

# **‘Design and Emotion’ in the Context of Social Differentiation**

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## **Abstract**

Different social classes diverge in their goals, concerns and attitudes towards material objects. Therefore, consumption preferences reflect and reproduce social differences among people. As Veblen (1957) and Bourdieu (1984) suggests, diversity in tastes among different social classes is a crucial factor which situates material objects in the context of social differentiation. The empirical data that were detected from a larger study on attachment to and detachment from products suggested that different social classes also differ in their emotional relationship with products. It was observed that lower class and upper class people respond to different aspects of products and develop different types of emotions. More significantly to consider products in an emotional context is valid and important mostly for upper class. Do these differences in emotions as to products reflect and reproduce the differences between social classes, as the diversity in tastes do? Product emotions are constituted individually and stem from the intimate relationship with products. However, as the result of recently emerging concern on emotions in design, they are now subjected to definitions, evaluations, calculations and manipulative efforts. Studies on ‘Design and Emotion’ seems to move towards inscription of these emotions on products as an inherent quality; and therefore, emotions as to products are capable of operating as a new factor that constitutes the link between consumption of various products and social differentiation.

**Keywords:** Product emotions, design and emotion, social differentiation, attachment, detachment.

## **Introduction**

Products that people possess and use function as a system of symbols that locates them in a certain social category. Differences among various social classes with respect to their goals, concerns and attitudes in buying and using particular products constitute a link between consumption preferences and social differentiation. Do different social classes also differ in their emotional responses towards products? Where emotions as to products can be positioned in this link between consumption practices and social differences? Does the concern on designing emotionally valuable products create a new constitution for social differentiation through consumption?

As an effort on answering these questions, this paper addresses the diversity in attitudes of different social classes towards emotional value of products and accordingly attempts at discussing ‘design and emotion’ in the context of social differentiation.

### **Material objects and social differentiation**

Importance of products as signs and symbols results in articulation of consumption practices as markers of social differences. The initiator of such studies that theorizes consumption within the context of social differentiation is Thorstein Veblen (1957)'s work *The Theory of Leisure Class*. Another critical study on the link between consumption preferences and social differentiation is Pierre Bourdieu (1984)'s work *Distinction*.

Veblen (1957) examines 'conspicuous consumption' that he sees as a tool for one who has wealth and wants to demonstrate it to be able to gain social honour. Veblen (1957: 21)'s particular interest is on the leisure class which he describes as the whole of "the noble and the priestly classes" whose occupations have "the common characteristics of being non-industrial." His main argument is that social honor is achieved through the possession of wealth and its demonstration in society either in the form of conspicuous leisure or conspicuous consumption.

Through avoidance from productive labor, Veblen (1957) suggests, leisure class occupies with doings that do not produce anything useful; and, this ability to spend time in an unproductive manner indicates the possession of wealth. Similar to unproductive expenditure of time, unproductive consumption of goods as well becomes honorable. Differences in consumption practices of leisure class and working class constitute a social discrimination between them. Veblen (1957: 61) explains these differences as that "...industrious class should consume only what may be necessary to their subsistence. ...luxuries and the comforts of life belong to the leisure class."

Having shared certain points with Veblen, Bourdieu (1984) proposes a more sophisticated and extended study on the link between consumption and social differentiation. Bourdieu (1984) investigates how consumption of various goods, foods, furniture, artworks etc. are employed in different social groups in order to highlight their ways of life and to differentiate themselves from other groups. Consumption preferences of different social groups function as a means of both reflection and reproduction of social differentiation. Bourdieu (1984: 226) suggests:

There are ... many fields of preferences as there are fields of stylistic possibilities. Each of these worlds –drinks ... or automobiles, newspapers or holiday resorts, design or furnishing of house or garden ... -provides the small number of distinctive features which, functioning as a system of differences, differential deviations, allow the most fundamental social differences to be expressed...

