

THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

MYTH-BASED DESIGNS; APPLYING HOLT AND CAMERONS' CULTURAL STRATEGY APPROACH TO NEW PRODUCT FORM

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ABSTRACT

In 2010, Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron published a book about how to identify key trends in consumer ideologies and myths, and how to use these trends to develop new brand identities. Whereas most rebranding efforts are based on individual consumer psychological needs, the Holt and Cameron approach is based on broad cultural trends. Once key trends are identified and new brand identities are crafted, Holt and Cameron then recommend how to implement the new identities, mainly through advertising. For many categories, however, (e.g., automobiles, clothing, home furnishings) the main carrier of the brand identity is through product form. This article describes the Holt and Cameron approach and how it might be adapted to the special issue of product form. The story of the 1998 Whirlpool stainless steel refrigerator is provided as an example of the Holt and Cameron sequence. This article suggests a new way for designers to incorporate cultural understanding upstream in the design process, and enjoins them to work closely with marketers to communicate to consumers and corporate investors the cultural value of design. Design and design research offer value insofar as designers identify cultural shifts, and then interpret these shifts in form of new designs which in turn influence new cultural directions.

1 INTRODUCTION

In a recent article, Friedman (2014) quotes Christine Lagarde, head of the IMF who complains that the world has sunk to a "new mediocre". Friedman notes mediocrity across monetary policies, books, television programming, movies, and car designs, all of which now follow the "same old, same old". Friedman states that "given the underlying principle of fashion is to identify that ephemeral state of culture and society known as the zeitgeist and reflect it back at the world in sartorial form, this would suggest that what has been happening in fashion, and the explanation for it, actually reflects a broader reality" (Friedman 2014, p 7) (author underline). She notes that designers are not interpreting cultural shifts and coming up with exciting new offerings but rather producing "homages" to past designs and reinventions" across many categories.

This represents a valuable contribution by design research: namely, to 1. research shifts in values and ideologies, 2. use these shifts to inspire new ideas in the form of new designs, 3. introduce new designs which influence the world in terms of new values and new ideologies. Bauhaus design is an example. Bauhaus designers took inspiration from the shifts toward industrialization and the machine economy, developed the Bau Haus style combining creativity and machines, and produced architecture which continues to influence peoples' beliefs and values today (Frampton 1992). The purpose of this article is to enjoin designers to track cultural shifts in the same way and work in closer

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collaboration with marketers as they produce and refine brand identities through product form. Designers could be much more vocal about their work upstream in the design process and how they implicitly follow cultural shifts and use them to inspire new designs which can have profound societal impacts.

2 BRANDS AND DESIGN

New brands, according to Park et al. (1986) offer three types of benefits: functional, symbolic, and experiential. Functional benefits refer to new capabilities based on new technologies, symbolic benefits satisfy consumer needs for self-expression and identity construction (Rolex watch to feel successful), and experiential benefits refer to sensory stimulation (new car smell).

My focus in this paper is on the second type of benefits, symbolic benefits. Most attempts at radical technological innovations fail (Sandberg 2011). Experiential benefits are important but should follow and support the symbolic benefits. A Rolex watch, for example, feels heavy and solid – which reinforces the meaning of a significant, personal reward for the wearer's achievements. This paper deals with finding new symbolic benefits.

There are many researchers working on semiotics of design (Krippendorf and Butter 1984, Vihma 2006) and how to use ethnography in design research (Margolin 2002, Wasson 2000). Most of these researchers, however, focus on meaning negotiation in terms of immediate consumption, generally referred to as interface or interaction issues. Product symbolism and usage is examined in the context of the immediate consumption meanings, for example, user to user exchanges in computer mediated communication (Souza 2005, Burdick and Willis 2011). Design students learn to track broad shifts in cultural values and ideologies, but these get less attention in terms of revised design meanings than immediate usage contexts.

Few researchers are working on meaning implications from how to do what Friedman calls for, which is to sense ongoing cultural shifts and identify opportunities for new product meanings. The most prominent is Verganti (Verganti and Oberg 2013, Norman and Verganti 2012, Verganti 2009, Verganti 2011). Verganti argues that new products will be successful if they involve radical new meanings. A technology might remain the same, but an ingenious designer can find a new meaning for it which will make it a market hit. Rather than try to solve a user problem (a kitchen bowl that never breaks), he recommends finding new meanings (e.g., Alessi kitchen items have funny, fun meaning). To identify opportunities for new meanings, he recommends a process of "interpreting and envisioning"

