

THE EMOTIONAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF THE OBJECT**^{1,*} Mónica Patricia López Alvarado, ²Leonardo Mora Lomelí and ³Alejandro Briseño Vilches**¹Teaching Methodology, University Center for Art, Architecture, and Design, University of Guadalajara, Guadalajara, Mexico²Humanities, University Center for Art, Architecture, and Design, University of Guadalajara, Guadalajara, Mexico³Education Sciences, University Center for Art, Architecture, and Design, University of Guadalajara, Guadalajara, Mexico**Received 15th July 2025; Accepted 18th August 2025; Published online 30th September 2025**

Abstract

In recent decades, the concept of design has evolved from a purely functional or aesthetic practice to an interdisciplinary field integrating emotional, cognitive, and sociocultural dimensions. From this perspective, designed objects mediate interaction with the environment and construct meanings, evoke memories, and generate emotional bonds with their users. The objective of this study was to analyze the emotional and symbolic dimension of objects from a transdisciplinary perspective that integrates contributions from design, psychology, and the social sciences. To this end, a qualitative, exploratory, and interpretive methodology was adopted, which included the application of surveys to 20 participants between the ages of 18 and 74. They were asked to identify meaningful objects in their daily lives, as well as the emotions, memories, and sensory experiences associated with them. The results revealed that cell phones are the most relevant objects due to their strong emotional, symbolic, and functional significance. Other artifacts, such as computers, personal accessories, kitchen utensils, perfumes, and religious items, were linked to family memories, personal identity, and emotional ties. The most frequent emotions were tranquility, confidence, and joy, while the most prominent sensory aspects included texture and sound. These findings confirm that the relationship between objects and their users is bidirectional: artifacts influence cognition and affectivity, while at the same time being culturally re-signified based on the experiences of those who use them. In conclusion, design must be understood as an ethical and culturally situated practice that goes beyond solving technical functions to delve into the construction of meaningful experiences. This approach highlights the need to train designers capable of integrating empathy, critical observation, and cultural sensitivity in order to create objects that positively impact people's emotional and social lives.

Keywords: Emotional design, Sensory experience, Cultural significance, Everyday objects.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the field of design has expanded its boundaries toward interdisciplinary approaches that recognize its profound involvement in the emotional, social, and cultural lives of human beings. Far from being an exclusively technical or functional discipline, design has established itself as a symbolic and narrative space that mediates the relationship between subjects and their environment through objects, artifacts, and experiences that shape meanings, evoke emotions, and influence collective sensibilities. This perspective has allowed for the development of fruitful links with disciplines such as psychology, cultural theory, communication, and the social sciences, which have generated new questions about the perceptual, emotional, and cognitive processes involved in interacting with the material world. Today, the objects and artifacts that make up everyday life are loaded with cultural, emotional, and sensory meanings that communicate the identity of those who use them, the conditions of the environment in which they are created, and the narratives that emerge from their interaction. This article is the result of a joint effort between researchers trained in the disciplines of design and psychology, whose academic and research trajectories have converged on the need to approach the study of objects from a transdisciplinary perspective, capable of integrating theories of design, culture, perception, emotion, and cognition. The relevance of this approach lies in the possibility of understanding design as a practice situated at

the frontier of science, where technical, humanistic, social, and creative knowledge converge. This has allowed for the development of design proposals for artifacts, products, services, and experiences that not only fulfill an instrumental function but also impact the lives of human beings and their environment from affective, symbolic, and sensory dimensions. In this sense, design is recognized as a project language that constructs meaning and generates meaningful experiences. Given this context, it is essential to recognize the importance of comprehensive training for design professionals, both in the field of teaching and in early research. It is necessary to strengthen not only the technical skills of design in students, but also soft and cognitive skills such as empathy, critical observation, and analysis of human behavior. This includes understanding the perceptual processes linked to the sensory, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that determine the user experience. Therefore, the object of study in design cannot be limited to the product itself, but must consider the interaction between humans, design, and the environment as a complex, situated, and symbolic system. It is essential to give design a profound project value, influenced by ideological and sociocultural factors that enrich and redefine the act of designing. This transdisciplinary approach proposes rethinking the role of the designer as a narrator, cultural mediator, and constructor of meanings, giving way to a more conscious, sensitive, and committed design practice with regard to the diversity of human expressions. This article analyzes the emotional and sociocultural dimensions of designed objects from a transdisciplinary perspective that integrates approaches from design, psychology, and the social sciences. It seeks to understand how the sensory, affective, and symbolic

