

# EXPLORING SENSUOUS QUALITIES OF TEXTILES

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## ABSTRACT

As designers we engage with materials in various ways throughout the design process. Especially textile designers who are met with a demand to be able to describe and communicate textiles – in words as well as in physical materials. In this paper we propose a tool consisting of a sensorial wheel and a visual wheel aiming at textile design students at a foundational level.

The tool is meant to develop textile designers' awareness and language by evaluating existing textiles, but at the same time providing the students with an open tool to readjust and combine with other methods and include in their existing design process.

The tool has been tested in a workshop at BA level and showed that students were able to evaluate and vocalise their chosen textiles and the sensorial qualities the textiles expressed by using the two wheels. In the reflection session afterwards, we have focused on the outcome of the sensorial wheel for the students to reflect on the use of the tool and how they experience sensorial qualities differently, thus developing their individual design language and process.

*Keywords: Design education, textile design, textile expression, sensuous qualities, learning tool*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Making, describing and selecting material is something design students are engaged with throughout their education. In this paper we look closer at the textile as material of investigation. We find it relevant to explore textiles specifically, as textile designers are highly engaged with the development of textile materials, including choices on fibre, yarn, construction and after-treatment level. Here students are met with a need to explain their material choices in relation to technical, aesthetic and functional aspects. Furthermore, since textiles are applied to a certain context, it is essential that the embedded sensuous qualities expressed in the textile match the context of use.

With this paper we want to develop and explore a tool mainly for textile design students to engage with the sensuous qualities of textile materials. This is done as a support for students to further develop a vocabulary to enrich their decision making and communication of design choices, when developing textile materials or selecting them for certain applications.

In design education different scholars have contributed with tools and methods aimed for design student to explore the sensorial dimension of materials. Examples of these are *The Experience Map* [1,2], *The Comparative Scale of Materials Attributes* [3], *The Repertory Grid* [4], *The Tripod Approach* [5], *The Atlas of Materials* [6], *The Meaning of Materials Tool* [7], *The Materials in Product Selection tool* [8]. The proposed tool is not meant to be used instead of these, but in addition to, together with or before these, as we wanted to develop a tool for design students on a foundational level. Consequently, the tool provides the student with an uncomplex approach to work with sensorial qualities using the tool as an entry point for further and more complex exploration of materials and their attributes.

To develop our tool, we used *The Experience Map* (ExpMap) as a primary inspiration source and build on parts of the framework it presents. The ExpMap presents a procedure of five steps that takes the user from an existing product and a vision statement ending with a sensorial analysis [2].

### 1.1 Why create another learning tool?

In our tool we wanted to have emphasis on the textile itself and less on the context of use, here being an existing and envisioned product or vision statement. Furthermore, since the tool is aiming for mainly textile design students at a foundational level, these can be regarded as novice designers, we have wanted to develop a tool consisting of two activities that can be used together but also independently. Moreover, representing an institution with strong focus on design methods and processes, we have wanted to



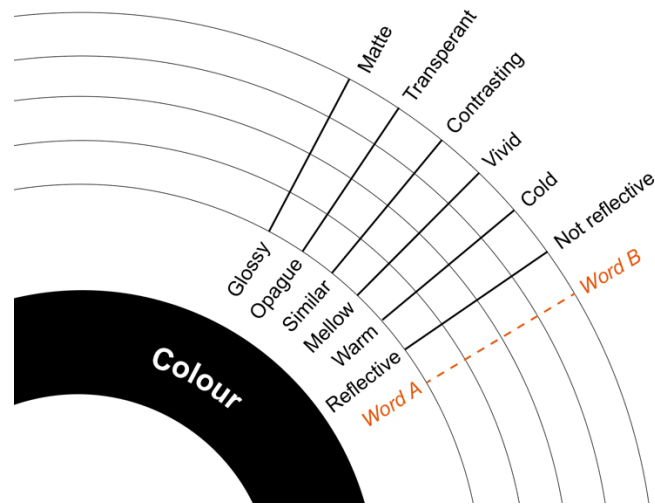


Figure 2. A section of the sensory wheel showing how a word pair could be added

### 3 THE WORKSHOP - CONTEXT

The workshop was carried out as a part of a BA course at our institution on material strategies during the sixth semester. The workshop was attended by four textile design students, two accessory design students and six industrial design students. In the workshop, we wanted to introduce the wheels as a learning tool to understand expressions of already existing textile samples. For the workshop, we prepared 5x5cm textile samples of various compositions, differentiating in fibre, construction, colour and texture to provide the students with samples holding contrasting sensorial qualities.