(Verganti and Oberg 2013 p. 89). He admonishes designers to look beyond the immediate product-user relationship, and consider "the systematic evolutions of society and culture that could impact current and prospective markets" (Verganti and Oberg 2013, p. 92). The main resource for new ideas and meanings, he claims, is the discourse among "interpreters". These are individuals who are not working in the category under consideration but rather architects, psychologists, design clients, people from related categories and any others who have ideas about future social and economic conditions which might yield opportunities for new meanings. As Verganti says, "meaning-driven innovation starts from the

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comprehension of subtle and unspoken dynamics in social-cultural models and results in radically new meanings and languages, often implying a change in socio-cultural regimes. The invention of the mini-skirt in the 1960s is an example: not simply a different skirt, but a radically new symbol of women's freedom that recognizes a radical change in society. No new technology was involved". (Norman and Verganti 2102, P. 13)

While Verganti can justify his approach with many examples of successful radical new meanings and products, there are still some problems with it. He is not clear about what to be looking for when interacting with the interpreters. Interpreters are asked to propose interesting scenarios of the future and what they mean, but how to do this is vague. He says that it is important to follow socio-cultural shifts and how they impact individual's self-identities, but does not provide much direction on what to look for. Most of the new meanings he describes as bases for successful new products relate to fun: Alessi kitchenware, KUKA robots (from serious industrial use to amusement park rides) (Verganti and Oberg 2013), Swatch watches. What other new meanings can be envisioned?

2.1 BRAND IDENTITY SOURCES, THE IMPORTANCE OF PRODUCT FORM

In most of the Holt and Cameron brand stories, the new brand identities are based on advertising. Advertising is about assigning meaning (Shimp 2010). Its principal goal is to reinforce the current meaning or definition of a product or service - or give it a new meaning or definition. I suggest that in many cases it might be preferable to base a brand image or identity mainly on the product's visual form. Certainly, in many categories, form is a very important if not the most important embodiment of the brand identity: cars, clothes, furniture, housing, jewelry, appliances, plumbing fixtures, cosmetics, and motorcycles.

There are many examples of new forms which resulted from shifts in ideologies (Bloch 1995, McCracken 1986). In terms of new architecture, after the US War of Independence, the United States set about the construction of new courthouses. The older associations and ideologies associated with British rule were set aside and replaced with new ideologies of democracy, freedom and independence. Americans no longer favored Georgian architecture, but turned instead to classical Greek styles insofar as they represented these values (Craig 1984). To this day, most courthouses in the US are in the Federal style.

The Ford Mustang is an example of a design that benefited from a shift in ideology. The early 1960s was a time of high social conformity in the U.S. (Riesman 1950). A majority of middle and upper class workers - nearly all men - worked in large corporations, women stayed home to raise children, everyone watched the same television shows, and all owned the same houses, clothes, and big cars. When it was introduced in 1963, the Ford Mustang was a radical new shape (Doblin 1970). It was relatively small, had some key styling features from Europe, and had a large hood-to-body length ratio which communicated power and performance. It was a break-out, anti-conformity car, and hit sales records in all buyer segments that are still impressive today.

2.2 STEPS IN THE HOLT AND CAMERON APPROACH

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The cultural strategy approach contains 6 steps:

1. Map the Category's cultural orthodoxy.

This refers to how the category is currently marketed. What are the current symbols, codes, values, product designs, retail designs and ad campaign themes used to market the product or service? Holt recommends that at this stage of the research process, researchers focus on current desired meanings and how all competitors in the category communicate those meanings. Most of this is through advertising, so much of the focus of research at this stage is on how different brands represent themselves in advertising.

2. Identify disrupters

Of all the myriad social, economic, media, demographic and technological changes that are constantly happening, are there any that could cause target consumers to reevaluate their current situation? The key to tracking trends, according to Holt and Cameron is to look for trends that can cause people to reevaluate their own identities. Holt and Cameron call for researchers to have high empathy with target consumers, to identify deeply with their lived situations, and sense if a change might impact their feelings about their current lives and consumption habits. Solomon (2004) suggests that Russia's satellite Sputnik was so disruptive to American culture in the 1950s that Americans were quick to produce and adopt new designs that symbolized technical mastery over nature and futuristic looks including jet tail fins on cars and high tech kitchen styles.

3. Unearth the ideological opportunity

Given that one identifies a source of social disruption, how will this impact target consumers' daily life identities? What values and beliefs would now seem attractive to them? As indicated above, the focus here is on empathizing with target consumers in order to sense what messages, myths or ideas they would feel particularly good about. Big changes are likely to produce markets for new forms. World War II was a time of austerity, sacrifice and scarcity for people in most countries. Immediately after the war, women gravitated to the new, softer dress styles of Christian Dior (Tortora and Eubank 2005) because they not only flattered their figures but were made of a lot of materials that would have seemed excessive during the war.

