We are in a world of individualization and collaboration. Design is not just everyday practice, but a way of living.

**Surface Deep**

**Design Customization**

Surface is what immediately brings the visual attention of a user to design. In modernity, surface is often a smooth, slick and flat plane that represents the ideology of rationality and order. As form and function are the top priorities in modern design, the emotional aspect of design is intentionally or unintentionally void. The surface becomes a blank canvas, a minimalist territory that leaves so much space to create, not just from the perspective of visual aesthetics and individual presentation, but also a space to connect design and users in the realm of emotion. The modernist may argue that surface design is an ornament or decoration that does not serve one’s need and functionality. However, at present, the overwhelming material world does not give our souls satisfaction. Our affection for objects has shifted greatly in favour of our emotional needs and comfort. A sense of belonging, self-esteem, fulfillment and happiness is what we really desire in design.

In psychology, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs[[1]](#footnote-0) uses the terms "physiological", "safety", "belonging" , "love", "esteem", "self-actualization" and "self-transcendence" to describe patterns that human motivation generally moves through.[[2]](#footnote-1) This theory has been applied to design with a transformed terminology: functionality, reliability, usability, pleasure and meaning. The top two levels of this pyramid structure are combined with emotion, where the functionality and usability stay at the base level of human needs.[[3]](#footnote-2)

The user’s first contact with a surface is the visual language of design presentation: color, shape, texture, pattern and also the structural shape of the surface.

Surface design is an extension of rhetorical visual elements that affect the user’s visual senses. The design composition creates a visual language that connects a viewer’s attention and interest to the design. It is the visual equivalent of starting with a simple greeting or an introduction. This contact creates an initial interest in an exchange of information that leads to a deeper understanding. Similarly, surface design functions as an introduction to the entire object, creating a visual communication and an emotional connection to the viewers.

To users, surface design is an introduction, a visual communication through the eyes to the heart, an effect of an emotional journey from unconsciousness to consciousness. For designers, surface design is an opportunity to express the designer’s passion into a visual representation. It is a process to connect the designer’s idea, belief and passions to users through visual expression.

Thus, surface design provides a large space for the designer and user to communicate in this realm. If we see the surface itself is a media space, designers traditionally use this space to create meaning and communicate with users visually. However, while users have immediate reactions to the surface design, designers need relatively longer time to receive feedback from the users. Semiotically, the graphic message can also be interpreted differently in different contexts. Thus, although the designer has control over the design, the designer has no way to control the effectiveness of the design and how users reflect on the design emotionally. So, the reality is, relying on the designer’s authority to provide the emotional needs of users in design is unpredictable.

If we consider surface design in the concept of post-structuralism[[4]](#footnote-3), in the context of linguistics, users can choose how they construct and combine words in different ways to express their individuality. If we adopt this concept in design, can we use surface as a canvas for users to express themselves and communicate with designs? If so, how can designers provide users the freedom but also give designers the ability to control the spirit of the design? How can surface design create a visual conversation that invites the users to collaborate in the design process? How can surface design create opportunities for users to express their individual sense? These questions lead to the exploration of the theory of customization in surface design.

In my 15 years of commercial art practice as an airbrush artist and a custom designer, I have created many “one of a kind designs” and “custom experience” for users on all types of surfaces. No matter if the design is a high-end custom painting on a sports-car, or it is a simple everyday object such as a T-shirt. My job requires me to work closely with the user, to help them to express their uniqueness through the design and its process. Surface design is always the first priority for my customers to claim their individuality and self-expression.

The ability to customize a design with personal experience is rapidly increasing with today’s technology. From desktop publishing to CNC; laser technology, online media and social platforms. Users can have many choices to design and product personalized design with high customization, in both tangible and digital forms. Surface design today also needs to adopt this design concept to provide users a platform for customization. Designers can use the surface as a design platform to collaborate with users, designing tools and method for users to create their own customizable designs on different surfaces with the integrated DIY process. With customizable surfaces, users can express their emotion freely with provided forms and guidelines,this is the mainframe created by designers. This collaboration in surface customization process can build a bridge between the material needs to the emotional aesthetic of the users, it also can create a prolonged visual conversation between designers and users.

Overall, surface design customization is user-centric: Designers collaborate with users to create designs individually. In this collaborative design method, both designer and user have the equal opportunity to make decisions on material and emotional needs. A democratic design process is a fundamental concept in this customizable design process, which may apply to

other design areas.

More importantly, in the social context, the equality in design authority is achieved through this design practice, it can inspire users to explore their individual creative power and social participation.

Modernism’s ideology of “form follows function” largely avoids surface design. The rational structures and clean, crisp and smooth surfaces reject the ornament and decoration of surface design. In a way that it avoids the irrational feeling from our outside consciousness to the hidden emotion deep inside of us. The naked body and smooth skin of the modern surface give us a sense of order and coldness. Surface design is just the layer of clothing we need to warm our bodies and satisfy the need for our emotional comfort. Afterall, it is my belief that the purpose of design is for people, and the spirit of design is to provide people with true happiness.

1. [Maslow, A.H.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Maslow) (1943). ["A theory of human motivation"](http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm). *Psychological Review*. **50** (4): 370–96.  [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. M.,, Wills, Evelyn. [*Theoretical basis for nursing*](https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/857664345). [ISBN](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Standard_Book_Number) [9781451190311](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:BookSources/9781451190311). [OCLC](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OCLC) [857664345](https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/857664345). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ruston, Daniel. “*Design for emotion”*. Google Design

   https://medium.com/google-design/design-for-emotion-7ba0cf40e05b [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Bensmaïa, Réda *Poststructuralism*, article published in [Kritzman, Lawrence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_D._Kritzman) (ed.) [*The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*](https://books.google.com/books?id=bREQibN9i-sC), Columbia University Press, 2005, pp.92-93 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)