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A Case for the Pillowcase

From a very young age, children are taught to store things. They're often taught to put their toys away when they're done playing or to slide books back into a shelf. Families that celebrate Halloween with trick-or-treating have their youngest hold candy bags or buckets in their strollers until they're old enough to hold their own bags and retrieve their own candy. Through school many kids store things in their bookbags. Their books and notes (ideally) won't be stained and ruined when protected by the bookbag and it makes it more comfortable and convenient to carry all their school supplies.

So, what does any of this have to do with pillowcases?

Well, pillowcases are perhaps the most ingenious design that was never meant to be ingenious. Pillowcases—also known as slipcovers or pillow bags—are incredibly self-explanatory. A typical pillowcase is usually a rectangular style bag that fits around a pillow. The shape of the bag ultimately depends on the pillow it comes with, but most general-purpose pillowcases are meant to fit a standard bed pillow. Some might have zippers or buttons on the end where the pillow is inserted to secure the pillow from sliding back out of the bag. Other than this deviation, most pillowcases are identical save for design and material. Like putting toys away to prevent the dog from eating them or slipping candy into a plastic pumpkin to shield it from the October snow, pillowcases are often used for protection. We don't even have to learn

how to use them either because we already know. They have multiple affordances, obvious

constraints, and clear mapping which makes them an incredibly good design. To add to this, their

designer model and user model should hypothetically be identical, which according to Don

Norman's *Design of Everyday Things* is the mark of a fantastic design.

To start, let's build a simple conceptual model. **Figure 1** (p. 6) shows off a standard

pillowcase without anything in it. It sits flat with no real distinguishing feature aside from the

opening on one side (in this case the right side of the pillowcase). In **Figure 2** (p. 6) a pillow has

been partially inserted into the case through its opening on the right side. Finally, **Figure 3** (p. 6)

shows the pillow completely secured into the pillowcase. For many pillowcases there is no real

front side or back side as both are typically identical. There is no wrong way to slide the

pillowcase on. It simply slides over the pillow, and most are left a little baggy to compensate for

larger pillows. Excess fabric leftover when a smaller pillow is placed inside can be tucked

underneath the pillow should the user desire. Other user models for pillowcases can have them

being used as bags for storage or covers for something other than a pillow. While this deviates

from the designer model it isn't necessarily a negative. Pillowcases are built to be durable. Thus,

they can hold a decent amount of weight and can protect items from an array of outside elements

(though most aren't waterproof). Users can stray from the intended conceptual model of the

designer and still find that pillowcases are useful and easy to work with. The usability of the

pillowcase is a testament to the multiple affordances it offers.

Don Norman explains affordances as both the "perceived" and "actual" properties of an

item (Norman, 1988, p. 9). He then goes on to use this example, "A chair affords ("is for")

support and, therefore, affords sitting," (Norman, 1988, p. 9). Piggybacking off this example,

pillowcases afford comfort and protection and therefore afford coverage. Pillowcases are often

used to protect the soft pillow encased within from drool and other staining substances that people release when they're asleep. Pillowcases also make sleeping more hygienic so long as the case is regularly washed. In fact, researchers from Medindia have found that bacteria, dirt, and more can accumulate on the pillowcase over several nights, (Medindia, 2018). The pillowcase can be easily removed and cleaned whereas the pillow could be ruined in the wash. On top of hygiene, pillowcases also add a layer of comfort and support to some pillows. These are the perceived affordances of the pillowcase. The actual affordance is simply covering the pillow with the case and sleeping. It should be noted that the affordances of a pillowcase are closely tied to the pillow itself. Without a pillow to be covered, a pillowcase is simply a big, soft bag. For the designer model of the pillowcase, a pillow must also be present. The two complement one another.

The usefulness of pillowcases has maybe gone down as materials have become cheaper and items have become easier to obtain. There are countless pillows for sale at any supermarket or furniture store now. If a pillow is ruined in the wash or stained from use without a pillowcase, it's incredibly easy and cheap to go and purchase a replacement pillow. So, while the overall usefulness of the pillowcase might have dropped over the years, the affordances haven't changed. It's easier to wash a pillowcase free of sweat and bacteria than an actual pillow. Pillows need to be washed carefully depending on the material they have inside of them. Most pillows are very easy to ruin in the wash. Pillowcases are built to be washer and dryer safe though. They can protect a pillow, get dirty, and messed up whilst doing so and then be easily washed. This is perhaps the most important affordance of the pillowcase: reliable reusability. If this is the pillowcase's best affordance, then its best usability trait is certainly its constraints—and lack thereof.

The pillowcase has a single major constraint. According to Don Norman, products need constraints to be effective and easy to use. Norman writes, "The surest way to make something easy to use, with few errors, is to make it impossible to do otherwise—to constrain the choices," (Norman, 1988, p. xii). A standard pillowcase has a single opening for a pillow to slide into. While some fancier cases are reversable and have special materials, most (if not all) share this single constraint. There's only one way the pillow is going in, and only one way it's coming back out. This makes the product incredibly simple to use. So easy that most kids won't ever have to learn how to use a pillowcase from their families. They've been taught to put things away for one reason or another that using a pillowcase correctly comes naturally. Even kids who might not understand *why* they're using a pillowcase can still use one without error because the constraints of the design make it so that people are almost forced into using it correctly and easily. This transitions well into the feedback of a pillowcase.

Though it could be seen as a weakness, pillowcases don't really have feedback. The only form of feedback a pillowcase really possesses is its size. If it doesn't fit the pillow, it usually won't slide around the pillow unless forced, and this action could possibly tear the pillowcase. The design of a standard pillowcase is so simple though that it often doesn't need in depth feedback to be usable/accessible. The same goes for the mapping. A pillowcase can go one of two ways when being used. It can slide over the pillow to encase it, or it can slide backwards off the pillow to become separate again. There are no signifiers directing people how to use them because the design is so self-explanatory. Thus, the pillowcase doesn't really need precise mapping or visibility other than the one side being open and the other side being closed.

Pillowcases aren't a product most people think about on a day to day basis. Not even a year to year basis. They're so simple that they're almost forgettable. This is what makes them

such a great design though. The affordances are common knowledge for the most part and the design doesn't need detailed feedback or mapping to be usable. The design of the pillowcase is also the constraint of it, and this design essentially forces people into using the product correctly and easily. These factors all combine to make an incredibly accessible and easily usable product that often gets overlooked or forgotten as just another sheet in the bedcovers. Truly, pillowcases are very underappreciated.

Figures

Works Cited

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