Both Veblen and Bourdieu stress the diversity in tastes as the factor which situates material objects in the context of social differentiation. Veblen (1957) recommends that acquiring taste and knowing how to consume are manners for claiming social honour through consumption. Veblen (1957: 38) explains the drive in conspicuous consumption as possession of “as large a portion of goods as others with whom [one] is accustomed to class himself.” However, he suggests, as more and more classes undertake consumption practices, the mere consumption of goods become no more sufficient to express wealth and to claim a social honour. In order to attain a social prestige through conspicuous consumption, for Veblen (1957: 64), one must also know how to consume in a proper way and therefore must be able to “discriminate with some nicety between the noble and the ignoble in consumable goods”, by cultivating his/her tastes. He further suggests that lower classes tend to emulate upper classes. As leisure class cultivates its tastes and becomes the master of taste, what it values as good taste is tried to be imitated by the lower classes.

The notion of taste is the key concept in Bourdieu (1984)’s explanation of the diversity in consumption preferences. He focuses on taste not in the form of essentialist view, but in relation to his working formulation of ‘habitus’. What Bourdieu (1977: 72) terms as “habitus” is the system of “dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures.” One’s taste is shaped through these dispositions that do not manifest themselves only in everyday experience but are also inscribed on the body. Various criteria that Bourdieu (1984) uses for explaining different taste structures such as education and occupation are in turn related to habitus. Therefore, for Bourdieu, diversity in tastes of different classes is the consequence of different habitus they have through which different material conditions of life become inner attributes of individuals.

For example, for Bourdieu (1984), as for Veblen, different experiences as regards obtaining needs of survival become a determining factor in taste structures. While taste of a person who can not guarantee his/her nourishment and comfort develops around direct and physical benefits, a person who has no doubts on getting his/her necessities for survival, tend to

acquire a distanced attitude towards the world of objects which Bourdieu (1984) considers as Kantian approach. The Kantian aesthetic is, as Miller (1987: 149-150) puts it, “one of refusal, a forgoing of the immediate pleasure of the sensual and the evident in favour of a cultivated and abstracted appropriation through an achieved understanding.” On the other hand, the anti-Kantian aesthetic is “a preference of immediate entertainment, pleasure, the gut feeling, a regard for the sensual and the representational.” For Bourdieu (1984), assurance on having fundamental necessities of survival, as well as the cultural capital gained through education furthers one towards a ‘pure’ aesthetical appreciation of objects. Such a distinction on tastes is the crucial factor that constitutes the link between consumption of various objects and social differentiation. Bourdieu (1984: 40) suggests:

...nothing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works, the aptitude for taking a specifically aesthetic point of view on objects already constituted aesthetically –and therefore put forward for the admiration of those who have learned to recognize the signs of the admirable- and the even rarer capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even ‘common’ ... or to apply the principles of a ‘pure’ aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life, in cooking, dress or decoration, for example.

In short, Veblen (1957) and Bourdieu (1984) emphasize the idea that consumption of various goods reflect social differences among various classes and also function as a means of differentiation in the society by reproducing the social order. Their accounts give way to many studies that handle material objects in the context of social differentiation.

### **Emotions as to products in different social classes**

Following accounts of Bourdieu and Veblen, it was argued that taste becomes a decisive factor in the relationship between material objects and social differentiation. Diversity in tastes and the following differences in consumption preferences reflect and reproduce social differences among various classes. What about emotions? Is there diversity in emotional responses towards products in different social classes, as in the case of tastes?

Emotional responses of different social classes towards products will be explored with reference to the empirical data that were detected as part of a larger study about attachment to and detachment from products. This study was conducted through individual interviews in

which respondents were asked to identify one of their products to which they feel attached and one from which they feel detached, and to tell their emotions about these products. The sample was divided into three different social classes and it was observed that they diverge in their emotional responses towards products. For the aim of this discussion, responses from two classes involved in the study –upper class and lower class- will be compared, by keeping in mind these two questions: First, do both upper and lower class develop emotional responses to products and do they equally give importance to these emotions? Second, to which qualities of products they respond emotionally and what types of emotions they develop?

