Empathy: Case Study of Apple and Airbnb

Introduction

Empathy has been widely mentioned in recent years in the world of design. In this Internet information age, empathy has become especially important, and sometimes considered to be the key to allowing design to satisfy the demands of users (Chapman, 2015). Empathy is commonly used in the design industry through the adoption of user interviews, user analysis, and so on. The degree to which designers can understand and emphasise with users determines the outcomes of the design. Designs that fail to empathise with users would also fail in providing apt solutions to the problems.

Thus, it is crucial for designers to adopt an empathetic mindset, via which they build empathy at every opportunity. This mindset allows designers to get to know their user, experience the pain points of users, and make smart designs accordingly. Rather than objectifying users by mapping out their cognitive or emotional experience, empathy allows designers to act in the role of their users. This creates a relationship between designers and users that carries meaning as well as care.

However, many designers still lack a sufficient understanding of what empathy is and how empathy can be utilised in the process of design. This essay aims to introduce the concept of empathy, and discuss how empathy can be applied in the process of design through the analysis of two case studies.

The first section of the essay provides a background on the concept of empathy and the importance of empathy in design. The second section of the essay examines two case studies where empathy has been successfully applied in the design process for ideal results. Based on the analysis of the two case studies, the third section discusses how empathy can be successfully applied to design. Lastly, a conclusion is drawn for the essay, summarising the key results of the discussion.

Background

Generally speaking, empathy is the capacity to understand and share the feelings of other people (Singer, 2006). The practice of empathy is to put oneself in the position of others, to experience the emotions of others, and to discern the thoughts and feelings of others. Note that empathy is different from sympathy. Sympathy refers to the emotional reaction to the suffering and misfortune of others. Sympathy is often carried out with obvious feelings, values and judgments of likes and dislikes (Zillman, 1991). Most of the time, sympathy is irrational, easy to manipulate, and affected by the environment (Zillman, 1991). On the other hand, empathy focuses of being able to stand on the position of other people and carry out thinking and feeling from their point of view (Zillman, 1991).

Empathy is one of the most important functions of human emotion and mind. When a newborn baby hears the crying of other babies, the response is that they also cry. When one sees that his or her friends are not happy, many children who are only two or three years old will also

make a move to comfort others. Small children may put their food and toys in the hands of their friends and express their concern in body language. Humans can understand other people's emotions because there are nerve cells in the brain called mirror neuron (Blakeslee, 2006). These neurons are activated by seeing others expressing emotions, providing an intrinsic simulation of the observed facial expressions and passing signals through the insula to the limbic system (Blakeslee, 2006). In this way, the human edge system will provide the emotional feeling of the observed expression (Blakeslee, 2006).

People with empathy must first be able to recognise the emotional changes of others. This recognition and understanding of other people's emotions is the core of social cognition (Shamay-Tsoory, 2011). People with empathy are always aware that the real emotional experience is happening to others, not to the observer. Although the effectiveness of empathy is powerful, it is also bounded. In many cases, empathy is the cornerstone of emotional resonance and understanding (Shamay-Tsoory, 2011). In the social context, empathy is what drives individuals to action. Individuals who are able to see and feel the suffering and struggling of other people are most likely to be compelled to help relieve them in some way. It is also an important way to improve user experience for designers. In the case of designers, it is vital to build empathy for users to take the right course of action to design.

It is common that development teams and businesses expect users to use the product in one way while the users take another form of interaction. There are numerous products and services that are not used according to the way that they are designed. Thus, it is vital to be empathetic in design. Designers should understand how their users feel when interacting with certain products or interfaces. Good design is based on the designer’s deep understanding of the people that they are designing for, on the consideration for the feelings and emotions that their designs may evoke in users.

To create meaningful products, designers need to understand the life of the target users. This understanding serves as the foundation of the Human-Centered Design (HCD) process (Roschuni, Goodman and Agogino, 2013).The ultimate goal of the HCD process is to enable the product to be customised in ways that match the user's explicit or implicit needs and ultimately to improve user experience (Roschuni et al., 2013). The HCD process refers to optimisation of designs based on the human's behavioral habits, physiological structure, psychological situation, way of thinking, etc (Roschuni et al., 2013). With HCD, improvement of designs with consideration for human is achieved based on the basic functions and performance of the original design. Thus, the application of HCD makes the users of the designs enjoy more convenience and comfort. Ultimately, HCD seeks to ensure the respect and satisfaction of people's psychophysiological needs and spiritual pursuits in design. It is the humanistic care in design and is the respect for human nature.

