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From Real-World Entities to Digital Icons: A Conceptual Analysis of Affordances and Signifiers in UI Design

Mr. Subramanya Prajwal R

Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Application, De Paul College, Mysore

Abstract:
Icons are central to user interface (UI) design, functioning as visual signifiers that guide interaction. Traditionally, real-world metaphors have been favoured for their intuitive affordance, yet minimalist and abstract icons are increasingly common. This study investigates whether icons designed using real-world metaphors are more intuitively recognized and confidently selected than abstract counterparts. A two-phase study was conducted with 134 participants. In Phase 1, participants selected between real-world (A) and abstract (B) icons for 10 common UI tasks and rated their confidence. In Phase 2, responses were scored based on whether real-world icons were selected. Recognition rates, confidence levels, and age-based trends were analysed. Results showed that real-world icons were strongly preferred for Gallery, Download, and Lock, while abstract icons for Send and Share received both higher selection and confidence. Statistical testing confirmed significant differences for 9 of 10 tasks. These findings challenge the dominance of metaphor and suggest symbolic abstraction plays a growing role in UI affordance.

Keywords: UI Design, Affordance, Signifiers, Icon Recognition, User Confidence, Real world entity Icons, Abstract Icons, Metaphorical Icons

1. Introduction:

Icons play a central role in modern user interfaces, offering quick and intuitive access to functions through visual cues. Traditionally, designers have favoured real-world metaphors—such as folders, trash cans, and locks—to make interface elements self-explanatory. However, with the rise of minimalist design paradigms, abstract icons like paper planes and share arrows have become increasingly prevalent.

This shift raises critical questions about usability. Are real-world metaphors still the best approach? Or have users developed new mental models that favour symbolic abstraction? This study explores these questions by comparing real-world and abstract icon recognition across ten UI tasks, evaluating both user selection and confidence levels.

2. Literature Review:

2.1 Theoretical Foundations: Affordances and Signifiers

The concepts of affordances (Gibson, 1977) and signifiers (Norman, 1988) form the theoretical backbone of UI icon design. Affordances refer to the properties that suggest how an object can be used, while signifiers guide how and where actions should occur within an interface. Kaptelinin (2014) emphasizes that a deep understanding of affordances enhances the intuitive usability of digital products.

2.2 Visual Language in Icon Design

Bollini (2022) critically examines how icon design balances mimesis (real-world mimicry) and abstraction, asserting that effective icons must communicate functionality without textual cues. The study argues that signifiers rely heavily on this dichotomy and must be crafted to resonate within digital ecosystems.

2.3 Metaphors, Modalities, and User Experience

Kim and Maher (2019) explore how metaphors—such as device, robot, and friend—shape affordances and signifiers for mobile and embodied systems. Their results highlight that each metaphor category brings distinct interaction modalities and design elements, reinforcing the connection between user mental models and icon functionality.

2.4 Empirical Evidence of Affordance in UI

Chen (2014) studies how users perceive affordances in virtual buttons and found that visual attributes like size and shading improve users' ability to identify clickable elements, reflecting parallels to perception in physical environments. Lintern (2000), in the context of aviation, also supports affordance-driven design, advocating for interfaces that inherently display how actions can be executed.

2.5 Interaction as Contextual Engagement

Baber (2018) redefines affordances as emergent from interactions between users, objects, and environments. This perspective aligns with the notion that signifiers must create contextually appropriate "affording situations" rather than simply designing static affordances.

2.6 Advances in Signifier Technology

Lemée et al. (2024) expand the concept of signifiers beyond UI to Multi-Agent Systems (MAS), arguing that clear affordance cues improve agent performance and are equally applicable to human-digital interfaces.

2.7 Holistic Approaches to Affordance and Usability

Masoudi et al. (2019) emphasize that both direct perception and ergonomics are crucial in affordance-based design. Their review reveals that many practical designs overlook ecological considerations, underscoring the need for an integrated approach that balances visibility, context, and continuity.

2.8 Gaps and Contributions

While these studies establish a solid foundation for understanding affordance and signifiers, few specifically analyze the shift from real-world icons to abstract symbols in digital UIs. Moreover, research often explores affordances or signifiers independently rather than examining their combined influence. The present study fills this gap by empirically assessing:

- How real-world metaphoric icons versus abstract icons perform in user recognition.
- Whether abstract icons can match or surpass real-world icons in perceived affordance and confidence.
- The role of designer intent versus symbolic convention in icon effectiveness.