We also provided the two wheels on A3 size paper to emphasise the physical interaction with the textiles and to allow for a physical, hands-on discussion. In Figure 3, the two wheels with the same sample made by one of the students is shown.



Figure 3. An example of one of the students filling in the two wheels

The students were asked to choose two textiles and evaluate these based on both wheels. Some students chose to work individually while others worked together. After students had evaluated their chosen textiles, all wheels were placed next to each other, shown in Figure 4, to provide a visual overview and allow for direct comparison between wheels and to support reflection and discussion among students on their evaluations and how the use of the tool was experienced. To evaluate the tool and the workshop, notes and insights from the students were written down, while the students were working with the wheels as well as in the discussions afterwards.



Figure 4. Students discussing their wheels in groups comparing how they have analysed the sensorial attributes of the chosen textile

#### 4 FINDINGS

During the workshop, some students found it easy to work with the wheels, while others were a bit more apprehensive until they got started. After a few initial questions, the students worked concentrated on the two wheels. It seemed to help the students working in groups, being able to discuss together on how they would evaluate the sensorial qualities of the chosen textiles, already reflecting on the sensorial qualities and vocalising their understanding with each other, while filling out the wheels.

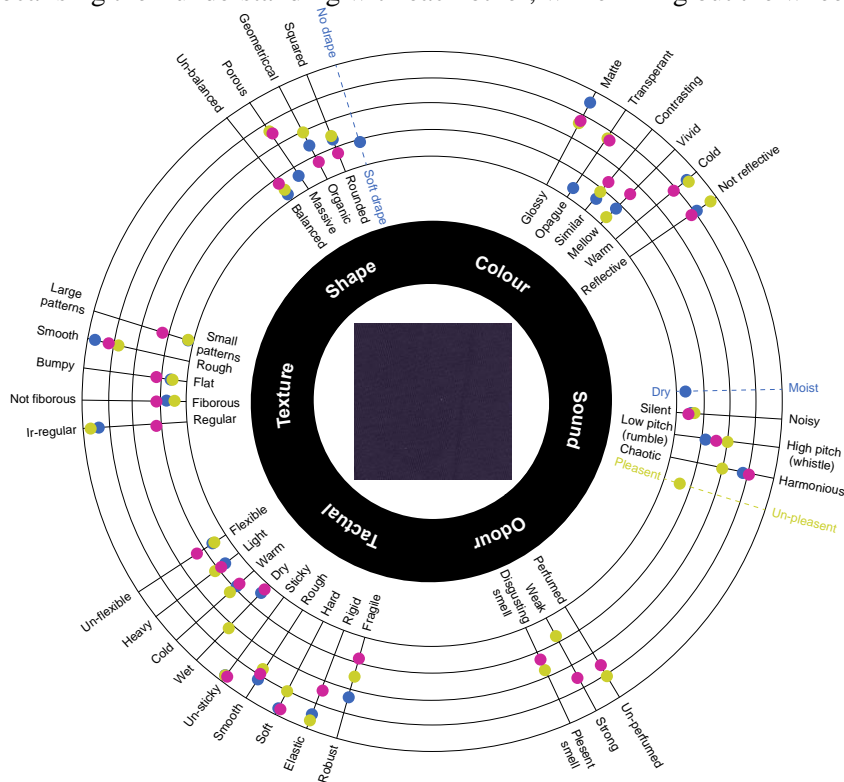


Figure 5. Examples of how students have filled in the sensorial wheel for one of the samples. Sensorial wheels for three students have been placed on top of each other

In Figure 5 the three sensorial wheels from students having chosen the dark blue knitted cotton textile are shown. Each of the students is indicated with a colour. This represents differences as well as similarities between the different sensorial wheels, thus visualising how students evaluate sensorial expressions in different ways.



## 6 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we introduced a tool inspired by the ExpMap as further development to use for foundational design education for primarily textile design students to develop the design student's language about textiles by evaluating already existing textile samples. The tool consists of a sensorial wheel and visual wheel, where the sensorial wheel describes contrasting word pairs based on sensorial qualities and the visual wheel shows chosen words from the sensorial wheel as pictures. We tested the tool in a workshop with third year bachelor design students, of which some were textile designers. Findings indicated that students overall found the tool useful and were able to reflect on the tools afterwards both in comparing their sensorial evaluations of the textile samples with each other, but also reflecting on whether they thought they could apply it in their own design process and how.

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