Spring 3-17-2018

Pick Up a Habit

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PICK UP A HABIT

A design thesis and honors project by Emily Frazier
For my mother and both of my grandmothers, for teaching me a variety of crafts and encouraging me to make things, and for my father, for inspiring an attention and dedication to detail like no one else could.
THE PROCESS:
MAKING, REPETITION, & FOCUS
This thesis began as an inquiry into physically repetitive processes of making, particularly weaving and screen printing. I found myself especially drawn to these physical crafting processes when I needed to focus on more thought-intensive and challenging tasks. Upon further personal reflection and experimentation with these methods of making, I realized that by keeping my hands busy with a repetitive task that I did not have to actively think about, I was able to focus on the problem at hand and work through my thoughts more easily. For a long time I had myself convinced that I was wasting my time by doing these tasks instead of the work I really needed to be doing, but I realized these breaks were actually helpful and almost necessary to get my work done.
Early Experiments
The project experiments that followed were an attempt to subvert the typical relationship between textiles and screen printing—in which a graphic is printed onto some textile and the object is finished—by changing the order of steps in this process.

Half and Half
The surface design of this pillow is split equally between woven design and a screen printed design.

Weave/Reweave: Yarn
White yarn was woven together to create a blank canvas for a screen printed design, and then unraveled and rewoven.
This piece used the same process as the last one, but used woven paper and printed text instead.

Weave/Reweave: Paper

The project that I proposed initially after this reflection and experimentation focused primarily on repetition in my own life, specifically habits and personal reactions to completing or not completing them. I was going to track my habits daily and translate the resulting data into a series of mandalas to be screen printed. Mandalas were representative of the cyclical nature of my habits, and allowed for modular units representing the different habits to be included or excluded easily. However, given the current popularity of mandalas associated with stress relief and the original religious purpose, they were not communicating the purpose of this project clearly enough. Also, by focusing on my own habits and reactions to them, the work was becoming too subjective, making it seem more decorative than a design piece. It became apparent that I needed a stronger foundation in research and quantifiable information for this project to be successful.

Personal Habits

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THE PROJECT:
PICK UP A HABIT
Pick Up a Habit

Pick Up a Habit is a physically interactive experience that demonstrates the relationship between the strength of habits, their perceived priority levels, and the availability of mental space through a series of tote bags differing in weight, available space, and appearance. Through examining the bags and comparing them to others, a better understanding is gained of the effects that habitual actions have on their thought processes, and a person can more effectively evaluate and adjust their own habits.

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Habits are behaviors or actions that have become automated due to repetition. People often desire to form habits to make parts of their lives easier to focus their limited time and energy on more important tasks. Many theories relating to habits from the 19th century operate on the general understanding that the human brain has a maximum capacity for what it can process at any given moment. Habits allow a person to complete a task without having to consciously remember the process and react to it. The stronger a habit is, the less focus it requires, and the less a person focuses on what they are doing, the more their mind can explore other ideas. There are also several comparisons made across literature in these studies likening habits to textiles; the two share repetition, the ability to express oneself, and adaptability. The tote bags utilize these shared characteristics to illustrate the relationship between habits and a person’s mental capacity.

The design of each bag is determined by the results of a survey administered to adults measuring habit strength and level of importance for seven desirable habits: exercising, reading books, going to bed before midnight, eating fruits and vegetables, saving money, flossing, and eating breakfast. The amount of available space in the bag is determined by the strength of the habit, with a greater score resulting in a greater usable space. Weights are added in the bottoms to reflect the level of importance. Viewers are strongly encouraged to pick up the bags and experience these varying properties.
All 21 bags, arranged from strongest habit score to weakest habit score.
Exercise

A saturated orange was selected to represent the exercise habit bags for its high energy. One side of the bag details instructions for squats, leg lifts, and dead lifts. The reverse contains my personal thoughts as I completed a group workout class at the recreation center on campus. Overall, most people’s scores fell around the middle of the scale, with a few being very good at keeping an exercise habit and some that were rather weak.
An egg yolk yellow was used for bags showing people’s breakfast habit strength. The bags explain the importance of eating breakfast and some tips for making the most of the meal, as well as my own experience shopping for breakfast food at the store. The majority of the people surveyed had a strong habit, but there were a handful with a weak habit.

