

PRODUCT NAMES AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION FROM DESIGNERS TO TARGET USERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an empirical study into the names that people assign to products, based on visual form qualities. The study considers the relationship between a designer and target users of a product, within the context of communication. The emphasis is on meanings that are elicited from product names, specifically the communicative aspect of aesthetic, symbolic, and emotional characteristics of visual product form described through product names. A product name is considered as a symbolic description of designers' intended messages with reference to product form. The fieldwork involved evaluations of newly designed Turkish seating furniture (n=8), by questioning both the original designers of the products (n=4) and representatives of target user groups (n=80). The results reveal that product names related to (i) the 'perceived character of product visual qualities' and (ii) 'personality aspects of product behaviour' can successfully convey designers' intended messages.

Keywords: Product Form Perception, User Experience, Communication, Product Names

INTRODUCTION

Evidence indicates that product form is one of the factors that play an important role in users' product evaluations and responses (Bloch, 1995; Crilly et al., 2004; Creusen and Schoormans, 2005; Hsiao and Chen, 2006; Desmet & Hekkert, 2007). Product form is mostly defended by its symbolic (meaning-based), aesthetic and emotional values and not by its traditional functional value. When people interact with products, they tend to interpret and respond to expressive qualities moderated through product form. In the perception of product form, the role of the sense

of vision is more prominent than touch, taste, smell, and hearing (Crilly et al., 2004; and Ulrich, 2007).

Product form, and in particular product *visual* form, can be considered the medium through which designers' encoded messages about a product are transmitted (Crilly et al., 2004). Product visual form is the first and essential medium of communication in product design, considering that it carries the messages or intentions of its creators whilst also moderating users' first impressions and interpretations. Product visual form speaks to those who interact with it, defining itself through its characteristics and behaviours. In this respect, audiences make a conversation with the originator of the product.

There are few empirical studies investigating comparative relationships between designers' and users' product form perceptions. Hsu et al. (2000) investigated the relationship between designers' (though not the designers of studied products) and users' conceptual models with reference to product semantics. The results of the study demonstrated that some significant differences exist between designers and users in their perception of product visual form, especially since a single visual element of a product can elicit different impressions from people.

The determination of a product name is a reflection of the story that designers (as form givers) make to connect with their audiences. Names are (usually) chosen to express meanings and characteristics of a design. Accordingly, product names can be considered as *media* that communicate designers' intentions or messages regarding the product they have created. Designers consider names as an opportunity to bring strength to their designs, by defining intended messages through just a few or a single word. A single word name can very powerfully

connote a designer's intentions to target users without any distortion or noises. A name implies more than assigning an external quality to product form; it signifies its internal communicative meaning and message.

However, there can be failures in the process of communicating meanings. Fiske (1990) argues that the generation and exchange of meanings within a semiotic model of communication is based around the extent to which a writer (constructor of a message) and a reader (interpreter of a message) utilize the same signage system. A proposed product name can be considered as a 'text' that is 'written' by a designer and 'read' by a user. From the perspective of semiotic studies, the relationship between the product *name* and product *form* can be questioned. For example, when we read the word of 'chair', it signifies to us the concept of a chair and a basic image of a chair may be conjured in our mind. However, questions may arise when we are exposed to an image of an unfamiliar chair. What does that image stand for or connote? Do we recognize the product as a chair? Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate and discuss designers' intended messages (encoded in product form) and target users' perceived messages (expressed through the names that they give to product visual form). The primary issue of this research is explored through the following questions:

- What kinds of messages do designers wish to transmit through the names that they give to their designs?
- Do target users' first impressions and subsequent interpretations correspond with designers' intentions, regarding products names and associated connotations?

