

Technologizing Touch: Tactile Magic, Education, and Domestication in *Apple iPad* Advertisements

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Abstract

Touch may be the most intimate but least understood forms of communication. Its primacy made it a third sense behind seeing and hearing. However, as touchscreen technologies permeate the cultural landscape, and tactility enters scholarly discussions, the importance of understanding the relationships between tactility and human-machine communication in everyday life is increasingly felt. This study provides a discourse analysis about the tactility of human-machine communication by using *Apple iPad* advertisements as case studies. The investigation uncovers three dominant discourses that position the *iPad* as providing a magical tactile experience through intuitive, everyday activities, confined within the critical space of domesticity.

Keywords

touch; tactility; human-machine communication; *iPad*

Slide to unlock

Humans primarily interact with machines through touch. Since the advent of stone tools through the mechanical age and even now into the digital era, touch has been our first and most enduring point of contact with machines. With the advent of touchscreen computers like the *iPad*, our tactile interactions have only solidified the dominance that touch plays in mediating human-machine communication. The recent wave of touch screens has consequences for how individuals perceive the affordances of other screens, e.g. touching television screens and being frustrated when nothing happens. Haptic technologies enable human-to-human social touch and affect over space, but connecting through machines more also means connecting with machines more. Effects and affects of these connections should be understood.

The study of tactile and human-machine communication is important to the field of communication but also important to fields that rely on understanding communication in making decisions about design, social formations, policy, and so forth. Some scholars explore the social significance of human touch (most notably Field, 2003; Montagu, 1978). Others analyze the social significance of touching through machines (Paterson, 2005, 2007). Research about the social and communicative significance of touching machines lags behind, leaving a critical void. How do humans learn to touch machines? Who controls the discourses that influence touching behavior? How are emotional responses elicited through tactile human-machine interaction? How does machine touch compare to human touch in influencing perceptions and development? This study begins to explore some of these questions and provides insights to build upon in future research.

Affordances

The construct of affordances provides a systematic framework to investigate human-machine interaction. Although the construct stems from Gibson (1979) and is further developed by

Norman (1990), Hutchby (2001) provides a useful summary for the purposes of my study by considering “affordances and the ‘impact’ of technologies on social interaction” (30). The construct suggests that artifacts, in this case, machine technologies, open to multiple uses but limit potential uses. Investigating these limitations helps explain some of the potential discourses informing the development and consequences of machine and human tactility.

Designers, engineers, and craftspeople contribute to rendering the affordances of technologies. They decide where the doorknob goes and how the door opens (Norman, 1988). A designer should have a practical knowledge of how humans and machines communicate. Individuals attempt to design machines that feel and respond in a way that invites certain types of use. Coordinated action results. Practitioners in these fields understand the necessity of designing machines that people become attached to and feel comfortable operating. To ensure a sense of feeling-with, marketers will also instruct users on how to touch machines.

Method

I use a discourse analysis informed by Foucault (1977) and Fairclough (1995, 2003) to analyze several print and video *iPad* advertisements to determine how represented users touch the devices. Discourse investigated encompasses the visual and verbal, tactile expressions *iPad* advertisements present. I focus on the intersections between the unspoken instruction-touching of the device and the spoken and visualized intuitiveness, “magic,” of it. Often competing themes emerge between words and images. Questions that motivate the research include: How are users invited to touch the *iPad*? What kinds of touch are not allowed? What kind of tactile language is introduced? Who is allowed to touch the *iPad*?

Magic, Education, Domestication

The discourse analysis reveals three clear and interweaving discourses that negotiate tactile human-machine communication with the *iPad*. The advertisements serve the function of making touch screens a magical apparatus to be used as if like a sorcerer’s wand, even while placing the use in primarily domestic settings and implicitly educating the user how to touch the device. The way these discourses are forged creates the sense of limitless tactile possibility while masking material limitations of the device.

The discourse of magic that runs through almost all *Apple iPad* advertisements serves at least two important rhetorical functions. First, it promises the user limitless freedom when using the *iPad*, while subverting the fact that freedom is bounded by a few inches of screen, tactile responsiveness, availability of applications, bandwidth and battery life. It is a promise the *iPad* cannot possibly deliver on, but which leaves consumers reaching out to take the magic wand. Second, and in concert with the first function, it serves to cleave the materiality of the *iPad* from the hands of the user. The discourse of magic persuades the consumer to believe in the product and suspend critical and evaluative judgment. Why take the *iPad* apart and look at the components that make the magic happen, there is no point, it is magic.

Discourses about the intuitiveness of using *iPads* work in tandem with discourses of magic. Playing off the primal nature of touch, the toucher is positioned as already having the knowledge necessary to operate the *iPad*. We are not taught to touch, we just do, or so goes the idea. The magical ease and intuitive use of the *iPad* is reinforced and our movements branded by *Apple* while being taught to touch by the advertisements. Positioning the audience in the first person is a clever way to make the user feel like they already know how to touch the device. After all, they have seen themselves doing it before.

The final discourse takes a domestic turn. Domesticity plays a large role in all of the advertisements. Domestic discourses create realities about who touches the *iPad* and where it is touched. They function to make the *iPad* a type of mobile home – so one always **feels** at home. Agency appears to be granted to the user that can take and touch an *iPad* anywhere and at any time while connecting to their family, friends, work, and other social spaces. The *iPad* becomes a personal, mobile space within a series of any other possible spaces, from the undercarriage of a car in a repair shop to a bus in Beijing. But instead of freeing the user, the *iPad* becomes a leash, domesticating the user by tying tactile possibilities and sense of self to the device. An individual can only fix a car by holding the device containing automotive schematics and can only get around town using the map displayed on the device held firmly in hand.

Discussion

Apple's iPad and other touchscreens now dominate the market. Companies copied them, using varying types of touchscreen technologies, and *Apple* continues to reinvent its own product line to be increasingly touch oriented. The promise and prevalence of touch screens stems from ideals of intuitiveness, the mystical connection between user and machine produced by touch, and immersiveness of the experience – even allowing users to touch space that is, for all intents and purposes, immaterial. Yet, touchscreen devices like the *iPad* are not particularly rich tactile devices. They avoid having much texture. With eyes closed, there is nothing tactilely interesting about touchscreens. The device loses its magic and becomes functionless, at least in the ways afforded by discourses in the advertisements. The discourses end up imbuing the device with a sense of tactility that it does not physically possess while subverting those it does.

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