4. Cull appropriate material

Often, the source material for a new brand identity or ideological direction for the brand is already available among the actions, current media myths, and emerging values of the target subculture. These can often be repurposed or recast to address the ideological opportunity. Here, the goal is to look for responses. Given the social change or disruption, what new messages, advertising, news stories, ideas, beliefs and especially forms are drawing their attention?

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5. Apply Cultural Tactics

Holt and Cameron suggest six tactics which seem to have worked in various contexts. One they call "cultural capital trickle-down" (Bourdieu 1984). This tactic involves designing brand symbols so that consumers of average sophistication levels can feel comfortable around products and services usually consumed by high sophistication consumers. To make average consumers feel at home, Starbucks designed all the visual elements in their shops – signs, cups, education displays - to make the arcane lore of coffee aficionados understandable and engaging.

Holt and Cameron recommend a lot of experimentation at this stage. They recognize that consumers are in a stage where they are seeking answers, but realize that some answers or myths will resonate better than others.

6. Craft the Cultural Strategy

This is a highly nuanced, highly detailed description of the new cultural expression of the brand including ideology, myth and all relevant cultural codes. It is not a one-page or one-paragraph of "key benefits" or "aspirational attributes". Rather, it is a document based on a thorough, high empathy investigation of target consumer values and lives as their myths and ideologies are impacted by social and cultural disruptions.

2.3 HOLT AND CAMERON STEPS APPLIED TO PRODUCT FORM. THE 1998 WHIRLPOOL STAINLESS STEEL REFRIGERATOR

The section below provides an example of how the sequence Holt and Cameron describe could be used to explain the success of the 1998 Whirlpool stainless steel refrigerator (see Fig. 1). While historical analysis is difficult and not very common in consumer research (Smith and Lux, 1993, Firat 1987), Holt and Cameron use similar case histories to support their arguments for ideology-based branding.

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Figure 1 – Stainless steel refrigerator and kitchen

1. Map the Category's cultural orthodoxy.

Kitchen appliance styles have changed considerably over the past century, usually in response to a shift in ideology. In the early 1900s, ornate wooden iceboxes were popular until scientists developed germ theory. The new focus was then on hygiene, so there was a stress on easy-to-clean white metal appliances (Forty 1986). With the end of World War II and growing prosperity for the middle classes, appliances were designed in popular colors. In the 1960s the popular appliance color was brown, then gold and green in the 70s, black in the 80s, and white in the 90s (Friedman 2012). Throughout the 90s, key shifts were underway in terms of the meaning of the home, specifically the kitchen. Living rooms were losing popularity, and large rooms opening from the kitchen - "family" rooms - were becoming popular (Harrison 1998). The stress was on family-centeredness, and design codes then stressed family values, achievements, and fun. Microwave ovens were simple enough for children to use, and refrigerator doors functioned as children "brag boards", places for children's pictures, art work, awards, and local news clippings.

2. Identify disruptor

The 1990s had a rocky start then 8 years of economic growth with the Clinton administration, culminating in the dot-com bubble which saw hopes and aspirations rise exponentially as many young people made sudden, seemingly effortless, great fortunes. Women continued to make advances in the workforce, further defining themselves as professionals as well as mothers and managers of the home front. Aspirations were rising sharply through this time period (Schor 1999). Women anticipated further success in professions, and everyone

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suddenly saw possibilities of higher living standards. Also, as Holt and Cameron (2010) point out, women who were children of the Baby Boom were raised by parents who were likely college graduates, and passed on to them a higher appreciation of cultural sophistication. They not only developed an appreciation of things but also "an appreciation of a lifestyle that was more aestheticized, more sophisticated, and more creative". (Holt and Cameron 2010, p. 92).

3. Unearth Ideological Opportunity

Given the attention on economic success and sophistication, it is not surprising that women would identify with upper class life styles and product forms. Their increasing self-definition in terms of work and professions would suggest that they would also be attracted to symbols and forms that connoted professional success. They were probably experiencing a gap between their current life situations including the older home-based ideologies on the one hand – and newer ideologies and worlds of success and professionalism on the other.

4. Cull Appropriate Source Material

Stainless steel refrigerators had been manufactured by Sub-Zero since the mid-fifties. They were purchased mainly by commercial and industrial establishments because the prices were very high, between 6 and 15 thousand dollars. Only the wealthiest families owned them. They became a simple aspirational item for many women described above in the late 1990s. Their professional look resonated with the serious work-minded side of these women.

