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Wentao Sun
ws9236@rit.edu

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Amulet: Addressing Emotional Abuse

by

Wentao Sun

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Communication Design

The School of Design | College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
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Name Title

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat

Name Title

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat

Name (Optional for some programs) Title (Optional for some programs)

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat (Optional for some programs)

Name (Optional for some programs) Title (Optional for some programs)

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat (Optional for some programs)

Abstract

In a world grappling with the scourge of psychological violence, particularly gaslighting, in intimate relationships, the "Amulet" project presents a visionary design solution. Positioned at the intersection of emotional abuse and technology, the project conceptualizes Amulet as a biometric system embodied in a hypothetical skin tattoo and extendable across digital devices.

The Amulet project explores the potential role of design in challenging and addressing this insidious form of abuse. The core elements of the project include designing a unique brand identity for Amulet and the creation of a user-friendly interface that offers an intuitive and empowering user experience. The designed system envisions using artificial intelligence and biometric data processing to detect emotional responses and manipulative language patterns.

In creating a system capable of identifying and alerting users to psychological manipulation, the project imagines a tool that could empower victims to recognize and resist gaslighting, helping them reclaim their autonomy. The brand and UI/UX design aim to imbue users with a sense of safety, understanding, and control, offering a conceptual escape pathway from the shadowy maze of emotional abuse.

While Amulet remains an imaginative design, it provides a catalyst for discourse around the intersection of technology, psychology, and feminist dialogue. This innovative proposal underscores the potential role of design in combating psychological violence and contributes to the forward-thinking vision of a more equitable society.

Keywords

Emotional Abuse, Gaslighting, Biometric System, Psychological Support, Futuristic Design

Introduction

Emotional abuse, in its many forms, is a pervasive issue in societies worldwide, frequently underestimated due to its inherent subtlety and deceptively private nature. It is often referred to as an 'invisible' form of violence, as it is characterized by behaviors that systematically undermine, belittle, and manipulate victims, causing profound psychological damage. 'Gaslighting,' a particularly insidious form of emotional abuse, serves to distort the victim's perception of reality over time, often leading to significant mental health issues and emotional trauma.

This subtle yet destructive form of abuse was brought into public consciousness through the actions of 'Pickup Artists' (PUAs). These individuals employ psychological manipulation as a means to pursue their targets, often resulting in a profound impact on the victims' mental and emotional wellbeing. While women are often portrayed as the primary victims of emotional abuse, it is crucial to acknowledge that men too can be subjected to such damaging manipulation. Consequently, this paper approaches emotional abuse as a universal problem that extends beyond gender boundaries, affecting individuals across all walks of life.

Based on these observations, the core inquiry of this thesis revolves around: "What is the lived experience of individuals ensnared in the throes of emotional abuse, and how should others intervene appropriately?" This inquiry sets the stage for the problem statement that this paper seeks to address: "How can we accurately identify instances of emotional abuse and provide effective assistance to its victims?"

To address this problem, a conceptual design project titled 'Amulet' was developed. This paper delineates the design and development journey of Amulet, highlighting the underlying thought processes, approaches, and anticipated outcomes of the project. The objective of Amulet is to equip victims with a tool to identify and resist this 'invisible' form of abuse, ultimately empowering them to reclaim their emotional autonomy.

Through this exploration, the paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding emotional abuse, fostering a greater understanding of its nuanced manifestations, and promoting strategies for effective intervention. It aims to further the collective goal of creating a future where emotional violence is swiftly recognized, vigorously challenged, and ultimately eradicated.

Main Body

Section I: Context

This project, titled 'Amulet', emerged from a rigorous exploration of the multifaceted issue of emotional abuse, a pervasive yet often overlooked problem. The research inquiry was defined by the questions: "What is the lived experience of individuals subjected to emotional abuse, and how should others intervene appropriately?" This inquiry necessitated a multi-dimensional approach, where understanding the problem's complexity was integral.

The research process was both extensive and thorough, involving a detailed review of academic literature related to emotional abuse. Seeking advice from professional organizations and counselors added a layer of practical wisdom, bringing forth the nuances of the issue at hand. Furthermore, quantitative research methods were used to gather data and gain a broader perspective on the prevalence and intricacies of emotional abuse.

