

# **“IT’S A HONDA! FOR ME...” AN EXPLORATORY STUDENT PROJECT ON BRANDING AND PRODUCT DESIGN FOR THE OLDER ADULT POPULATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Physical as well as cognitive needs associated with aging and product usage were long the point of focus when designing for the older adult population, with coursework on ergonomics and human-factors as important components in design education. Today, designers and design educators are challenged to take a more holistic design approach by actively addressing peoples’ needs and wishes associated with the perceptual and experiential aspects of products. In addressing such needs and wishes, the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of products constitute important parts of the product design process. However, the literature on design for the older adult population has only cursorily addressed how educators can integrate and focus on these qualities in design education. In this paper we report on an exploratory student project conducted at Chalmers University of Technology, focusing on branding and design for the older adult population. The purpose of the project was to explore the visual identity of brands as a starting point for the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of products when designing for older users. Results from the project showed that students enthusiastically embraced branding in designing product concepts for this user group. They also displayed a number of attempts to empathise with these users’ specific needs and wishes. In total, the concepts produced in the course suggested a broad range of ideas on how to make products more perceptually as well as experientially appealing for older adults.

*Keywords: Branding, design for the older adult population, inclusive design, product design*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Prolonged life expectancy, improving health and increasing purchasing power has made design for the ‘grey’ or ‘silver’ market increasingly important for companies [1, 2]. Some reports even suggest that the market for products targeted to older users represents the largest market ever [3], making it an undisputable part of contemporary business. Many companies are also seeking ways to better cater for the needs and wishes (expectations) of the older adult population when designing new products. Car manufacturers such as Nissan and Toyota have adjusted their design processes to account for the specific needs that can emerge with age and introduced a number of features in recent models to increase their appeal to older users [4]. Similarly, Fujitsu launched the Raku Raku phone in 2008, designed especially for the needs of senior citizens, following the implementation of a Universal Design approach [5].

Addressing physical as well as cognitive (physiological) needs associated with aging and product usage has for long been the dominant benchmark in product design when targeting older adults, with coursework on ergonomics and human-factors as key components in design education. Numerous studies have been performed on determining the effect of aging on physical capabilities such as dexterity, mobility and strength (see, for example, [6] and [7]). Approaching design with an empathically driven mindset – as it is typically the case with approaches such as Universal Design, Inclusive Design and Design for All [8] – has also proven beneficial for producing products that appeal not only to older adults, who may experience reduced functional capabilities, but also to able-bodied people [9,10]. A prominent case in point is the trans-generational success of the OXO Good

Grips range of ergonomically designed kitchen tools that have appealed to a large range of users, regardless of their age and/or physical capabilities [11].

At the same time, product design education is challenged by the fact that the needs and wishes of older users are becoming more complex to fulfil in new product development. Among other things, with increasing independence and the progress of modern society and technology, a growing awareness of the need for aesthetically pleasing products with appropriate symbolic connotations, in order to maintain a mobile, active and healthy lifestyle, has emerged [11]. The consideration of physiological capabilities remains an essential part of product design when targeting older users. However, requirements pertaining to desirability of products go beyond the direct physiological capabilities of the user, indicating a need to better acknowledge the perceptual and experiential aspects of products. As such, designers and design educators are challenged to take a more holistic design perspective when targeting older adults. In doing so, work on the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of products becomes relevant in order to make new products perceptually as well as experientially appealing.

In this paper, we report on an explorative student project recently conducted at Chalmers University of Technology (Chalmers) focusing on branding and design for the older adult population. The purpose of the project was to explore the visual identity of brands as a starting point for approaching the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of products designed for older users. Over the years, branding and design has become increasingly intertwined in both theory and practice. In particular, the development of the visual identity of brands to strengthen brand recognition and brand equity has been identified as an area for design [12, 13]. A number of authors have also discussed how design education can prepare design students for future work in this area [e.g. 14, 15]. Few studies, however, have specifically addressed the role of branding in design education targeting the needs and wishes of the older adult population. Throughout the paper, we describe how the *Visual Brand Identity and Market Analysis* course at Chalmers was organized to explore such a role.