Another trend at the time was the rising popularity of gourmet cooking. Cooking shows, expert chefs, Food Networks (cable networks) and cooking demonstrations became very popular. The shows promised that "you can cook like a pro". The kitchen became a focus for one's culinary skills. With a professional-looking appliance, one could emulate the skills of a professional chef. As McCardle (2012) wrote, "as a status symbol, they (commercial appliances) signify that a. you are a serious cook, and b. you didn't just go to Circuit City to get your appliances".

A popular kitchen appliance at the time was the KitchenAid mixer (Panati 1987). The first KitchenAid mixers were introduced in 1918, and were designed after earlier mixers which were built for the US Navy. In the 1930s, the Model K version was introduced. This was streamlined but still had industrial capabilities, and still sells today. This expensive product was heavily promoted on gourmet television cooking shows by expert chefs who also proclaimed that "you can cook like a pro". Whirlpool saw the success of KitchenAid designs and marketing, and purchased the company.

5. Apply Cultural Tactics

The appropriate strategy here for Whirlpool was mentioned above: the Holt and Cameron "cultural capital trickle-down". Women across the US identified with the higher status connotations of the stainless steel appliances and the implied

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professional level of cooking with them. In 1998, under the high prestige Kitchen Aid brand name, they introduced the first popular stainless steel refrigerator. By 2005, the Whirlpool model and several stainless steel copiers had 15 % of the market. By 2008, they had 20% of the market. Today, Whirlpool has three of the ten top- selling units, along with being the largest manufacturer of kitchen appliances.

6. Craft the Cultural Strategy

Holt and Cameron argue that their method for creating pivotal new brand images is a superior way to do innovation because it preempts competitors, limits them from simply copying one's new idea. Obviously, a brand identity based on form is easier to copy than one based on advertising. Many appliance companies were quick to copy Whirlpool (and Sub-Zero) with their own stainless steel appliances. Whirlpool's first-mover advantage as the only popular price stainless steel refrigerator diminished rather quickly. The problem here might be that while the new form was unique, it was not unique enough.

2.4 APPLIANCE DESIGN OUTLOOK

The appliance industry is now looking for signs of the next popular design. There are many articles online (e.g., Byron 2011, Mcardle 2012) and chat posts (Chowhound 2007, Zillow 2012) which provide interesting clues regarding consumer feelings about stainless steel as well as other types of designs. Consumers who like stainless steel say that they like it because it is versatile, resists scratches, resists sun fade, has an inherent timelessness, a clean, uncluttered look, is easy to clean, modern, sleek, easy to sterilize and , if commercial grade, can handle higher BTUs. Those who do not like it say it looks cold, shows fingerprints, is not homey, too commercial, gets dings, and "reminds me of working in a county morgue – or hospital".

If there are any indications of a new disruptor or possible backlash, it might be related to the continuing limited opportunities for young people in the US and other countries. For about 5 years now, young people starting their careers in the US and around the world face limited job openings, low entry pay, expensive child care, high debt (student loans), and high costs for many durables and nondurables (Shierholz et al. 2012). The near term future would seem to offer few hopes of any changes. It would not be surprising if at least some of these people started to reevaluate their situations and turned to belief systems and ideologies that support lives and consumption behaviors which are more achievable, less aspirational and more authentic (Gilmore and Pine 2007). One blogger on one of the stainless steel appliance blog sites wrote, "In today's world where the illusion is all that seems to matter to so many people, even in relationships, we need to focus more on substance instead. That may mean following our own tune instead of the crowd's. I love my 1952 GE double oven, broiler stove white porcelain over steel. Stumbled across it in someone's garage while looking at doors for sale. In mint condition and the elderly couple had bought it new when they had gotten married. Now they were moving into a retirement home. Cost me all of \$50 and works wonderfully. If you have something that's a diamond on the inside, cherish and take good care of it..."

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3 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to describe the Holt and Cameron method of tracking ideological changes and applying them to new product form. Rather than focus on customer need identification, the method focuses on tracking major cultural changes and what these mean for customer self-identity development. Holt and Cameron show how to create new brand identities through advertising. In many categories, the main carrier of the brand identity is the product form, so this article explores how to use findings from the Holt and Cameron approach to come up with new product forms. This method builds on approaches proposed by Verganti which describe the importance of cultural trend analysis and consumer self-identity analysis, but do not go as far in saying how to do it.

Designers in general should be more like artists insofar as many artists are open about their role in analyzing and interpreting culture. Warhol's art (Lucie-Smith 1995) and his commentaries helped the world interpret the trend toward consumerism after World War II, and Christo (Gablik 2013) creates and describes his massive art pieces which reflect on issues of social inclusion as they bring thousands of people together, as worker-participants and spectators. Similarly, the value of design research and design in general is to interpret cultural trends and find ways to impact those trends.

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