The resulting insights brought forth a significant realization - the extent to which outside intervention could be effective is limited. The primary factor that would determine the effectiveness of any intervention is the victim's (or potential victim's) self-awareness. A clear understanding of one's psychological state emerged as a vital requirement, necessitating a shift in focus towards self-awareness tools as a useful method of intervention.

This awareness led to defining the audience for the project, which extended beyond the victims of emotional abuse to potential victims and those in their support networks. The challenge was to design a tool that could promote self-awareness of emotional abuse, aiding in its early detection and prevention.

Through its user-centric design, 'Amulet' seeks to empower individuals in recognizing and combatting emotional abuse, and in doing so, contribute to tackling this pervasive social issue. The incorporation of research and professional advice into its design ensures its relevance and efficacy for its intended audience.

Section II: Methods

This project followed a systematic methodology, driven by the design goal of enabling individuals to monitor their mental states and provide supportive prompts when necessary. The brand's ethos was intended to evoke a sense of warmth, calmness, and comfort while protecting user privacy.

The design process was iterative, with the development of design aspects and testing/validation of concepts happening simultaneously. This approach allowed for the co-evolution of the product's visual brand identity and its functional capabilities. Balancing utility and privacy was a central challenge throughout this phase, considering the vulnerable position of our target users.

The initial concept revolved around a support system, leveraging both physiological and psychological data analysis along with environmental assessments (such as recorded ambient sounds, physical states, etc.) to evaluate the user's emotional well-being accurately. The system then offers tailored support based on this comprehensive assessment. The focus was on making the system as non-invasive and discreet as possible, given that many potential users are under continuous scrutiny from their abusers.

This requirement for discretion led to the evolution of the product from a wearable device into a form of tattoo. The initial wearable design, akin to an accessory, was intended to blend seamlessly into the user's daily attire. However, the need for increased stealth led to the innovative idea of an "intelligent tattoo." Drawing on futuristic design principles, the tattoo is imagined as a dynamic entity that can adjust its opacity for further concealment, adding an interesting layer to the design.

Throughout the design phase, challenges were encountered and systematically addressed. The primary issue was to ensure the device's discreet nature did not compromise its functionality. The emphasis on privacy was amplified during the refinement phase, given the potential surveillance from abusers.

The validation of preliminary designs involved user testing with selected respondents and professional consultations. Their input was crucial in shaping the product's final form and functionality. Feedback from these tests guided further refinement, ensuring the design was not just effective but user-centric.

Research was an integral part of this project, blending qualitative and quantitative methods. In-depth interviews with victims, rescuers, and organizations like the Center for Battered Women helped shape an understanding of the emotional abuse landscape. Surveys and questionnaires supplemented this by providing a broader view of the problem's scope and societal perceptions.

The research process also included examining emotional sharing platforms to assess the impact of shared personal experiences. Additionally, professional consultations were employed to validate the approach taken and confirm the project's reliability.

Following the design process, user testing and professional consultations were conducted to gauge user experience and effectiveness. The insights gained from this phase provided invaluable feedback about

privacy and the need of hidden, driving the final refinements of the product and ensuring it met the needs of its intended users effectively and empathetically.

Section III: Results

The culmination of the development and testing phases led to the realization of a unique, multifunctional, and discreet product designed to address the deeply sensitive issue of emotional abuse. Below, we discuss the final product through its core features, benefits, and potential use scenarios.

Feature 1: Customizable Tattoo Design

The product, envisioned as an intelligent tattoo, allows users to affix it to their skin, offering a level of discretion unparalleled by conventional devices. It affords users control over its appearance, including the shape and opacity of the tattoo, catering to both aesthetic preferences and the need for concealment.

Scenario 1: Initial Setup

Upon receiving the product, the user applies the intelligent tattoo to their body. They can then manipulate its shape and opacity using the associated device, allowing them to tailor its appearance to their liking or to blend in with their skin, enhancing its stealth.

Feature 2: Comprehensive Wellness Report

The device constantly monitors the user's physiological and psychological data and environmental factors to provide a detailed wellness report. These reports can potentially reveal patterns indicative of emotional abuse, such as consistently poor mental health while in the presence of specific individuals.