METHODOLOGY

This study used products from the furniture sector to investigate the meaning of names given to product visual form. It involved studies with the original product designers and intended users. The reason for selecting this sector was that it is a strong manufacturing industry in the authors' country of residence (Turkey). Furthermore, furniture industry firms regularly commission design services and make considerable effort to differentiate their products through distinct visual forms. Products for the study

were gathered from a wide variety of seating furniture, each providing the basic function of sitting, e.g. chairs, armchairs, chaise lounges, sofas, and stools, and each was designed by a well-regarded Turkish designer. Product selection centred on seating that:

- represented a 'new edge' in Turkish design, being innovative or novel regarding visual form;
- was available to, or specifically targeted at, Turkish users, for ease of access to user group participants.

Of the candidate products, a final selection of eight was made (Table 1), based on a further requirement that the designers of the products had to be available for participation in the study.

An empirical study using questionnaires was carried out, to investigate the relationship between designers' and users' ascription of names to the selected products, based on visual appearance. Two stages were involved: sessions with designers and sessions with target users.

SESSIONS WITH DESIGNERS

A questionnaire was devised to probe designers' intentions in relation to selected names and product visual form. In the first step, the questionnaire was used to understand whether the designers had any particular type of user in mind when designing their product. Accordingly, the designers were asked to provide demographic information of the target users including age, gender, income level, and level of education together with a description of their lifestyle and typical activities. Later, the designers were asked to explain who gave the product name, and why. Then, if deemed necessary, an alternative name summarizing the visual characteristics of the product was requested from the designers.

SESSIONS WITH TARGET USERS

It was crucial that the target user participants fitted to the profile that designers had in mind for their products. One of the most difficult and critical tasks was to locate such participants. In this regard, the designers had been asked to mention in which places, and in which regions of cities, intended users would most likely be found. The demographic and

sociological information collected from the designers' questionnaire allowed rejection of data originating from user participants not matching the target profile. Eighty participants were recruited in total, divided into ten participants for each of the eight products under evaluation. The designer-user ratio was therefore 1:10. During the questioning process, the products

were represented as A3 colour printouts, accompanied by dimension information. Participants were guided to make their evaluations on the basis of their impressions and not just literal interpretations. Users were asked to draw or write their first impressions of the product form and to offer a name for the product based on what came quickly to mind.


Designer / Manufacturing Firm	Product Code, Name and Image	
<p>Öznur ÇÖMLEK Member of design team Manufacturer: Autoban</p>	<p>P1 (Sledge)</p> 	<p>P2 (Mushroom)</p> 
<p>Alp NUHOĞLU Solo designer Manufacturer: B&T</p>	<p>P3 (Daydream)</p> 	<p>P4 (Sumo)</p> 
<p>Tanju ÖZELGİN Solo designer Manufacturer: B&T, Nurus</p>	<p>P5 (Boxer)</p> 	<p>P6 (TO armchair)</p> 
<p>Aziz SARIYER Solo designer Manufacturer: Derin</p>	<p>P7 (Ball)</p> 	<p>P8 (S armchair)</p> 

Table 1 Furniture sector products selected for inclusion in the empirical study

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The questionnaire data contained different levels of meaning ascribed to product form via product names. Designer's intentions, alongside users' first impressions and analogy statements, were taken into consideration. The analysis of the data is discussed in the following sections, firstly on an individual basis for each product.

NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH P1

According to the designer, the name 'Sledge' was given to P1 by the design team because the visual characteristics of a sledge were influential factors in

determining the product form. The designer proposed no alternative name. Ms. Çömlek put forward that the intended form had been exactly realized in the manufactured product. On the other hand, users with the help of imagination tried to deconstruct the visual characteristics of P1 into familiar sketched analogies. In comparing the sketched analogies and the names proposed by users, the former method seems to have been the most effective at eliciting product form signals that matched designers' intentions (Table 2).

As the essence of the given names and analogies imply, three kinds of names could be distinguished. The first kind of names refers to objects or concepts around us that exist in the world such as Horse

Saddle, Snowboard, Waves & Cloud, and Alpine Cheese. It reveals that users found similar attributes involving aesthetic, function, material, and other characteristics in these objects as they found in P1. The second group refers to attributes that lead to a direct assessment of form or function independent of a product reference, such as Primitive, Arch, Chink, Sit-Lie. For example, the name of Sit-Lie not only explains about the product form but also suggests a

level of posture and comfort. The last group refers to the personality of the product form. The name of Grandpa given by the first user describes the product personality as being old and traditional. The results show that semantically the name Snowboard is closest to the given name Sledge. So it can be said that the design team were slightly successful in transmitting messages that would lead users to understand the choice of product name Sledge.





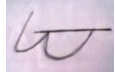



									
Product Name: Sledge (P1)					Alternative Name: ...				
U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10
									
Grandpa	Horse Saddle	Snowboard	Primitive	...	Arch, Curve	Chink, Cleft	Sit-Lie	Waves & Clouds	Alpine cheese

Table 2 Comparison between product name(s) determined by the designer and sketched analogies / names given to P1 by users

NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH P2

Table 3 contains the sketched analogies that four participants used to describe their first impressions of P2. These sketches correlate quite closely to the names also offered by these participants. The organic form of a mushroom was the source of inspiration for the design team to create P2, and accordingly the name ‘Mushroom’ was assigned by the design team. Ms. Çömlek also proposed an alternative name ‘Chocolate’ on the basis of what the product form reminded her of. Considering the names proposed by users, three types could be identified.

The name Oval given by user 1 defines the dominant visual qualities of P2, as the curvaceous attributes of P2 were the centre of attention. It can be supported by the sketched analogy and the visual qualities of P2 defined by user 1. Another group of names refers to familiar objects with similar properties regarding

overall shape, material, function, and other characteristics. Eight of the names, Stamp (proposed by U2 and U5), Fountain (U3), Pawn (proposed by U4 and U9), Bobbin (proposed by U6 and U10), and Goblet (U8), were found to fit this group. The name of Cosy Stop (U7) refers to a message about the overall impression of the product: “this stool tells me to stop and take a cosy break”. The names of Castle (U4), Mushroom (U6), and Dumbbell (U9) were given as secondary names. These names reveal that P2, with impressive curves on its wooden body, was successful to remind people of familiar objects, mostly on a small scale. The name ‘Mushroom’ was directly noted by U6 (and indirectly by U3, who drew a mushroom growing under a fountain in her sketched analogy). Therefore, the design team was relatively successful in communicating the organic characteristics of a mushroom.






									
Product Name: Mushroom (P2)					Alternative Name: Chocolate				
U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10
									
Oval	Stamp	Fountain	Pawn, Castle	Stamp	Bobbin, Mushroom	Cosy Stop	Goblet Sofa	Pawn, Dumbbell	Bobbin

Table 3 Comparison between product name(s) determined by the designer and sketched analogies / names given to P2 by users

NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH P3

The name ‘Daydream’ was given to P3 by the designer. Through the given name, the designer intended to communicate positive emotional attributes of the product, in that one can make a dream while sitting. An English name was given because the company has customers from countries other than Turkey. The designer suggested an alternative Turkish name of ‘Düs’, which means dream. Considering the sketched analogies, three distinct types can be identified (Table 4). The sketched analogy of U1 originated from the product’s overall shape that reminded the user of a Boomerang, an object with similar visual qualities. Another type of sketched analogy referred to the product function, as users (U2 & U10) tried to show that P3 would swing as one sits.

The last group of sketched analogies reflects participants’ feelings toward P3. User 4 expressed that she was happy while user 9 tried to express that P3 provided privacy for a single person. Except for user 1, the other users (U2, U4, U9, & U10) gave names to P3 on the basis of their sketched analogies. Most of the proposed names referred to feelings and connotative interpretations of an object. The names of Destination, Loneliness, Smiley, Desire, and Privacy fit to this group. Based on the sketched analogies of users 2 & 10, it is obvious that the names of Flexible and Swing originated from the perceived functional characteristics of the product. The name Chaise Lounge refers to denotative meaning, being tied to the obvious function of the object. Even as a name it describes the product’s visual properties. The name of AHMET (a common male name in Turkey) is related to user 8’s experience level of meaning attached to her husband


