Understanding and Designing Wellbeing in Relation to our Material Environment

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ABSTRACT
Research has suggested that our material environment and how we personalise the physical space around us can contribute towards our psychological wellbeing. The following paper discusses this research and offers opportunities to open the design space in relation to the design of digital interventions that can help understand maintain or develop our wellbeing.

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Wellbeing, Personalization, Identity, Evocative Objects, Interaction Design.

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H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

UNDERSTANDING WELLBEING
There are a variety of theoretical frameworks within which wellbeing is examined; these include telic theories which state that individuals achieve happiness when a certain endpoint, such as a goal or need, is reached. Bottom-up theories claim that the positive and negative moments which comprise a person’s life are summed in order to produce that person’s perceived subjective wellbeing. In contrast, top-down theories claim that a person’s inherent propensity to experience the world in a certain way will affect that person’s interactions with the world. Cognitive theories focus on the power of cognitive processes in determining individual wellbeing. Evolutionary theories suggest that feelings of pleasure and well-being are produced by that which aids humans in survival. Temperament and personality theories have confirmed the importance of temperament and personality in determining an individual’s capacity for wellbeing and finally relative standards theory maintains that wellbeing results from a comparison between some standard, such as one’s past [6]. Whereas it is quite difficult to agree upon one definition of wellbeing, previous research has highlighted that the more able a person is to perform their identity, through the use of their material environment a more ‘well rounded’ person exists. A strong ‘sense of self’ or ‘identity’ is an important component of a person’s mental wellbeing. To this end, personal possessions, as an extension of the person’s sense of self, allow the construction, maintenance or reconstruction a person’s identity [2]. Personal possessions, however, are not limited to the ownerships of material objects, but can also include places one has been to, individual experiences, ideas, other people one feels close to, or group possessions (e.g., belongingness to a sports team); things that relate to the person’s self, that contribute to, and reflect, a person’s identity [2].

UNDERSTANDING & PERSONALISATION
Miller [9] argues that people are constructed by their material world, he believes that what makes us what we are exists, not through consciousness or body, but as an exterior material environment that habituates and prompts us. What his research discovered was that tenants who had been able to carry out a transformation of their homes were those who had good social relations and the support of others. Both one would presume contribute to a person’s wellbeing. This act of using material possessions to change one’s relationship with their environment is known as personalisation.

The term personalisation comes from environmental psychology, and the personalisation of the home as an expression of identity is a recurring theme in the area [1]. People organize their houses according to their needs and personal tastes through decoration and it is this act of personalisation that allows them to adapt to their houses [1,9]. A house becomes a home through an active process in which people transform their surroundings, creating links to the place they have chosen in order to satisfy their needs and wishes. Decoration plays an essential role in this process. One has often heard the phrase ‘making it your own’, but this is exactly what the act of personalization is. It is an individual using their possessions to decorate their space whilst satisfying their needs. Through this personalisation a physical space becomes converted into a psychological space [1]. And this being the case we can explore the relationship between our physical spaces and our wellbeing.

Exploring the meaning of this activity, Brunia and Hartjes-Gosselink [3] found personalisation to be associated with psychological wellbeing, as it does not only refer to distinguishing oneself, but also refers to making oneself
familiar with a place and a person’s motivation and need to express individual identity as well as one’s feeling of belongingness to group identity.

PERSONALISATION & EVOCATIVE OBJECTS

But what objects do we personalize with and assign meaning to? Whereas Carter and Gilovich [4] make a distinction between objects as experiential or material, Dewey [7] suggests that there is no distinction and that all objects influence our experience. He states that the meaning of an object becomes realized in the activity of interaction and in the direction or purpose that this activity indicates: physical and psychological growth. He helps us understand the variety of ways in which activities with our objects can be experienced as meaningful.

Once such activity is reminiscence; communicating signs of loved ones or past experiences inducing certain moods associated with those people. In fact, self-positive reminiscence activities are positively and directly associated with wellbeing, particularly in later life [10]. This also supports Dewey’s notion [7], that activities around our objects do influence psychological growth. Dewey [7] also introduced a distinction between the activities of perception and recognition as a way of dealing with the role of an object’s own qualities. Recognition is when we experience a thing and interpret it only as something we already know. Many people relate to objects through recognition simply because of habituation, or because they are unable to give their full attention to all of the information received from the environment. Perception, on the other hand, occurs when we experience a thing and realize its own inherent character [5].

The activity of recognition can be linked to the objects that were used by Miller’s participants to personalize their space. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so [9]. These objects work by being invisible and unremarked upon, a state they usually achieve by being familiar and taken for granted. Furthermore our self emerges through habitual interactions with and around our belongings [5]. People can become ‘blind’ to their home and indeed the people and objects that occupy it. It is only when an ‘outsider’ enters the home that these norms may be pointed out or remarked upon. Or indeed, when people become deprived of their possessions, when they have to leave their home and enter a situation where they are left without their taken for granted objects and find themselves in a material environment that is completely foreign to them. Examples might include individuals in emergency shelter who have suffered from domestic violence, prisoners or inpatients in isolation in hospital wards.

In previous research I explored how people perform their identity through the way in which they personalize their space [8]. I asked participants to speak about the objects that they could not live without and asked what they evoked or represented to them – these objects being termed evocative objects. This research provided rich insights into the role that our material environment plays in how we perform our identity and how personalisation contributes to our wellbeing [2]. It is necessary, however, to extend this research by looking at those who find themselves outside of their taken for granted material environments, and to reflect on how technology can assist and enhance the formation and performance of peoples’ personal identities.

CONCLUSION

Knowledge of the role that objects play in relation to our wellbeing opens up space for interaction design to afford opportunities that help us understand, maintain and develop our identity, a crucial component of a person’s mental wellbeing. Interactive technology has the potential to enable opportunities for reminiscence, can connect us to places and people that are meaningful to us or stimulate reflection on positive experiences and personal achievements. This paper further invites designers to reconsider the qualities of materiality in the design of technology that could act as an extension of a person’s sense of self.

REFERENCES