Empathy and HCD are both parts of the larger concept known as design thinking. The concept of design thinking refers to the application of creativity and innovation for actions, design-making, and problem solving (Tschimmel, 2012). This concept focuses particularly on the impact of creative and innovative thinking. Empathy is one of the core principles of design thinking. In fact, it is the first step to the design thinking process. During the step of empathise, designers need to set aside their assumptions, and to suspend their own view of the world. Only in this way can designers see through the eyes of users.

Case Studies

Apple

Apple is one of the most successful technology companies in the world. Its success is largely built on its ability to deliver empathetic designs. The founder of Apple, Steve Jobs's philosophy is that Apple's products are personal tools to help individuals solve problems (Thomke & Feinberg, 2009). Apple does not face institutions or companies, but chooses individuals as its target customer. In fact, Apple has never successfully launched a product for the enterprise, which makes Apple focus on the experience of individual users (Thomke & Feinberg, 2009). In a sense, Apple's success comes from a thorough understanding of how people use computer equipment and the commitment to develop 'cool products.'

As an electronic consumer goods company, Apple always insist on satisfying the needs of consumers and constantly introduce products that can better enhance the consumer experience. Even when its products are very popular, Apple continues to deliver with innovation. From a consumer perspective, the user experience is paramount. This means that taking into account both the customer's needs and the customer's ability is important. Apple did not realize this initially. For example, one of Apple's early products, the Lisa computer introduced in 1983, was the world's first personal computer with graphical user interfaces and mouse far before the emergence of Microsoft's Windows system. The Lisa is technically leading the IBM compatible machine, as users can run several programs at the same time without having to use the keyboard to type commands. However, because it is not compatible with IBM machines, and not even compatible with Apple II, and also because the price is up to 10 thousand dollars, the product was not successful among consumers. Apple quickly gave up the product.

Later on, from iPod to iPod Touch, from iPhone to iPhone 4s, from iPad to iPad2, every time Apple upgrades, the company greatly enhances the consumer experience. While the previous generation of iPod Touch, iPhone, and iPad are still selling well, Apple is constantly developing and continuously introducing a new generation of products. For Jobs and his development team, the computer should be designed to help customers get their job done. It should be something that the consumers like to use. Apple not only makes users to see the benefits but also makes them enjoy these benefits. Only by significantly simplifying the complexity of the computer can the customer believe that the computer is useful.

Therefore, Apple especially appreciates the ease of use in design (Thomke & Feinberg, 2009). In order to achieve the goal of ease of use, Apple focused on the customer's ideas and needs in product design, and how customers interact with the product. When the designers are convinced that they has grasped the customer's ideas and needs, they will try to achieve it from an engineering perspective. It is important to create and innovate in the design phase and to create and innovate in engineering. Under the guidance of this concept, users often need to press only one button to complete the functions they want to achieve on Apple products. For example, the operation of the iPod, iPhone, and iPad is extremely simple.

Airbnb

Another successful design based on empathy is Airbnb, the online marketplace for arranging or offering lodging. Different from Apple, which used empathy for delivering products, Airbnb used

empathy to create a story for its brand that attracts users across the world. Airbnb's empathic storytelling skills moved it from a small company among start-ups to a global giant worth more than $30 billion (Pera et al., 2016).

Although many companies are involved in the business of offering non-hotel residential choices for travelling, Airbnb is the first brand that comes to mind for most consumers. Airbnb is not the biggest company offering this kind of service, and it is also not the one that has been in the industry the longest. However, Airbnb is the most apt in telling a story that resonance with consumers.

There is no doubt that companies like HomeAway and TripAdvisor are indeed more successful than Airbnb in certain areas, such as in revenue and number of listings, given the company's later founding time. However, when considering the growth rate, in the past few years, Airbnb dominated the whole industry, and its expansion speed is much faster than most of its competitors added up. This high-speed growth is the result of several factors including timing, market disruption, strong leadership, smart business models, successful strategic decisions, and excellent UX experience. Perhaps one of the most important factors for Airbnb’s success is that they have mastered the skills of storytelling.

