

R³ RESPONSE 02 — AFFORDANCE

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Understanding the Application of Affectivity and Signifier in Everyday Digital Devices

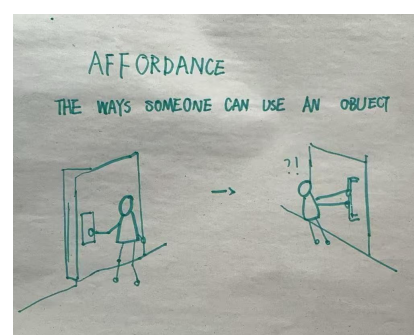
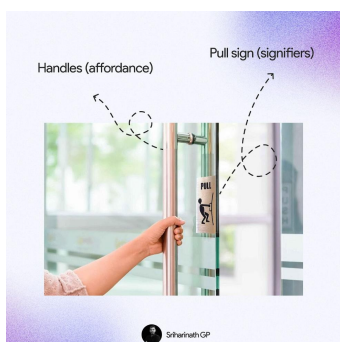
Task 1 — Understanding Affordances

Affordance describes the relationship between an object and the actions it enables for users. Originating in psychology, this concept was introduced to design by Donald Norman, who emphasised how objects communicate potential uses through their form, materiality, and interaction logic. In design, affordance concerns not only what an object can do, but also what users perceive it can do.

In everyday digital devices, affordance shapes intuitive interactions that require no deliberate instruction. Touchscreens support tapping and swiping through their smooth, responsive surfaces; keyboards enable pressing via raised keys and physical feedback. These affordance features exist independently of whether users have received explicit instruction. When affordance is well-designed, users experience 'natural fluidity' in interaction; conversely, it can lead to confusion and frustration.

Norman distinguishes between actual affordance and perceived affordance. Though devices may technically support multiple actions, only those perceived by users hold meaning. For instance, while a flat glass screen theoretically supports pressing anywhere, interface elements like buttons, icons, and gestures guide users towards specific actions. This highlights design's crucial role in shaping perception, rather than relying solely on functionality.

In digital products where physical cues are limited, affordance becomes particularly critical. Designers must employ visual, interactive, and behavioural signals to indicate possible actions. Thus, understanding affordance enables designers to anticipate user behaviour, reduce cognitive load, and create interfaces that support intuitive interaction rather than command-based operations.



Task 1 – Affordances of Devices

Affordance of digital devices

Mobile phones (such as the iPhone)

a. Touchscreens support tapping, swiping, pinching, and scrolling operations.

b. Icons support launching applications.



c. On-screen keyboards support text input.

d. Camera interfaces support photographing and video recording.



e. Notifications support instant attention and response.

Tablets (such as the iPad)

a. Large touchscreens support reading, drawing and gesture navigation.

b. Stylus support enables writing and sketching functions.

c. Split-screen mode facilitates multitasking.

d. On-screen buttons provide simplified interaction.

e. Rotating the screen switches between different display modes.



Laptops (such as the MacBook)

a. Physical keyboards support rapid and precise text input.

b. Trackpads support pointing, clicking and gesture control.

c. Hinged screens support opening, closing and angle adjustment.

d. Desktop interfaces support file management.

e. Ports support connecting external devices.

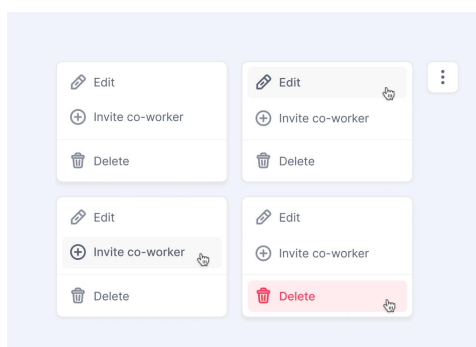
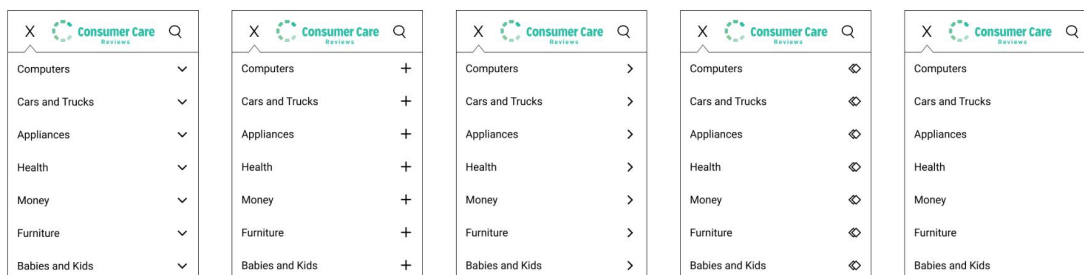


Task 2 — Signifiers

The signifier is a perceptible cue indicating the precise location where an action should occur. While affinity describes possible actions, the signifier conveys how these actions should be performed and where they should take place. Donald Norman notes that the signifier is crucial in helping users understand an object's intended purpose.

In physical objects, signifiers encompass interactive elements that draw attention, such as labels, arrows, textures, or shapes. Within digital interfaces, signifiers manifest as buttons, icons, highlights, animations, or colour changes. For instance: shadowed buttons imply clickable actions, while underlined text indicates clickable links.

Without clear indicators, users may overlook available actions, leading to confusion or misuse. Effective design requires aligning indicators with action cues to ensure users intuitively perceive available operations without instruction. Consequently, indicators play a pivotal role in usability, accessibility, and inclusive design.



Ultimately, the signifier serves as a bridge between intention and action, transforming latent empowerment into perceptible gestures that thereby guide user behaviour.

Reflection

Having grasped the distinction between operability and symbolic meaning, my approach to observing daily interactions with digital devices has shifted. Rather than attributing usability issues to user error, I now perceive them as shortcomings in design communication. This perspective compels interaction design to adopt a more critical and empathetic methodology, placing clarity, perceptibility, and accessibility at the core of considerations. Moving forward, I shall apply these principles to evaluate and design interfaces that better support intuitive and inclusive user experiences.

This paper elucidates the understanding of operability and signifier through interpretation, comparison, and reflection, drawing upon everyday digital examples.