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experiences that users establish with artifacts shape personal and collective meanings, impacting their cognition, their way of relating to their environment, and the processes of communication with themselves and others. A theoretical review supporting the proposal is presented, along with a description of the qualitative and interpretive methodological approach and an analysis of cases that demonstrate how objects-artifacts generate emotional, sensory, and symbolic links with users. The findings of this research show that design, beyond its utilitarian function, constitutes a form of narrative and affective expression of the sociocultural context, with a bidirectional impact between the user and their environment. This contribution seeks not only to broaden the field of reflection on design practice, but also to encourage interdisciplinary research that strengthens the dialogue between psychology, social sciences, and design as a humanly situated discipline.

Design, identity, and culture

In recent decades, design has been redefined as a profoundly human practice, with implications that transcend the functional or aesthetic to enter the emotional, cognitive, and sociocultural spheres. This broader perspective has led to the recognition that designed objects, services, and experiences not only mediate interaction with the environment, but also impact the construction of identity, affective states, and the social and symbolic processes of human beings.

One of the most significant contributions in this line of thinking is that of Norman (2004), who argues in *Emotional Design* that objects should be not only functional but also emotionally satisfying. According to Norman, products activate three levels of emotional processing: visceral, behavioral, and reflective that influence the user's perception, behavior, and decision-making. This view establishes a direct connection between the user experience and the individual's emotional and cognitive structure.

Complementarily, Jordan (2000) introduces the concept of design for pleasure, encompassing physical, social, psychological, and ideological dimensions. His research highlights how products generate pleasure by responding to users' emotional needs, reinforcing their sense of belonging, self-esteem, and cultural identity.

From a sociocultural perspective, authors such as Margolin (2002) and Manzini (2015) agree that design should be understood as a situated practice, immersed in specific ideological, historical, and cultural contexts. Manzini argues that designed artifacts and systems not only solve functional problems, but can also transform ways of life and strengthen the social fabric through new forms of sociability and sustainable innovation.

Similarly, from the perspective of cultural psychology and sociology, Belk (1988) and Turkle (2011) have shown that objects act as extensions of the self, allowing us to articulate personal identities, activate memories, and build emotional bonds with our environment. In *Evocative Objects*, Turkle compiles testimonies that reveal how objects can trigger introspection, emotional dialogue, and symbolic interpretation. For their part, Pine and Gilmore (1999), in *The Experience Economy*, introduce an approach focused on the design of meaningful experiences as a new form of value creation. Their

proposal has profoundly influenced service design, recognizing that experiences generate lasting emotional impacts that reconfigure the relationships between users, products, and environments.

In the field of emotional and sensory design, the work of Desmet and Hekkert (2007) is fundamental. These authors propose models for understanding how the formal, symbolic, and contextual attributes of objects can induce specific emotions, and how these responses affect the user's well-being and subjective experience. This approach has been key to the development of methodologies that integrate psychology into user-centered design. This background confirms the importance of studying the emotional, cognitive, and sociocultural impact of design, understanding the object as a symbolic and affective mediator in the relationship between people and their environment. This theoretical framework provides a solid basis for continuing to explore the role of design as a situated, sensitive, and interdisciplinary practice.

The practice of design today stands at a crossroads between the functional, the symbolic, the emotional, and the cultural. In this sense, designed objects can no longer be understood solely as practical solutions to material problems, but rather as narrative constructions that embody and express the sensibilities, affections, and values of the sociocultural environment in which they emerge. This project-based and transdisciplinary vision requires incorporating theoretical frameworks from not only design, but also psychology, social sciences, philosophy, and communication, among other disciplines. Design is not only a technical or aesthetic activity, but also a cultural practice embedded in ideological and sociopolitical systems. As Dormer (1997) and Manzini (2015) point out, every designed object reflects, reinforces, or questions the cultural values of the context in which it arises. Objects are not neutral entities; they are loaded with meanings that influence the way people identify, behave, and relate to their environment.

This perspective coincides with the conception of design as a critical and political act, capable of both perpetuating dominant narratives and opening up possibilities for imagining new ways of inhabiting the world. Along these lines, Verganti (2009) argues that design has the power to redefine the meaning of things, promoting not only functional innovation but also cultural transformation. From psychology, concepts such as empathy, motivation, perceptual processes, and affective states are essential for understanding how people interact emotionally with objects. Researchers such as Norman (2004) and Jordan (2000) demonstrate that the most meaningful design is one that manages to connect emotionally with users by recognizing their desires, expectations, and values.