From the first day, Airbnb is not at the forefront of the industry for its features or advantages. Rather, it has been focusing on one thing, emphasizing on the real experience. Airbnb's message was to “travel like a human.” This was changed to “belong anywhere” in 2014. Its slogan may have changed many times, but one thing has remained the same. It tells customers, investors, employees and everyone about a compelling, consistent story.

Discussion

Empathy allows one to understand other people's positions and feelings, and think and deal with problems from the perspective of others. Specifically, the role of empathy is to allow oneself to enter the role of others in a given circumstance, and to experience the feelings and thoughts of others in terms of their background as well as physical and psychological state. Even if one’s own opinions are different from others, one can understand the other's psychological, emotional, or behavioural responses. Even though being able to understand others and empathise with others does not necessarily mean that one has to agree with them.

A design must meet the user’s purpose, so designers need to understand how people interact with the products they design. The process of design is the process of discovering and solving problems. Designers should know not only who they are designing for, but also what kind of environment these people are in, what they need to do with the products, why they do it, how they will deal with it, and what kind of feelings they perceive. These should be the questions that designers continue to think throughout the design process. In the process, designers need to constantly warn themselves 'I am not the target user.” The perspective of population segmentation and market statistics is no longer enough for designers to fully understand users. The cultivation and application of empathy can help designers to understand users and they are more real and profound in the ever-changing market. This understanding covers the user’s ability, needs, expectations. And it is based on such understanding that designers come up with elegant, beautiful solutions.

The skill of empathy allows designers to understand and share the same feelings of the audience. Through the practice of empathy, designers are can put themselves in users' shoes, and to connect with users regarding how they feel about a particular problem or situation. Successful designs are the ones that are able to make the lives of their users easier. Particularly, empathy allows designers to notice real user needs that are latent. This is to say, empathy allows designers to notice the habits or desires that the users themselves may not yet have noticed through observing what situation they actually face and what courses of action they actually take. Rather than being concerned with the facts of the users, an empathic design focuses on the feelings of the users and their motivations.

User-Centred Design (UCD) is an attractive and efficient way to enhance the experiences of the user (Arbas et al., 2014). The user-centric design philosophy is very simple. That is, in every step of developing a product, users must be considered. This approach to design emphasises empathy, which can be achieved through a number of specific procedures. Contextual interviews are conducted by walking into the user's real environment. This would allow designers to know how users work, how they live, and so on. Focus group interview is carried out by organizing groups of users for discussion. This would let designers know more about users' understanding, ideas, attitudes and what they want. Similarly, individual interviews are one-on-one user discussions that allow designers to know how a user works and what the user feels, as well as what the user wants and experiences.

Conclusion

The key to the success of a design is to successfully capture the hearts of consumers by standing at the consumer's perspective empathically and listening to the voice of the customer (VOC). Only in this way can designers design high-quality products that successfully capture the hearts of consumers. Empathy is a common practice that people often use in their daily lives. No matter what kind of problems one may face in one's interpersonal relationships, one can find solutions more easily by understanding and value others' ideas. Especially in the event of conflict or misunderstanding, if the person can think about himself in the other's situation, he may understand the other party's position and original intention, and then seek common ground while reserving differences and eliminate misunderstandings.

The process of thinking about things is built on incomplete facts, past experiences, and even intuitive perceptions. The same is true for designers. When designing a project, designers tend to analyse the design focus and direction with their own past experience, which may be quite different from the real consumer demand. To put it another way, it is normal to have assumptions or speculations in the design process. Otherwise, the design case cannot continue. However, it is important to pay attention to what speculations one has made. In the design, through observation, analysis, and discussion, the designer would be able to get closer to the physiological and psychological reality of the target group, to experience the situation of consumers using products or services, and to identify potential needs and market opportunities.

Thus, it is important for any designer to try to get oneself close to the physiological and psychological state of the target group. This will greatly increase the level of credibility of the design, which is also the purpose of empathy design.

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