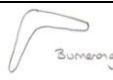



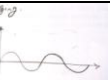
									
Product Name: Daydream (P3)					Alternative Name: Düs				
U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10
									
Destination	Flexible	Loneliness	Smiley	Desire	Chaise Lounge	Even	AHMET	Privacy	Swing

Table 4 Comparison between product name(s) determined by the designer and sketched analogies / names given to P3 by users

NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH P4

The name ‘Sumo’ was given to P4 by the designer, for the following reasons. He noted that P4 resembles a sumo wrestler in material qualities, being very strong and robust. Therefore he wanted to communicate this

attribute of P4 through the name of Sumo and its associated meanings. Three sketched analogies existed in users’ first impressions of P4 (Table 5).

User 2 attached P4 to a tree and a piece of trunk that can be used for sitting and playing as it rolls on the

ground. User 4 demonstrates a common chair, with four legs, a sitting area and a back. It is assumed that the user either compared P4 with a common chair, or he tried to represent the obvious function of P4 as being used for sitting. User 7 tried to make the visual structure of P4 clear for herself. However, just user 2 proposed a name that matched the sketched analogy. The impressive colour of P4 was an influential factor in most of the users' perceived impressions and proposed names. Three users (U2, U3, & U4) suggested the names of Green Trunk, Green Pea,

and Kiwi, referring to familiar things with similar visual qualities. The names of Rolling Chair and Bathtub refer to the perceived functionality of P4. User 1 proposed the name of Topitop. However, the user did not explain why she gave this name and what it meant. One user considered the product as shaped like a cube and accordingly gave the name Cube. One user found P4 to be similar to plastic products from the Kartell company and gave the name Kartell to P4. The name of Idle refers to product personality.





									
Product Name: Sumo (P4)					Alternative Name: ...				
U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10
									
TOPITOP	Green Trunk	Kiwi	Green Pea	...	Cube	KARTELL	Bathtub	Rolling Chair	Idle

Table 5 Comparison between product name(s) determined by the designer and sketched analogies / names given to P4 by users

NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH P5

According to the designer, the name 'Boxer' was given to P5 because of the product's overall form. The name was the shared idea of both the designer and the manufacturer, B&T Design. 'Pieta' was an alternative name the designer gave to the product, representing the Holy Mary. The designer also suggested some signified behaviour of the product form: as if holding one's body in the palm of the furniture, protecting, taking, and carrying. Five users made sketched analogies to try to understand what the product visual form signified or meant to them. All users gave names to the product, which somehow defined visual characteristics of the product (Table 6).

The sketched analogies defined the natural and sculptural qualities of the product form, together with its sensual behaviour. The users identified similarities between the curvaceous attributes of P5 and a woman's body, cloud, flower, and wine glass. Most of the users were inspired by attractive curves on the body of the product. For U6, P5 reminded him of a tulip next to a small rock. It can be interpreted that the user wanted either to put emphasis on pleasing

attributes of the sitting unit or to illustrate that there is a lack of harmony between the sitting unit and the footstool. For user 10, P5 implied some pieces of

rocks that were naturally carved into the shape of a sitting unit. Based on the proposed names, different classifications of name could be identified. The names of Swan Feather and Dreaming Cloud refer to the impressions that were based on the integration of 'perceived usability and analogy'. Regarding the name Swan Feather, the user found the product to be warm to rest against, echoing the natural characteristics of the feather of a swan. U7 proposed the name of Dreaming Cloud because she found it a very restful and comfortable sitting unit in which one could take a seat, and fly in his/her dreams like a cloud. The next group of names referred to the 'personality' of the product form, such as Sensual and Love Lounge. The names of Contrast and Bumpy referred to P5's physical surface qualities. User 1, who proposed the name Contrast, did not find visual harmonies or compositions between the two objects (sitting unit and footstool). User 5 explained that the product had uneven movements on its surface, so he named it

Bumpy. One of the names derived from P5’s ‘visual quality’ and ‘evoked experience’ was Red Pilot. The other names that refer to integration of ‘visual quality and analogy’ were Red Hen, Red Bud, and Wine Glass. Each of these shows that the wine colour of the

product, together with its rounded shape, were influential on most users’ first impressions.

