally friendly cleaning products. "Some of it I've learnt from my Mum, showing us when we were little …and other stuff I've picked up from online sources about what's an eco way to do things.' (Becca, female, 25)

It would appear that there are specific desirable qualities sought in regularly used products and domestic spaces that motivate users to engage with appropriate care practices. In terms of clothing products the

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majority of survey respondents (almost 90%) used the term 'comfort' to describe one rationale for why the garment was cared for and used regularly. From the data on domestic spaces it is apparent that for most users caring practices are associated with cleanliness. In the UK in the late 1890s a wide range of measures were implemented to change public behavior in order to prevent the spread of disease (Forty, 2002), which included communicating scientific facts and stimulating emotive responses of guilt and anxiety about dirt. It appears, this health and hygiene agenda is still active today.

Conclusions

Although the pilot study is a work-in-progress, it is recognized that going forward a larger study is needed to more clearly define the key desirable qualities and drivers in regularly used products and domestic spaces, which once identified may help to signal pathways to improved design, development and/or services that can be used to motivate users to rigorously engage with care practices again. For the design community we reiterate the view shared by Cox et al., (2013) that there is a potential to improve signposting to after-care service and repair where it is available, but at the same time recognize that users acquired care knowledge from family members requires time and commitment to update personal knowledge. As mentioned, existing sustainable design literature suggests that care practices could be managed through external services and facilities, however if not handled cautiously, this approach may become problematic as the duty of care is shifted away from the user, creating a wider disconnect between product and user. However, this approach is useful to consider as it repositions the view of design and the designer as more than just a contributor to production, and instead sees the role as a bridge between production and consumption. We argue that another way forward is to consider design practice underpinned by care thinking as a way to support and engage the user in a more considered approach to the care of products and domestic spaces.

Acknowledgments

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