3. Research Gap:

While existing literature explores the usability of icons through cognitive theories like affordance and signifiers, few studies have compared real-world and abstract icons using both behavioural data and user confidence levels. Most research focuses either on recognizability or perceived meaning but rarely integrates the two. Additionally, the increasing use of abstract icons in modern interfaces calls for updated studies that reflect how users interpret these symbols today. There is limited empirical evidence, especially in the Indian context, on whether abstract icons offer comparable usability and clarity to traditional

metaphoric icons. This study addresses that gap by combining icon choice patterns with confidence ratings, offering a more complete picture of how users interact with different icon types.

4. Objectives of the Study

- To assess user preference between real-world and abstract icons.
- To analyse confidence levels associated with each icon type.
- To identify tasks where abstract icons outperform real-world ones.
- To evaluate statistical significance of icon selection patterns.
- To recommend guidelines for UI icon design based on findings.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

A descriptive and analytical research design was adopted to evaluate participants' perceptions, choices, and confidence in icon recognition tasks. The study measured both behavioural outcomes (icon selection) and perceptual responses (confidence levels).

5.2 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total of 134 participants were selected through convenience sampling. Participants included college students and working professionals across different age groups and regions in India. Inclusion criteria:

- Basic digital literacy
- Familiarity with mobile or desktop applications

5.3 Data Collection Instrument

A structured online questionnaire (Google Form) was developed containing visual and rating-based components. The instrument consisted of three main sections:

- **Demographic Profile** (Age, Gender, Digital Literacy)
- **Icon Selection Tasks** (10 icon-based decision questions)
- **Confidence Ratings** (10 corresponding Likert-scale confidence questions)

Each icon task displayed two options—one real-world metaphor (Icon A) and one abstract icon (Icon B). Participants were shown icon-pair images for each task, displaying one real-world metaphor and one abstract representation. An example stimulus is shown in Figure 1, 2, and 3.

Figure 1: Trash bin vs. X-mark for "Delete"

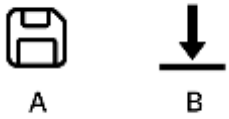

Figure 2: Floppy disc vs. Downward arrow to a bar for "Save".

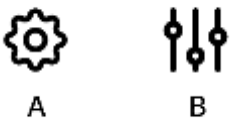

Figure 3: Gear vs. three sliders for "Settings".

5.4 Reliability Testing

The internal consistency of the confidence rating scale (1–5 Likert) was tested using Cronbach's Alpha. The overall reliability coefficient was **0.85**, indicating strong reliability of the scale.

5.5 Statistical Tools Used

- Descriptive Statistics (Frequency, Percentage, Mean)
- Binomial Test (Preference for Real-world Icons)
- Confidence Mean Comparison (Real-world vs Abstract Icons)
- Pearson Correlation (Confidence vs Selection Type)
- Data Visualization (Bar Charts using Python)

5.6 Data Analysis Software

Data was processed using **Jupyter Notebook (Python)** with packages including Pandas, Seaborn, and Matplotlib for statistical analysis and visualization.

6. Results and Analysis

6.1. Demographic Profile

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18–24 Years	68	50.7%
	25–34 Years	46	34.3%
	35–50 Years	20	14.9%
Gender	Male	80	59.7%
	Female	54	40.3%
Digital Literacy	High (4–5)	76	56.7%
	Moderate (3)	40	29.9%
	Low (1–2)	18	13.4%

6.2. Icon Recognition (Popularity Analysis)

Task	Popular Icon (Chosen Most)	No. of Users	Selection Rate (%)
Delete	A (Real-world)	102	76.1%
Assistance	B (Abstract)	76	56.7%
Download	A (Real-world)	118	88.1%
Sync	A (Real-world)	94	70.1%
Gallery	A (Real-world)	121	90.3%
Save	A (Real-world)	106	79.1%
Lock	A (Real-world)	117	87.3%

Figure 4: Recognition Rate of Popular Icons Across Tasks (N = 134)

Send	B (Abstract)	102	76.1%	
Settings	A (Real-world)	108	80.6%	
Share	B (Abstract)	84	62.7%	

6.3. Confidence Levels by Task

Task	Avg. Confidence
Settings	4.75
Gallery	4.72
Send	4.71
Share	4.67
Save	4.66
Lock	4.64
Download	4.60
Delete	4.55
Sync	4.48
Assistance	4.37

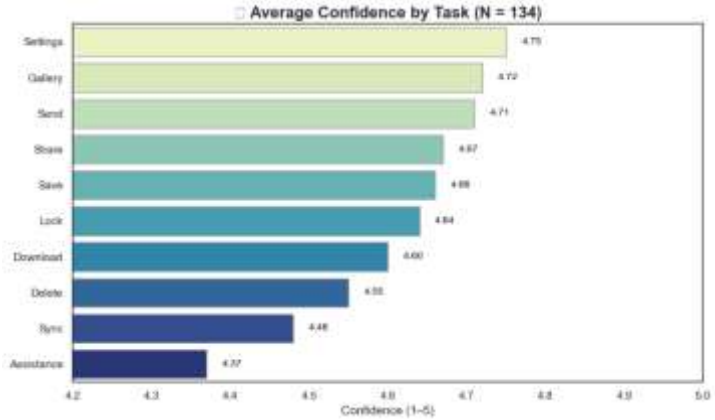

Figure 5: Average User Confidence Rating by Task (Scale 1–5)