Scenario 2: Checking the Report

The user can access these reports on their device, gaining insight into their emotional health and potential risks. For example, if the system detects a recurring pattern of significant distress when the user interacts with a particular person, it would flag this as a potential sign of emotional abuse.

Feature 3: Discreet Emergency Assistance

In scenarios where the system identifies a sudden or severe emotional distress, it offers a hidden emergency contact or alarm feature. This feature is designed to ensure the user can receive help when needed while maintaining their safety and privacy.

Scenario 3: Emergency Situations

In an instance where the user's emotional state registers as significantly distressed, the system discreetly activates the emergency feature. It could connect the user to a trusted contact or emergency services,

ensuring the user receives immediate assistance while keeping the intervention hidden from potential abusers.

Overall, the product combines human-centric design and a deep understanding of the nuances of emotional abuse. Its innovative approach ensures it offers support, detection, and aid to those in need while respecting their need for privacy and discretion.

Section IV: Evaluation & Discussion:

Addressing the Problem Statement

Given the futurist design nature of this project, a tangible product could not be made due to current technological constraints. Instead, user testing and discussions were based on existing prototypes. The final design, albeit not a physical product, does provide a clear vision and direction for future endeavors to address emotional abuse effectively. From Stern (2007) and Sarkis' works, it's apparent that traditional methods of addressing emotional abuse are inadequate and often place the onus of resolution on the victims. Our design, on the other hand, places technology at the heart of addressing this complex problem, aiding victims discreetly and providing insights for professional intervention.

Reviews

Feedback from users regarding the visual design of the brand has been overwhelmingly positive, with many describing it as comforting, elegant, and trustworthy. Notably, users have observed that the project has evolved beyond its initial focus on emotional abuse to a more comprehensive mental health platform.

This is not necessarily a misdirection. As Karakurt et al. (2013) and Stark (2010) suggest, emotional abuse is a significant component of intimate partner violence, but it isn't isolated from broader mental health issues. Our design therefore seeks to provide comprehensive emotional support, not just focus on one facet of mental health.

Future Iterations and Impacts

The progression from focusing solely on emotional abuse to a broader mental health platform indicates the potential of this design direction. There is ample room for expansion and development in the design for mental health. As research has shown, many psychological states are reflected in physiological responses, which can be monitored and analyzed (Van Houdenhove et al. 2001). This represents a feasible application for the future development of this project, potentially making it more tangible and impactful in the real world.

Research Review

The term "gaslighting," a core feature of emotional abuse, was first popularized by the movie "Gaslight" (1944) and later brought to public awareness by psychotherapist Robin Stern in 2007. Stern, along with other psychoanalysts, focused on providing victims with tools for self-identification and escape routes, showing the limitations of human intervention without technological aid.

Sociologists argue that gaslighting and emotional abuse are deeply rooted in macro-level social inequalities, especially gender and sexuality (Myhill 2015; Stark 2010). This perspective highlights the necessity of a product that can provide discreet assistance, taking into account the complex socio-cultural dynamics at play.

Emotional abuse is the most common form of intimate partner violence and affects victims more negatively than physical abuse (Karakurt et al. 2013; Anderson 2009). Our product, aiming to detect and respond to signs of emotional abuse, aligns with this understanding and strives to provide support where traditional avenues may fall short.

Lastly, there are clear gaps in the global response to emotional abuse, with many societies failing to recognize it as a serious form of violence. Our product seeks to bridge this gap by providing an innovative solution that transcends cultural and societal boundaries.

In conclusion, the body of research supporting this project confirms the urgent need for a solution like the one our product provides. Although the physical product has yet to be realized due to technical limitations, its conceptual design lays a solid foundation for future technological advancements in this critical field.

Conclusions

Throughout the exploration of this project, a clear underpinning is evident: the urgency to address the pervasive issue of emotional abuse. While it often remains unseen, its consequences are significant, both at the personal and societal level. Those affected may fail to recognize their circumstances, leading to an escalating cycle of harm.

The project's design and conceptualization focused on providing a platform to tackle this multifaceted issue. By amalgamating resources such as community support, educational content, and legal assistance into an integrated tool, victims of emotional abuse are provided with means to identify their situations, seek help, and navigate their recovery journey.