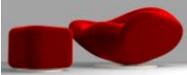





		Product Name: Boxer (P5)				Alternative Name: Pieta			
U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10
									
Contrast	Red Pilot	Wine Glass	Red Bud	Bumpy	Swan Feather	Dreaming Cloud	Sensual	Love Lounge	Red Hen

Table 6 Comparison between product name(s) determined by the designer and sketched analogies / names given to P5 by users

NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH P6

The designer, as an acronym for the designer’s name Tanju Ozelgin, gave the name of ‘TO Armchair’ to P6. Signifying that the product can be trusted, the designer suggested the alternative Turkish name of ‘Kunt’. Users, on the other hand, proposed different kinds of names, none of which was related to the actual name and its symbolic meanings (Table 7). Four users gave a name that mostly referred to familiar objects or concepts with similar

visual characteristics (Hot Wheelbarrow, Kite, Ship, Teeter Board and Bird). The analogies sketched by users 1 and 10 support these kinds of names. There existed two names, Deep and Isometric, which directly judged the visual quality of P6. The name Relaxing signified the product personality. The name SOLMAZ (a female Turkish name) is mostly related to the experience level of meaning, because the participant attached P6 to her daughter. U4 could not suggest a name for P6 as he found it an unusual product



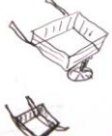
		Product Name: TO (P6)				Alternative Name: Kunt			
U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10
									
Bird	Deep	Relaxing	...	Teeter Board	SOLMAZ	Isometric	Ship	Kite	Hot Wheelbarrow, Hot Sledge

Table 7 Comparison between product name(s) determined by the designer and sketched analogies / names given to P6 by users

NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH P7

The designer stated that the name ‘Ball’ was given because the product resembles a ball in appearance. He suggested a second name of Globe because of the product’s spherical shape. Two users sketched analogies to reveal their first impressions. User 5 found the product form to be like a peeled and carved

potato. The user noted that P7 also reminded him of a peeled potato because of its colour and shape. User 7 sketched his feelings as he found P7 to be very comical, with its appearance resembling a smiling face. These two users gave names to P7 on the basis of their sketched analogies (Table 8).

The users' first impressions and proposed names show that P7 with its impressive colour and spherical shape evokes similar impressions in users' perceptions. Accordingly, the name of Lemon Chair (U1), Lemon (U3, U9), Egg (U4), Peeled & Boiled Potato (U5), and Lim-Ball (U10) can be identified. The names of Chick and Cradle signify the familiar and

childlike characteristics of P7. However, the name of Cradle may also represent the user's perceived usability as she found it to be comfortable. The name of Corners of Sphere related to this user's literal evaluation of the overall product shape. As mentioned before, the name of Smile was based on the user's sketched analogy that refers to product personality.




									
Product Name: Ball (P7)					Alternative Name: Globe				
U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10
									
Lemon Chair	Chick	Lemon	Egg	Peeled & Boiled Potato	Corners of Sphere	Smile	Cradle	Lemon	Lim-Ball

Table 8 Comparison between product name(s) determined by the designer and sketched analogies / names given to P7 by user

NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH P8

According to the designer, the name S Armchair was given because visual characteristics of the letter 'S' were influential in determining the overall product shape. The product exhibits a continuous curved line, consistent with the letter S. Based on its visual characteristics, the designer suggested the alternative names of Spiral and Flex. Four users sketched analogies to indicate their first impressions. Three users (U1, U2, and U5) sketched analogies that reveal they were trying to deconstruct the visual characteristics of P8. The sketched analogies helped them to name the product. The sketched analogy from U8 demonstrated product personality characteristics. The names given by most of the users reveal that P8

with its distinctive form and characteristics evokes similar impressions in users' visual perceptions (Table 9). The names of Fatty "S", "S-ofa", S-shaped Couch, S Armchair, and "S" are extremely close to the name designated by the designer. Two users (U2 and U7) proposed the name Snake, which signifies a something that is typically found in an S-shape. The name of Snuggle from U4 intimates product comfort. However, there existed two other names, Sebere and Saun, neither of which have explicit meanings nor did the users indicate any reasoning. Based on the proposed names by users, it can be said that the designer was highly successful in transmitting messages that led users to understand the choice of product name S Armchair.