6.4. Binomial Test Results (Real-World vs Abstract)

Task	Real-World Chosen	Total	p-value	Significant?
Download	118	134	<0.001	Yes
Gallery	121	134	<0.001	Yes
Lock	117	134	<0.001	Yes
Save	106	134	<0.001	Yes
Delete	102	134	<0.001	Yes
Settings	108	134	<0.001	Yes
Sync	94	134	0.002	Yes
Assistance	58	134	0.291	No
Send	32	134	<0.001	Abstract
Share	50	134	0.003	Abstract

6.5. Confidence Difference Between Icon Types

Task	Real-world Average	Abstract Average	Difference
Gallery	4.79	4.09	+0.70
Save	4.77	4.25	+0.52
Delete	4.57	4.48	+0.09
Lock	4.67	4.50	+0.17
Download	4.62	4.46	+0.16
Sync	4.51	4.42	+0.09

Settings	4.76	4.73	+0.03
Send	4.44	4.80	–0.36
Share	4.57	4.73	–0.16
Assistance	4.22	4.49	–0.27

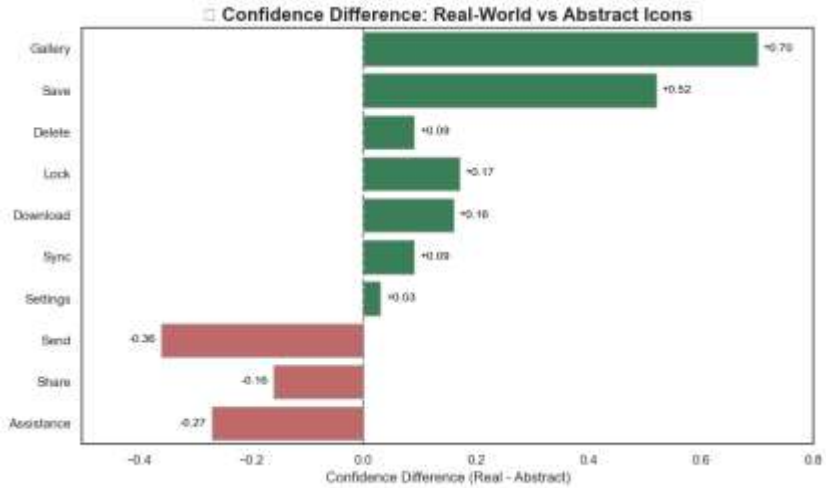

Figure 6: Confidence Difference Between Real-World and Abstract Icons

6.6. Interpretation of Findings

- Real-world icons were clearly preferred for actions involving physical metaphors (e.g., Save, Download, Lock).
- Abstract icons were significantly more recognized and trusted for communication tasks like Send and Share.
- Participants expressed higher confidence with real-world icons in most cases, but abstract icons outperformed in familiarity-heavy tasks.
- Assistance was the least confidently rated task overall, with no statistically significant preference, indicating a need for better design cues.

7. Discussion:

The findings validate the assumption that real-world metaphors enhance usability—but with clear exceptions. Icons related to files, galleries, and system settings strongly benefited from real-world resemblance. In contrast, communication-related icons like Send and Share showed significant preference for abstract symbols. This suggests users have internalized these abstract forms as new visual conventions. Interestingly, user confidence did not always match affordance theory. For example, users not only preferred the abstract Send icon but also reported higher confidence with it, despite its lack of a real-world counterpart. This highlights that modern icon design must balance between metaphor and symbolic familiarity.

Designers should also be mindful of age-related differences (visualize with optional age group chart) and re-evaluate outdated metaphors (e.g., lifebuoy for Help, envelope for Send). Clear affordance is not just about realism—it's about relevance.

8. Conclusion and Future Work:

This study contributes to HCI and UI design research by empirically showing that while real-world icons still hold value, abstract icons have gained strong symbolic traction. In several cases, they are not only recognized but inspire more confidence.

Future work should explore:

- Cross-cultural testing of icon interpretations
- Response time analysis (e.g., via eye-tracking)
- Testing in real-world usability scenarios (e.g., mobile apps or web forms)

By combining behavioural data with confidence scores, this study presents a fuller picture of how users perceive affordance in the evolving landscape of interface design.

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