To begin with, it was observed that to think about products in an emotional context and to experience certain emotions as to products were valid mostly for upper class respondents. For the majority of lower class respondents, it was an extraordinary idea to consider products as sources of emotions. Most of them hardly understood what is meant by emotions as regards products and hardly imagined their products in an emotional context. Their responses fall into one or two categories of product emotions at most. Following sentences of a lower class respondent illustrate impossibility and strangeness of considering products emotionally within her conditions of life: *“I do not have anything to which I feel attached. In fact, I do not have anything except a washing machine because my house was burned. My washing machine was broken down and it was at service at that day.”*

Among upper class respondents, on the other hand, an intense and complex emotional relationship with products was observed. Almost all of them responded easily, mentioned many types of product emotions, explained them in detail and told some stories about their products. Following sentences of an upper class respondent about her kettle exemplify such a deep emotional relationship with products: *“I’m not working. I spend most of my time at home and drink too much tea and coffee. Therefore, I use my kettle during the day. When I am alone, I see it as a friend. I’m not exaggerating, we have a good relationship! Also, I like its appearance. It seems to me that it reflects my life. I take it with me even when I travel. When I was younger and living with my parents, my kettle was standing in my room and I was not going outside of my room for drinking tea or coffee. I was feeling a kind of freedom.”*

Among lower class respondents, mostly mentioned sources of emotions were the experience and the utility provided by the product. Nevertheless, none of them valued form related

qualities of products. Mostly mentioned products in case of attachment among this group were TV's that were valued for the experience, particularly the enjoyment they offer. Emotional relationship with TV's were explained by such sentences as *"It's my sole entertainment, I spend time with it."* With respect to utilitarian concerns, lower class respondents mostly valued products that satisfy a fundamental necessity, emphasising the usefulness of the product. For example, a respondent who feels attached to her refrigerator explained her reason with the following clear-cut sentences: *"It satisfies a very important need. Foods spoil without a refrigerator."* Moreover, some lower class respondents mentioned their professional equipment such as drill and shoeshine box in case of attachment. A respondent who feel attached to his shoeshine box explained his emotions as follows; *"I have to use it; because, I earn my money through it."*

Among lower class respondents, social image of products were another important consideration in cases of both attachment and detachment. This group mentioned both positive and negative emotions as to products according to the impression they give about their social position. They valued products that they assume belonging to upper class and condemned ones that seem typical to the lower class. For example, a respondent who valued her washing machine for its usefulness also added her proud with its brand by declaring that *"Its brand is Arçelik"*. On the other hand, another respondent who dislikes her oven explained her reason as follows: *"I bought it from a street seller. It is cheap!"*

An interesting case of emotional attachment towards a mobile phone revealed the sensibility of lower class respondents to the effects of products on the way they are seen by other people in society. A lower class respondent who feels attached to his mobile phone explained his reason as follows: *"I feel attached to my mobile phone, because it enables communication. However, I'm not able to use it, since it costs too much for me. I'm only carrying it with me"*. He was feeling attached to a mobile phone which he can not use; doubtless because, having a mobile phone for him was a symbol of a higher status in the society. It is not difficult to grasp why he did not make explicit his social concerns instead of mentioning capacity of mobile phone for enabling communication. He either wanted to conceal his desire to be seen as a member of upper class or he was not aware of such an aspiration for emulation. This case which exemplifies the idea of Veblen (1957) that lower classes want to emulate upper classes is typical to many lower class people in Turkey who carry a mobile phone in spite of having a little income.