In turn, the social and cultural sciences offer an analytical framework for understanding how variables such as gender, social class, culture, and age mediate the relationship between people and objects. These dimensions are key to building inclusive, empathetic, and socially impactful design proposals, as argued by Walker (2021) and Papanek (1985). In this sense, it is important to transcend a purely technical vision in teaching practice and early research training. Heller and Vienne (2015) advocate for designer education that develops critical observation skills, cultural analysis, systemic thinking, and social sensitivity. The challenge lies in training professionals capable of interpreting complex phenomena from a comprehensive and human perspective. Design practice is

thus configured as a form of research and critical action, in which designed objects cease to be simple functional solutions and become sensitive responses to deeply human problems. This perspective requires a transdisciplinary approach that articulates diverse knowledge and allows design challenges to be addressed from multiple angles.

Emotional design and affective experience

One of the fundamental frameworks for understanding the subjective dimension of design is emotional design, extensively developed by Norman (2004), who argues that objects affect users on three levels: visceral (immediate sensory response), behavioral (interaction and usability), and reflective (personal and cultural meanings). This model recognizes that the way we experience objects is deeply mediated by our emotions, making design a powerful tool for generating emotional bonds.

Along similar lines, Jordan (2000) proposes the concept of pleasurable products, emphasizing the need to design beyond function to incorporate aesthetic, emotional, ideological, and relational pleasure. His approach considers that objects contribute to the subjective well-being of the user, promoting positive experiences of use and reinforcing the emotional connection with the product.

More recently, Bedolla (2023) expands on this notion from a Latin American perspective, emphasizing the importance of the cultural, sensory, and symbolic context of emotional design. His proposal considers that objects communicate not only through their form and function, but also through their sensory qualities that evoke memories, stories, and cultural identities.

In her studies and research, the aforementioned author emphasizes the importance of designers carefully selecting the elements that make up an object or artifact, such as materials, textures, shapes, colors, dimensions, and properties of use. This selection should not be based solely on aesthetic or functional criteria, but should be supported by a deep understanding of human nature. From a psychological and neuroscientific perspective, it is recognized that object design has the potential to directly influence the user's perceptual, emotional, and cognitive processes, activating brain mechanisms related to attention, affective memory, and decision-making (Norman, 2004). The designer must therefore consider variables such as the user's personality, emotional needs, sensory preferences, and habitual behavior. In addition, it is essential to analyze the conditions of the environment where the object will be used, both in geographical terms (climate, temperature, humidity, lighting) and sociocultural terms, since these factors influence the appropriation, acceptance, and meaning of the object (Papanek, 1985). The impact of a well-conceived design can transcend the utilitarian, producing effects at the sensory, emotional, cognitive, and cultural levels, thus reinforcing the notion of design as a discipline that mediates between the materiality of the world and the subjective experience of human beings (Pallasmaa, 2005).

Semiotics, narrative, and the language of objects

From the perspective of design semiotics, Krippendorff (2006) argues that objects function as material languages,

communicating meanings that users interpret based on their experiences, knowledge, and social context. This symbolic relationship turns design into a narrative practice where objects tell stories, express ideologies, and activate affective memories. This narrative dimension of the object, also highlighted by Margolin (2019) and Tonkinwise (2011), allows us to think of design as a situated cultural action, where the designer acts as a mediator between forms, symbols, and users. Thus, products acquire meaning not only for what they do, but also for what they say, evoke, and represent.

Sensory perspective and perceptual experience

Human perception plays a crucial role in our daily interaction with the objects and elements that make up our environment. These objects are not merely functional instruments; they are carriers of meanings, memories, and emotions that are intertwined with the way each individual experiences and makes sense of their world. Thus, the inhabited space and the artifacts that compose it become extensions of identity, reflecting cultural codes, ideological values, and aesthetic appreciations that have been shaped over time. From a psychological perspective, the perceptual process can be understood in three fundamental stages: attention, sensation, and perception. Each of these stages is filtered through sensory, cultural, and emotional filters that are unique to each person, which means that the experience of the environment is deeply subjective. Attention directs focus toward certain stimuli, sensation translates those stimuli into sensory information, and perception organizes and interprets that information, giving it meaning. This process not only allows us to understand the outside world, but also directly influences the construction of the individual's inner world.