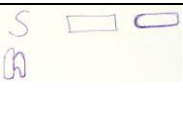


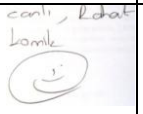
									
Product Name: S (P8)					Alternative Name: Spiral, Flex				
U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10
									
Fatty "S"	Snake	SAUN	Snuggle	"S-ofa"	S-Shaped Couch	Snake	SEBERE	S Armchair	"S"

Table 9 Comparison between product name(s) determined by the designer and sketched analogies / names given to P8 by users

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

All of the names proposed by designers and users are now cross-compared to identify different types of names together with the kinds of messages communicated through those names. Although users were not asked to explain why they had suggested

names, the users' perceived descriptions and sketched analogies were taken into consideration to propose rationale for the names. Moreover, the types of names given by designers are analysed and described separately from those of users, so that a comparison can be made between the types of names that appear in both classifications. It is assumed that the types of names identify the dominant concepts or attributes communicated through product visual form. Across the eight product examples, it can be identified that designers tend to select names that:

- a. refer to personality aspects of the product behaviour, e.g. Sumo (P4), Pieta (P5), Daydream (P3), Kunt (P6);
- b. refer to a visual resemblance between the product and other familiar objects or concepts, e.g. Sledge (P1), Mushroom (P2), Chocolate (P2), Ball (P7), Boxer (P5), Globe (P7), S (P8), Spiral (P8); or
- c. refer to a product's identity or to a product that has a belonging to someone. In other words, these kinds of names reveal how the designer attached a personal touch to the products he/she designed: e.g. TO, stands for Tanju Ozelgin (designer of the sample P6).

On the other hand, considering the ≈ 80 names proposed by users, different types of names can be distinguished that mostly arise from first impressions of product visual form. These names refer to:

- a. perceived personality characteristics: e.g. Grandpa (P1), Snake (P8), Sensual (P5), Smiley (P3);
- b. perceived usability of the product's behaviour: e.g. Snuggle (P8), Swan-feather (P5), Rolling chair (P4), Swing (P3);
- c. the assessment of product visual qualities: e.g. Contrast (P5), Bumpy (P5), Deep (P6), Cube (P4), Oval (P2), Primitive (P1);
- d. the resemblance between a product's visual qualities and familiar objects or concepts: e.g. Lemon

(P7), Egg (P7), Bird (P6), Kiwi (P4), Green Trunk (P4), Stamp (P2), Bobbin (P2); or

e. the experience of meaning (or, personal experience or familiar associations triggered by the product): e.g. Solmaz (P6), Ahmet (P3), Red Pilot (P5).

According to this classification, it can be observed that names related to 'the resemblance between a product's visual qualities and familiar objects or concepts' and 'personality aspects of product behaviour' are offered by both designers and users. Therefore, these findings can be an applicable guide for designers to select names through which they can initially transmit intended messages, and which would lead users to understand the choice of product name and thereby what the product signifies.

It can also be observed that names given by designers look more personal, idiosyncratic and tangential than those offered by users. In other words, the purpose seems to puzzle more than explain, or individuate more than categorize. If we consider the marketing strategies of firms operating in the high-end furniture sector, it is perhaps no surprise that rather cryptic names are used to entice users towards a sense of individuality, up-scaling and exclusivity.

The present study investigated the communication process between the designer and target users through an empirical study on eight product examples. It is accepted that designers who develop product concepts based on styling explore the boundaries of aesthetic, meaning-based and emotional experiences. Follow-up research could focus on relationships between product visual characteristics and mental images that users construct at first glance, in order to elicit a product form's immediate and primary signals and to see if these compare closely or distantly with designer's intentions.

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