As reasons for emotional attachment, upper class respondents mostly mentioned their personal concerns such as products' appropriateness to their sense of identity and ability of participating in their interests and future goals. For example, a respondent explained his emotions about his computer with the following sentences: *"My passion towards computer dates back to the age of 10. At the moment, I am studying computer engineering; therefore, computer became also important for my career objectives. Also, I assembled my computer by myself. Computer is full of opportunities; but, it means to me something more. I feel as if it reflects my life-style. I think that there exists another world beyond its screen."* In case of detachment, wrong purchase decisions were an important source of negative emotions as to products among upper class respondents. As having a higher income level and a shopping capability, many respondents told their regret on buying those products that they feel detached. A respondent, for example, explained her reason for feeling detached from her vacuum cleaner as follows: *"I bought this vacuum cleaner because of its attractiveness. However, it was not necessary, I have another one. I have never used it."*

Certainly, upper class respondents as well mentioned utilitarian aspects of products as reasons for feeling attached. However, the source and the nature of valuing functional qualities of products were different among lower class and upper class respondents. An upper class respondent, for example, explained his attachment to his armchairs with the following sentences: *"We bought them when we got married. We carried them everywhere that we moved during all those years. They have never broken down. They are very strong. Our armchairs are still with us like a statue."* On the other hand, a lower class respondent who feels detached from his cupboard explained his emotions as follows: *"They are of very poor quality. They were broken down after three months. However, I do not have enough money to buy a new one. I hate them and feel regretful of buying them."* Both respondents talked about their furniture and evaluated them as regards their functional performance. However, what differ between them are their attitudes towards functional performance of products. For the higher class respondent, a good functional performance was important since this enables him to keep his armchairs that reflect his memories and continuation of his life, during life time. His valuation of armchairs for their ability to stand like a statue reflects his admiration and esteem towards them. On the other hand, for the lower class respondent, functional performance was nothing more than a necessity. Once he bought a cupboard he does not want it to be broken down, since he can not afford it again. The emotion of upper class respondent

towards his armchairs –his admiration of its functional performance- is a distanced evaluation. He considers them as things in themselves not as things that satisfy his need for sitting. This case very well fits to the idea of Bourdieu (1984) that the assurance on obtaining necessities creates a distanced attitude towards the world of objects.

This concise comparison of lower and upper classes with regard to their emotional responses towards products reveals the diversity in emotions as to products in different social classes. Furthermore, some aspects of this diversity in emotions ensue from the same sources of differences in taste that Veblen and Bourdieu describe. Principally, Bourdieu (1984)'s idea that dissimilarity in obtaining fundamental necessities creates the diversity in tastes can be observed in this discussion on the diversity in emotions as to products: assurance on having fundamental needs for survival furthers one towards recognizing 'pure' emotions as to products.

### **Conclusion**

It was argued that there exist dissimilarities between different social classes as regards their emotional responses towards products. Lower class and upper class people respond to different aspects of products and develop different types of emotions. What is more important than this difference is that to consider products in an emotional context is valid and significant mostly for upper class. However, one question remains: do these differences in emotions as to products reflect and reproduce the differences between social classes?

Emotions as regards products arise individually from an intimate relationship with products. Furthermore, they are not realized as certain inherent qualities of products such as style and hence they can not be employed as symbols of social positions. It seems that emotions as to products can not operate as a factor in the system of social differentiation. However, emotions that people recognize as to their products have recently come out as an interest in design discussions. The goal of this concern on emotions in design can be described as designing products that are capable of providing desired emotions. Consequently, emotions that have previously been constructed individually within the intimate relationship with products have turned out to be subjected to definitions, evaluations, calculations and manipulative efforts.

This concern on emotions in design practice seems to make steps towards inscription of these individual emotions on the products as an inherent quality. By creating discrimination between products as regards their emotional capacity, such an approach is capable of situating product emotions in a symbolic system through which preferences on emotionally valuable products can be expressed. In that case differences in emotions arise as a factor which influences consumption preferences –that is, whether to buy an emotionally valuable product or not- and therefore reproduce social differences among people, as the diversity in tastes do. Consequently, such a result which may stem from the concern on emotions in design is capable of operating as a new factor that constitutes the link between consumption of various products and social differentiation.

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