

Design for Subjective Well-Being

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Abstract

Happiness is often considered a universal goal of people. In the relatively new field of positive psychology, many studies have been conducted to understand the concept of happiness and its broader counterpart; subjective well-being, leading to a collection of theories that explain their determinants. It has been shown that although there are genetic influences on subjective well-being (SWB), people are not necessarily 'born' happy, but can and do change their levels of SWB. On the basis of these theories researchers have introduced and validated a variety of strategies to increase SWB.

Although widely available in literature and validated to be useful, not many people seem to pick up on SWB strategies by implementing them into their daily lives. Comprehension is one thing; action is another. Here lies an opportunity for design, and the main design question of this graduation project is therefore:

“Can strategies for subjective well-being be translated into or supported by tangible designs that inspire and persuade people to adopt these strategies into their daily lives?”

To answer this question, SWB was studied in theory and practice, problems and opportunities for product design were identified, and these insights were translated into an interaction vision.

The product should give hope, inspire and reassure the user that it's OK to try new things (Active experimentation.) The product should allow the user to take some time for contemplation (Reflective observation.)

After a diverging and converging stage of ideation, a set of concepts was designed that explored the interaction vision. Theory from behavioral psychology was used to design their persuasive qualities. These concepts were compared to and evaluated with existing companies that produce similar products. One concept was chosen, and further developed into a final design proposal: a system named Tinytask.

Tinytask is a system that offers users new experiences. Users subscribe to Tinytask and receive key chains that contain small and concrete assignments related to SWB strategies. Users commit to the assignments and use the key chains as a reminder. They add and confirm assignments to their profile page on www.tinytask.nl, where they can also add comments to reflect on their experiences. Tinytask should inspire and persuade people to break with routine and have new experiences related to SWB strategies, by making a habit of active experimentation and reflective observation.

A prototype was built and was tested by fifteen participants over the course of three weeks. Various strengths, weaknesses and recommendations were found as a result of this user test.

Tinytask was successful in persuading participants to break with routine. The system inspired and triggered active experimentation. Due to limited functionality of the website prototype, participants could not reflect on their experiences online. However, conversations with others – in some cases elicited by the key chains – caused participants to contemplate their actions.

Concluding, Tinytask has inspired and persuaded people to adopt strategies for subjective well-being into their daily lives, which answers the design question. Although the design is still premature, it is a case study that explores the possibilities of design for subjective well-being. There are many opportunities for design within this direction. Even though there is a large gap between abstract theories and concrete products, this study has shown that theory from behavioral psychology can successfully be used to make that translation.