The sensory dimension of design has become increasingly important as it is recognized that objects interact with the body and the senses in a comprehensive and meaningful way. Fritsch and Krogh (2022) assert that affective design must integrate stimuli such as textures, temperatures, sounds, lights, and aromas to generate multisensory experiences that foster emotional resonance. This resonance is not merely momentary: it can activate memories, moods, and even influence patterns of thought and behavior.

Hekkert (2006), from the perspective of perception psychology, points out that sensory environments have a direct impact on people's emotional and cognitive experiences, affecting their well-being, concentration, creativity, and motivation. Thus, design is not only perceived with the senses, but also interpreted emotionally and integrated cognitively, shaping the way each human being communicates with themselves and the world around them.

This relationship with objects also acts as a form of internal dialogue. Through objects, people construct personal narratives, establish routines, and define spaces of safety, comfort, or productivity. The act of choosing, using, or keeping an object can be loaded with symbolic meanings that reinforce self-image, emotional bonds, and a sense of belonging. In this sense, objects are mediators of the subject's intrinsic communication, while facilitating or hindering their interactions with others. For his part, Sennett (2008) takes up this idea by emphasizing the importance of manual labor and materiality in the construction of knowledge and identity. Direct contact with the object its weight, shape, temperature

has not only a physical dimension, but also an emotional one, generating sensations that reinforce the bond between the subject and their environment. This embodied experience of the object contributes to processes of introspection, self-affirmation, and empathy, which are fundamental to a balanced emotional life. In this context, design takes on an ethical and humanistic dimension. It is not only about creating beautiful or functional objects, but also about generating experiences that promote the overall well-being of human beings. Considering how an object is felt, interpreted, and remembered from a sensory and emotional perspective allows for the design of more humane, empathetic, and inclusive environments that recognize the complexity of individual and collective experiences.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted using a qualitative, interpretative, and exploratory approach with a transdisciplinary emphasis. The objective was to analyze the emotional dimension of object design as an expression of the sociocultural context, integrating conceptual references from the social sciences, cognitive and emotional psychology, cultural theory, and design semiotics. We worked with a purposive sample of twenty participants living in an urban environment. Their ages ranged from 18 to 74, with a gender distribution of 80% female and 20% male. The inclusion criteria were: having daily access to personal items, willingness to respond to the survey in a thoughtful manner, acceptance of informed consent.

A semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended and closed-ended questions was designed specifically for this study and validated through a pilot test with three participants before its formal application. The instrument included five sections:

1. Identification of the five objects most used in everyday life.
2. Selection of a single meaningful object, excluding cell phones.
3. Main function attributed to the object (utilitarian, symbolic/emotional, or aesthetic/decorative).
4. Emotions, memories, and sensory experiences linked to the object.
5. Perceived identity significance in relation to lifestyle, stage of life, profession or trade, or way of thinking and feeling.

The questionnaire was administered in digital format through Google Forms®, which allowed for standardization of responses and facilitated data collection. Data collection was carried out in two stages over a period of four weeks. In the first stage, participants received an invitation by email and completed the online questionnaire independently. In the second stage, follow-up was conducted through brief video call interviews to explore open-ended responses in greater depth and ensure data reliability.

The analysis was organized around three previously defined dimensions:

- a) Product language and symbolic meaning, focusing on the formal and material attributes of the objects (Krippendorff, 2006; Bedolla, 2020).
- b) Emotional and sensory experience, focusing on perceptions, memories, and affective responses (Jordan, 2022; Norman, 2004).

- c) Sociocultural context and narrative of the object, focusing on the relationship with cultural discourses and social identities (Escobar, 2018; Hall, 1997).

The information was processed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), supplemented by descriptive analysis of frequencies and percentages. Microsoft Excel® was used as statistical support for the latter.