Insights from user testing have proven the platform's potential effectiveness. The overall visual design was lauded for its inviting and trustworthy appeal, a crucial attribute for a tool aimed at fostering a sense of safety and confidence. Furthermore, the platform's evolution into a more comprehensive mental health tool was seen as a positive departure from the initial focus solely on emotional abuse, illustrating the wider applicability and potential impact of the design.

This project spurred new inquiries into the role of design in mental health support. The possibility of integrating emotional monitoring represents an exciting future direction, using technology to make the platform more attuned to users' needs and states. This convergence of mental health needs and technological advancement represents an untapped area for designers to create meaningful and impactful solutions.

In closing, while this project remains in the conceptual stage, it embodies a hopeful direction for addressing emotional abuse. It serves as a testament to the potential for technology and design to tackle complex social issues, offering a beacon of hope for those affected. As we continue to explore ways to foster mental wellbeing, this project underscores the transformative power of thoughtful design, demonstrating its potential to spark change and make a tangible difference in the lives of individuals.

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AMULET
Amulet
Amulet
Amulet

Business Card AMULET

Pin AMULET

Folder AMULET
Letter Head AMULET

Stamps AMULET

"I want my status to be automatically recorded at all times to analyze my emotional fluctuations."

FEATURE 1
PSYCHOLOGICAL IDENTITY

It is a exclusive professional psychological assistant, who is always at your back and call as you need.

DELIVERABLES

FEATURE 2
PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYZER

It is your rational and objective secretary, recording and analyzing where your mood fluctuations originate.

DELIVERABLES

"I wish I could be alerted when my toxic person is nearby."

FEATURE 3
EMOTIONAL GUARDS

It is your hidden and faithful protector, helping you warn of danger and seek help.

DELIVERABLES

"I wish it could follow me anywhere."

FEATURE 4
FUTURISTIC TATTOO

In addition, of course, it is also a super cool magic tattoo. Unlimited patterns and movements, exclusively for you.

DELIVERABLES

Screen AMULET

USABILITY TESTING

USABILITY TEST RESULTS

- Overall participants reported a positive experience with the Amulet system, affirming its potential as a tool to recognize and combat toxicity in relationships. Participants noted the nature of the system, its ease of use, and its unique approach to emotional abuse detection as factors contributing to this positive feedback. Participants raised concerns about the potential risks associated with false positives and negatives. For instance, an incorrect detection of abuse could escalate a non-abusive situation or lead to unjustified alarms, potential scenarios could have serious consequences for the user's safety and mental health.
- Participants also raised concerns/questions regarding data privacy. Given the sensitive nature of the data being collected and analyzed by the system, users were particularly interested in understanding how their information would be stored, used, and protected.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- These concerns underscore the need for further refinement of the system. The design is currently exploring ways to improve the accuracy of abuse detection algorithms and strengthen the data privacy measures. While the usability testing has affirmed the potential of the system, it also highlights the areas where further work and innovation are needed.
- The design is committed to taking these feedback and insights into consideration, continuously improving the system's design and functionality to ensure it effectively meets the needs of its users. The next phase of the project will focus on implementing these improvements and conducting more rigorous testing and refinement. Through this iterative approach, the Amulet project aims to deliver a truly revolutionary tool in the fight against emotional abuse.

USABILITY TESTING

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Technical Feasibility: Although the thesis is clear about the project being conceptual, some discussion on the technological feasibility of the system, such as integration with existing systems, etc. would lend more credibility to the project.
- Ethical Considerations: With any system that involves monitoring and analyzing sensitive and sensitive biometric data, there are bound to be ethical considerations. More discussion on how data privacy and user consent would be handled could strengthen the thesis.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Limitations: It would be beneficial to discuss the potential limitations or challenges that could arise with the 'Amulet'. This could include potential false positives/negatives in abuse detection, user's dependency on the device, etc.
- Implementation: While this is a conceptual project, discussing potential paths for real-world implementation, partnerships, or ways to move from concept to reality might be an interesting addition.

USABILITY TESTING

AMULET

Amulet is a biometric system that can be displayed on the skin and on multiple devices to support victims of psychological violence.

DESIGNER
Wentao Sun

COMMITTEE
Adam Smith, Mike Strobert

TOOLS
Figma, Illustrator, Photoshop, After Effect

TIMELINE
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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY