

Empathic Design vs. Empathetic Design: A History of Confusion

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Abstract

Many different design models have been developed, and formalizing and classifying their definitions to create a coherent and unified guide to design models will help stimulate the development of both new models and new products. Classification will also help to eliminate design models whose definitions have never been formalized and as such can be a source of confusion and misinformation. “Empathic Design” [1] and “Empathetic Design” [2] are two models in need of just such classification: their names are similar enough to confuse effortlessly. In this paper, I investigate references to the two design methods in the literature, locating a formal definition for Empathic Design in the literature and failing to locate one for Empathetic Design. In doing so, I demonstrate that one of these methods is valid while the other still needs to be formalized lest its use continue to cause confusion about its implementation.

1 Introduction

The importance of clearing up the confusion between Empathic and Empathetic Design is readily apparent. If one of the terms lacks definition or is being improperly defined as the other in formal work, it indicates the systematic misreading and miscrediting of a prior paper, something that should be corrected from the standpoint of giving authors proper attribution for their work. Readers who cannot find a proper definition for a method will be unclear on how to either implement or reproduce research that claims to have used it. Lastly, we make it possible for the method without a definition to be given a new and appropriate one. We acknowledge that the words have different meanings, and can suggest an appropriate method derived from the proper semantics.

2 Background

“Empathic Design” was defined by Rayport and Leonard-Barton [1], a work that has been cited multiple times [3] and has become the standard text on the subject. When using their method, a designer attempts to assess the needs of a potential user group (or the flaws in an extant product or prototype) by examining it from the user’s perspective. For example, installing a new wheelchair ramp in a building based on where handicapped people are being forced to detour around steps. This method allows designers to both take advantage of ad-hoc solutions to problems developed by individuals and refine them into genuine products or to note problems that users have assumed unfixable. (e.g. Handicapped people give up on entering the building because of the lack of ramps.)

“Empathetic Design”, as we have noted earlier, has a less clear definition. While we cannot point to any papers that lay out a different meaning for it than that defined for Empathic Design, we note that the term has come up with several ad-hoc meanings, from ‘center creative concepts around the people [the designers] will influence’ [9] to ‘living the user’s life’ [2]. When discussing the latter definition with Dr. Sweeney, she explained that by this she meant the designer should actually spend a day living as the user, for example spending a day in a wheelchair to get a feel for being handicapped. I have found no other documentation to support this, but the definition’s precision is noteworthy.

3 Methods

To research this problem, I used several different search engines to locate documents relating to the various design methodologies, and then confirmed the nature of the reference visually. While each search engine found different results (discussed below) the general trend was for descriptions of both Empathic and Empathetic Design to refer directly or obliquely back to Rayport.

3.1 Google

Searching Google for “empathic design” results in approximately 12,700 hits, of which the majority on the first page are direct links back to [1]. Hits on subsequent pages continue to either directly reference documents or to describe Empathic Design in similar terms (e.g. ‘Many customers are unaware of or unable to articulate their needs . . . and so enhanced methods of market research are required’ in [4]). As one delves further back search results degrade but references to Rayport remain constant.

A search on the term “empathetic design” immediately yields several descriptions either mis-citing [1] [5] [6] or using the terms interchangeably [7]. As with the previous search, result quality slowly degrades but mis-citations remain a feature, and no coherent design document is ever-mentioned. (Sweeney’s definition and website appear as a hit on page 3, as a definition of the term.)

3.2 Google Scholar

A Google Scholar search on “empathic design” yields 363 hits; of these, it appears that Rayport is the most-cited document, a fact that helps to establish its primacy as the originator of the term. In contrast, a search for “empathetic design” yields 31 results, all with fewer than 10 citations, and some of which are mis-citations of Rayport.[8]

4 Results

While I could locate a clear source for the concept of Empathic Design, a paper which is often cited as the term’s origin, I was not able to do so for Empathetic Design. Instead, I found mis-citations of the source of Empathic Design and ad-hoc meanings put forward by single individuals that are not commonly referenced. Also, as indicated by the following table, we can see that Empathic Design is a more commonly referenced method than Empathetic Design, further indicating that this propagation of incorrect citations has been limited.

	Google Hits	Google Scholar Hits
“empathic design”	~ 12, 800	~ 364
“empathetic design”	~ 439	~ 10

5 Discussion

My findings have shown that the most common use of the term “Empathetic Design” is simply a misuse of the definition of Empathic Design, and that an alternate definition cannot be readily found in the literature on design methods. Note that this does not mean that no other definitions for Empathetic Design exist -my search did find some ad-hoc definitions- nor that a broader search using additional tools (e.g. www.scopus.com) would fail to find an official definition. It is impossible to prove the nonexistence of term’s definition, and Dr. Sweeney herself has demonstrated an alternate understanding of its meaning. As such, what exists here is an opportunity to clarify the definition and officially lay out a new one. Such a project is beyond the scope of this paper, and I shall not attempt to do so here; that door is open for the next person who wishes to enter it.

References

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The actual article can be found for sale at http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/b02/en/common/item_detail.jhtml?id=97606
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6 Appendix

6.1 Research Problem

How can we be certain that different design methods are unique?

6.2 Problem Statement

Given the use of the terms “Empathic Design” and “Empathetic Design” as the names of design methods, prove that each term is or is not a distinct method.

6.3 Operational Definitions

A *Design Method* is a general, high-level process that an individual can follow in order to develop a given object. An *object*, in the above context, can be anything physical or abstract.