## **2 VISUAL BRAND IDENTITY AND MARKET ANALYSIS**

Since the introduction of the integrated bachelor/master programme in Industrial Design Engineering at Chalmers in 1999, the fostering of students' analytical, creative and strategic skills when designing new products has been considered essential components of the educational curriculum. In 2004, the master-level course *Visual Brand Identity and Market Analysis* (7.5 ECTS) was introduced to give strategic design and branding a more prominent position in the design education at Chalmers. In developing the specific skills associated with the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of branded products, Warell's Design Format Analysis [13] was early introduced in the curriculum. Over the years, this method has established itself as a prominent component in the teaching at both the Industrial Design Engineering programme and the closely related Automotive Industrial Design Engineering programme.

The goal of the Visual Identity and Market Analysis course is to provide students with an understanding of the role of branding in design, with an emphasis on how aesthetic and symbolic qualities of products can be used to support and develop the visual identity of brands. The course is organized around a series of lectures and a main group project. In the lectures, students are introduced to a range of design and branding theories, which are complemented with practical insights from high-level professionals from industry. For example, design managers from Electrolux, Saab and Volvo have over the years lectured in the course. An extensive reading package has also been developed to support the students in learning on the aesthetic and symbolic role of design in branding. In the group project, students apply the material introduced in the course in their analysis of automotive brands, and use the outcome as a starting point for designing and branding new products. Ultimately, the course brings together a range of concepts from the product design and branding literature to form a holistic picture of the role of branding in design, with emphasis on the visual qualities of new products (for more details about the course outline see [16]).

## **3 BRANDING AND DESIGN FOR THE OLDER ADULT POPULATION**

As the course curriculum at Chalmers has evolved over the years, the main group project has addressed a broad range of themes, including cross-category brand transformation, co-branding, and the use of quantitative consumer data in design. For the academic year 2008/2009, branding and design for the older adult population was introduced as an explorative theme for the main group

project. For the purposes of the course, we defined people above 50 as members of the older adult population.

As noted earlier, the market for products targeted to the older adult population has grown significantly and a number of firms have also sought success by more actively targeting this market. Yet, industry reports indicate that companies still struggle to target this part of the population. For instance, a survey in the United Kingdom among 45,000 people above 50 revealed that 86 percent felt ignored by industry [2]. Reasons for this may pertain to misconceptions about the concept of age and the defining characteristics of the older adult population. Contrary to commonly held belief, the concept of age *per se* is not part of the sense of self (i.e. the identity) of older adults, which means that the needs and wishes of this user group can be rather similar to those of younger adults [17]. The Volvo C30 was, for instance, primarily designed for younger adults, but most of its European buyers were found among older adults. Similarly, most premium automotive brands such as BMW, Jaguar and Mercedes are desired by (and advertised featuring) younger adults, while first time buyers of these cars are typically well above 50; perhaps as people first at later stages of life finally have acquired the purchasing power to fit the hefty price tags often associated with these cars. With needs and wishes similar to those of younger generations, designers need to recognize the heterogeneity of the adult older adult population [2, 18], implying that the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of products targeted to older adults should not be underestimated (next to differences in the needs and wishes regarding utilitarian qualities).

This does not mean that designers should ignore the specific physiological needs of older adult users when designing new products. However, a focus only on the utilitarian needs is not sufficient. In fact, work on the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of products designed for people with reduced functional capabilities (such as walking aids and wheel chairs) has, for instance, been raised as critical in order to avoid stigmatisation of users [19]. As such, catering for the functional as well as identity related social and cultural needs associated with aging emerges as an essential challenge for product design, especially when approaching design with an empathically driven mindset.

In recognizing this challenge, pursuing the visual identity of brands with their diverse aesthetic and symbolic qualities seems to provide a promising path for design education to prepare students to meet a variety of perceptual and experiential needs and wishes of older adults. Furthermore, a focus on the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of branded products is likely to reduce undesired connotations elicited by differences between products designed specifically for older users and those targeted at other demographic groups. The latter is also relevant from the point of view that design for older users does not necessarily imply specific products [3].

### **3 PROJECT OUTLINE**

When recognizing the need for a more holistic design approach in meeting the needs and wishes older users, a number of questions emerge: How would the outcome of such an approach materialize in new product concepts for this user group? What would the outcome be if the aim was to place greater emphasis on producing perceptually as well as experientially appealing products for older adults in design education? To what extent could aesthetic and symbolic qualities of brands be used to drive the design of such products? How would a focus on branding sit next to fulfilling physiological needs associated with aging? Questions such as these were topical when defining the learning experience of the explorative assignment for this year's main group project.

The fictive case of a car manufacturer seeking ways to extend its brand outside the automotive industry through the introduction of a product for the older adult population (i.e. a category extension) was deemed a suitable learning context to explore some of these questions. Three priority areas were specified to frame the projects on products for parts of the older adult population; (1) advanced well-being, (2) sophisticated expectations for the quality of life, and (3) higher level of activity and vitality. As such, the assignment was implicitly focused on the design of products concepts for mature individuals exhibiting a desire for an 'active' lifestyle.

The assignment was organized into two phases. During the first phase of three weeks, the students were divided into nine groups of four people and assigned a well-known car brand to analyze. The selected brands to analyze were Aston Martin, BMW, Citroën, Fiat, Honda, Jeep, Lexus, Porsche, and Volvo. During the three weeks, the groups were free to use any of the frameworks and approaches provided in the lectures and the course literature to analyze their brands. The students were also encouraged to creatively adapt the frameworks and approaches to better fit their purposes. The goal of their analysis was to establish what they found to be the essence of their brand, with a focus on the

aesthetic and symbolic qualities of its products. They were also asked to consider what could potentially appeal to their target group within the older adult population. In the second phase, the students were tasked to synthesize their analysis into a brand extension concept which would address the needs and wishes of an older user group. The time-period available for this phase was four weeks, during which the students progressed from an initial idea to a first set of digital visualisations of their concept. Throughout the design process, the students were encouraged to use creative methods and techniques (such as image boards, brainstorming, computer modelling and physical model making) to solve the assignment.

#### **4 PROJECT EXAMPLE: HONDA ACTIVE GPS DEVICE**

The students produced a range of interesting concepts during the course, including product concepts such as an umbrella for BMW and an indoor herb cultivation system inspired by Fiat. Together, the concepts explored an array of ideas on how to make products more perceptually as well as experientially appealing for older adults. The students also displayed various attempts to empathize with the specific functional and utilitarian needs and wishes of the user group. In doing so, many of the students came to the conclusion that, while there may exist differences between older and younger users, a more 'age neutral' approach would in many cases suffice.

The Honda Active GPS device provides an interesting example of how the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of a brand were used by the students in their projects. During the analysis phase, the students acquired both primary and secondary data on Honda and its products. Primary data was acquired through interviews with Honda car dealers and consumers as well as a small-scale online survey. The students also performed observation studies as well as product tests at a local car dealership. Secondary data about Honda was acquired through a number of sources, including Honda's marketing network, the company web pages, news articles as well as discussion forums on Internet. Together the primary and secondary data provided the students with a first sense about what people experienced as the core values of Honda.

To further develop their insights about Honda, the students performed a Design Format Analysis to identify, describe and assess the visual cues found in Honda's current product portfolio (for details about this method see [13]). They also sought recognizable design cues in the historical succession of product generations as well as in concept cars. Finally, a semantic analysis was performed to reveal correlations between the design cues and the perceived core values of Honda (for details about this method see [16]). Based on their analysis, the students argued that Honda as a brand only weakly embodies recognizable design cues across their product portfolio and over product generations. Yet, by focusing on some of the more recent car models, such as the 8<sup>th</sup> generation of the Honda Civic launched in 2006, in combination with the ideas expressed in some concept cars, the students were still able to argue for a number of coherently used 'Honda-specific' design cues. The students also argued that while there was a lack of strong signifiers, the located explicit design cues used by Honda (especially in the Civic) were still considered to strongly correspond to the brand values of Honda in an implicit manner.

During the synthesis phase, the students translated their insights about the Honda brand and its use of design cues in a fictive extension of the Honda product portfolio; a handheld GPS device for active older adults. The students deemed a GPS device as a relevant extension for Honda when targeting the older adult population as it made reference to concepts such as transportation and mobility. They also created a new fictitious sub-brand, *Honda Active*, to support the introduction of their product. The core values of Honda Active were defined as distinct, sporty, advanced, fun, environmental and alternative premium. The brand mission was further seen as focusing on making advanced technology accessible to people with an active lifestyle. As argued by the students, products of the Honda Active brand should be "instinctively" recognisable and create an immediate impression on the user in comparison to other products. The student sought to achieve this through the employment of a characteristic and iconic design format. Honda Active products were also defined as being characterised by a sophisticated user interface (exhibiting a high degree of usability) especially suited for people with a somewhat reduced physiological capacity or simply those with a limited interest in technology. Thus, as criteria for their design, the aim was for the handheld GPS device to be perceived as a recognisable, authentic, intuitive and appealing representative of the Honda Active brand.

The resulting product concept (see Figure 1) sought to incorporate these criteria as well the located explicit design cues. The navigation of the interface was designed to be intuitively understood and

presumably appreciated by both younger and older users. In order to give the GPS device a distinct and recognizable form, the students developed a “point-symmetric double-wing” form theme for the design, chamfered in a “Honda-typical” way. Considerable emphasis was also placed on the design of the technical system (such as functionality of the menu system) and the user-interface, featuring simple set-up and optional audio as well as tactile feedback functions. Furthermore, the product incorporates a single on-off button, induction rechargeable batteries and integrated wireless Bluetooth technology, emphasizing the innovative approach of Honda. Visually, the implementation of Honda cues were sought through the product’s bright white colour with a blue active signature line, as well as the combination of matte rubber details and glossy, glass-like material.



Figure 1. Honda Active GPS by F. Andersson, J. Bergqvist, A. Rynvall, L. Wiklander, 2008.

## 5 DISCUSSION

In addition to the theoretical and conceptual challenges of integrating a focus on branding in coursework on design for the older adult population, design educators are also challenged with practical questions about how to integrate the two in the classroom. As inspiration, this paper presented the background, structure as well as outcome of the Visual Brand Identity and Market Analysis course at Chalmers for design educators seeking answers to such questions. In doing so, we pointed to how brands with their diverse aesthetic and symbolic qualities can provide a fruitful learning experience for design students when seeking new ways to explore the perceptual and experiential aspects of product targeted at the older adult population.

The approach taken in the course followed an analysis of well-known brands (with an emphasis on visual identity) which was used as a starting point for creating new concepts beyond the original product domain of the brand. As such, we presented ideas on how to approach some of the needs and wishes of the older adult population which otherwise perhaps easily may be overseen in coursework on design, ergonomics and human-factors.

Our experiences with the course showed that the students were enthusiastic about the notion of designing for the specified target group, in part empathising with some of its needs and wishes. However, perhaps more importantly, the students demonstrated an understanding that design for the older adult population is typically not about special solutions for a niche market but rather about pushing the boundaries of mainstream design. The ‘age-neutral’ concepts suggested in the course showed that many products can be designed to fit both younger and older users if an empathically driven mindset is employed.

While students typically adopted such a mindset, the process employed did however lack a critical component in the sense that the target group was not actively approached on an individual level to contribute with input for the design of concepts. This was primarily due to the focus on branding and design proposed by the general course outline, which promoted an emphasis on the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of branded products within the given timeframe; other parts of the design curriculum at Chalmers provide students the opportunity to experience user-centred research methods

and participatory design processes. A project approach incorporating a truly participatory design process would however undoubtedly result in more faceted insights and a more profound understanding of needs and wishes of the older adult population. We therefore encourage future studies to explore how a focus on branding could be incorporated in such approaches when designing for a mature market. The success of these efforts is for the future.

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