

Dissertation Release**24.10.2022**

Empathy for users is a core part of product design, but it is constantly contested by other realities of work

Title of the dissertation	The role of empathy in design practice – Theoretical development and empirical exploration of an integrated model
Contents of the dissertation	Human experiences are critical to consider when solving today's problems. Particularly, the users and customers of new products are experts in the context in which the products are used. Thus, testing and adjusting solutions based on user and customer understanding is paramount in creating products that both solve needs and fit existing practices. Still, there are reports of products that fail on the market due to lack of user acceptance and failure to serve minority users. Here, empathy can help explicate how human-centricity is and ought to be enacted in design. Research on empathy in social sciences describes that interpersonal understanding results from processes of cognitive sensemaking and affective responding. Outside design, empathy has been found to benefit, for example, doctor-patient encounters in information elicitation, sales negotiations in constructive compromising, and even married couples in maintaining prosperous relationships. Empathy should be beneficial for product designers too, as they likewise elicit information from stakeholders, make compromises, and maintain relationships, among other tasks.
	This dissertation developed a model for empathy in design and expanded it through multiple empirical studies in Finland and the USA. The findings indicate that empathy is both interwoven into design practice and constantly contested by practical constraints and contexts. For example, novice designers' empathy was hindered by time pressure, and even professionals experienced personal distress when negotiating between delivery deadlines and thoroughly understanding customer needs. Overall, the results of this dissertation provide a shared language for academics in the field and a framework through which empathy-oriented design methods and educational interventions can be planned.
Field of the dissertation	Product development
Doctoral candidate	Antti Surma-aho, M.Sc. (Tech.), born in 1990 in Imatra, Finland
Time of the defence	24 October 2022 at 12:00 hours
Place of the defence	Aalto University School of Engineering, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Design Factory, Betonimiehenkuja 5C, 02150 Espoo, Finland, Auditorium "Stage"
Opponent	Professor Scarlett Miller, Pennsylvania State University, USA
Supervisor	Professor Katja Hölttä-Otto, School of Engineering, Aalto University, Finland & University of Melbourne, Australia
Electronic dissertation	https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/handle/123456789/117063
Doctoral candidate's contact information	Antti Surma-aho, Aalto University, antti.surma-aho@aalto.fi , phone +358405080716