Eat Breakfast
People’s reading habits scored high across the board for the most part. My thoughts as I begin reading a book are on one side, and the other text is a summary of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. The side panels share their maroon color with some of the old cloth-covered, hardbound books on my shelf at home.
This was the overall weakest set of habit scores from those surveyed, which corresponds with the low importance rating it was given by them. A light minty blue designates the bags that measure this habit. My inability to find floss in my bathroom can be found on one side; on the other, there are instructions for flossing.
This habit was ranked with the highest importance by those surveyed, which was reflected in the strength in scores across the board. Dark green side panels, tips to save money, and thoughts about where my money goes comprise these bags.
Eating Fruits and Vegetables

People generally had high scores for this habit. A fresh green was chosen to represent eating more produce. The bits of text on the bags list the benefits of eating more fruits and vegetables and my own struggle to buy produce at the store.
Those who ranked this habit as important generally scored high, but those who ranked it as a lower priority had much weaker scores. The responses were mixed fairly evenly between those who prioritized it and those who did not. A night sky blue identifies these bags as relating to sleep habits. One side of the bag lists tips for getting to bed earlier, and the other side are the thoughts of a sleep-deprived college student.
RESEARCH
The other school of thought, supported by the thoughts and writings of René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, John Locke, and David Hume, argue that habit is "a form of mechanism that arrests and inhibits consciousness, thought and freedom" (Grosz 217). Through automating behavior and actions, one does not have to observe their surroundings with scrutiny at all times. According to Descartes, humans are not always truly perceiving their surroundings as they are in front of them, but instead as they think them to be, due to a “habit of believing” formed at some point in their existence (Patterson 244).

The other school of thought on habits, and the one that this project will be exploring forward movement, but instead that “habit is the point of transition between living beings and matter, enabling each to be transformed through its engagement with the other” (Grosz 217). This explains habit as a mode of survival in line with Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Humans rely on familiar experiences to create context and adapt to new situations; their environment influences what habits are formed. In turn, humans change the environment through their habits, which will cause the humans to have to change their habits again.

Many habit theories from the 19th century rely on a general understanding that there is only so much the human brain can do and hold at once.

The work of Ruth Blue delves further into the roles of consciousness and distraction in habits, with a base in Ravaisson’s Of Habit. Ravaisson argues in his work that effort is a primary condition of consciousness: without putting effort into actions and thoughts, one is not consciously thinking (43). Blue expands upon this, postulating that habits work through distraction from conscious thought regarding one’s surroundings. Many habit theories from the 19th century rely on a general understanding that there is only so much the human brain can do and hold at once (Vrettos 403). In essentially automating one’s response to what is immediately in their surroundings, the human response to stimuli is minimized, leaving a larger capacity of the mind for other thought. These other thoughts do not necessarily have to relate to the current surroundings; habits that take one out of conscious thought allow one to “focus with more intensity on other thoughts usually relegated to the back of the mind” (Blue 15).

In addition to habit’s ability to alter the mental capacity for thought and action, habit has an external effect of communicating to others the individuality of a person. People are often identified by their actions, and to repeat an action reinforces this identity. Just as changes in a physical environment cause humans to change their habits, which in turn change the environment, the same is true of human habits in a social environment. Others will adapt their own habits in response to the habits of one person (Vrettos 403).

Vrettos and other philosophers and psychologists studying habits have often compared habits to clothing consumption and wear, based on the shared role of a repetitive process in its production or formation and habit’s ability to express one’s identity (408). If one wants to change the perception of themselves by others, one can change his or her clothes, or habits. In order to change either of those, there is repetition somewhere in the process that allows one to do so, whether it is the automated, repetitive movements of a machine knitting loom or the repetition of new actions or skills until it also becomes automated.

The metaphor of clothing to habits is appropriate also in how intertwined each one is with the social, cultural, and evolutionary history of humanity. Textiles have been used in the past and are still being used to make humans more suitable to the environments they are in. They have also been used to express status and hierarchy in societies and cultures. Early garments made from the furs and skins of animals allowed Native American tribes to survive the cold winters in northern lands. At the same time, the extent of decoration with beads, feathers, dyes, or other adornments communicated the status of a member of the tribe (Gordon 63).

There has been a recent resurgence in the interest in habit, with numerous websites, books, and other resources being created solely to improve oneself through changing habits (Bennett 8). Benjamin Franklin dedicated an entire chapter of his autobiography to his quest in making 13 virtues into habits through tracking them daily, and the influence of the table form that his system took can be seen today in the habit tracker section of a person’s bullet journal, a trendy way of organizing one’s life (Franklin). Over 40 million copies have been sold of Stephen Covey’s 7 Habits of Highly Successful People since...
it was published nearly 30 years ago. This book lists habits that when adopted, will supposedly improve one’s character for the better in the workplace, leading to career success (Covey). An article on lifehacker.com, a website dedicated to tips and tricks to make life easier, lists seven habits that are the most popular in a habit-tracking app, and how to make it easier to pick them up as habits (Ciotti).

There are a few different ways to measure and track habits. Franklin did so with a table filled out daily, in which he marked instances of fault in not reaching the virtue that day. Habit tracking as it exists in bullet journaling uses a similar table, filled out daily, but marks which habits were completed that day, in more of a positive reinforcement manner. The National Institute of Health lists 12 criteria to measure the strength of one’s habits on a 7-point response scale in the Self-Report Habit Index proposed by Verplanken and Orbell in 2003. This is by far the most in-depth and scientific way to quantify one’s habits (“Consumer Health Informatics Research Resource - Habits.”).

Thank you to my advisors Jenn Stucker and Janet Ballweg, the BGSU Graphic Design faculty, the BGSU Honors College, and my friends and family.

Works Cited
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