RESULTS

Analysis of the information collected revealed significant trends in how participants relate emotionally, symbolically, and culturally to everyday objects. First, 98% of respondents identified the cell phone as the most important object, highlighting its triple emotional, symbolic, and functional dimensions. However, when asked to choose a single meaningful object other than a cell phone, the responses diversified to include items such as computers, personal accessories, perfume, frying pans, glasses, rosaries, and lamps. These objects were described as carriers of memories, personal identity, and emotional ties. Regarding the main function attributed to the objects, 70% of participants defined them as essentially utilitarian, 20% characterized them by their emotional or symbolic function, and 10% considered them mainly aesthetic or decorative. In terms of the emotions evoked, tranquility, confidence, and joy stood out, while nostalgia, anxiety, and indifference were mentioned to a lesser extent. This finding shows that everyday objects not only fulfill an instrumental function but also contribute to generating affective states that influence subjective well-being. The analysis of associated memories revealed that 45% of participants linked the objects to personal experiences of a familiar nature, while 58.8% stated that they help them think, remember, or concentrate better. These associations reinforce the notion of objects as extensions of memory and mediators in cognitive processes. In relation to sensory experiences, participants mainly highlighted the pleasant sound and texture of the objects, which shows that the sensory dimension is an essential component in the construction of emotional attachment to them. Finally, with regard to the identity meaning attributed to the objects, 50% of respondents considered that the objects represent their lifestyle and personality. Twenty percent linked them to an important stage in their lives, another 20% to their profession or trade, and the remaining 10% to their way of thinking and feeling. These results allow us to understand the role of design not only as a functional facilitator, but also as a mediator of identity and cultural belonging.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained in this research confirm that everyday objects play a central role in the construction of emotional, symbolic, and cultural bonds, which coincides with Norman's (2004) arguments about the importance of considering design from an emotional perspective. The fact that the cell phone is identified by the vast majority of participants as the most significant object reveals its status as a complex mediator between functionality and affectivity. This finding reinforces the idea that products activate different levels of emotional processing visceral, behavioral, and reflective that determine both users' perception and interaction with their material environment. Complementarily, the importance attributed to

objects such as computers, personal accessories, perfume, or rosaries reflects what Jordan (2000) defines as design for pleasure. These artifacts not only fulfill utilitarian functions but also generate pleasure by connecting with memories, personal identity, and social bonds. The predominance of utilitarian functions noted by participants (70%) is accompanied by 30% of symbolic, emotional, or aesthetic attributions, demonstrating that utility and affective value are not mutually exclusive dimensions but are articulated in the user experience. From a sociocultural perspective, the results coincide with Margolin (2002) and Manzini (2015) in that design should be understood as a situated practice. The choice of objects linked to family memories and professional or personal identity confirms that artifacts are not limited to solving functional problems, but also shape ways of life, strengthen the social fabric, and act as vehicles for cultural innovation. Likewise, the findings support the thesis of Belk (1988) and Turkle (2011) on objects as extensions of the self. The fact that more than half of the participants stated that meaningful objects help them think, remember, or concentrate better shows how these objects mediate cognitive and affective processes and become repositories of personal memories and identities. In relation to the experiential dimension, the emotions evoked mainly tranquility, confidence, and joy reinforce what Pine and Gilmore (1999) proposed regarding the experience economy, where value is not produced solely by the possession of objects, but by the meaningful experiences they trigger. Similarly, the relevance of sensory attributes such as texture and sound confirms the models proposed by Desmet and Hekkert (2007), who highlight how the formal and sensory aspects of products directly influence the user's subjective experience. Taken together, the results of this study provide empirical evidence for a theoretical body that supports the need to understand design as an interdisciplinary and situated practice, in which objects operate as mediators of emotion, cognition, and culture. It confirms that artifacts are not only functional tools, but also supports identity and memory, as well as catalysts for emotional and sensory experiences that influence individual and collective well-being.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that design transcends its purely functional and technical nature, establishing itself as a social, cultural, and emotional phenomenon that impacts the construction of identities and the everyday experience of users. By analyzing the interaction between objects, emotions, and symbolic meanings, it becomes clear that design acts as a mediator in the configuration of affective and sociocultural bonds, opening up new perspectives for interdisciplinary research. In terms of practical implications, this work provides criteria for designers, educators, and researchers to incorporate more comprehensive approaches into their creative and methodological processes, considering not only the materiality of objects but also their ability to generate meaningful experiences. It also offers foundations for strengthening pedagogical models that connect design with real contexts, promoting its social and cultural relevance. Looking ahead, there is a need for further empirical studies to validate the links between design and emotions in different sociocultural contexts, broadening our understanding of the impact of design on everyday life. It is also important to explore how emerging technologies and changes in modes of interaction can redefine the way users relate to designed objects and environments. This opens up a research agenda aimed at consolidating design

as an increasingly central field in contemporary social and cultural transformation.

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