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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DESIGN SUPPORT PROGRAMMES IN THE UK

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ABSTRACT

SMEs represent over 99% of businesses in the UK (BIS, 2010a). The importance of SMEs for a country's business and economic growth and the recognition of the problems they encounter have resulted in business support being provided for SMEs in most industrialised countries.

The effectiveness of design support is often evaluated by examining the impact of design interventions on business and measured by using the standard business performance indicators, such as company survival, economic growth and job creation. Focusing on the measurement of outcomes may inform whether the programme is successful or not, but it may fail to reveal why and how. This research focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of design support by examining the design support discourse in order to understand the divide amongst SMEs, DSPs and design consultancies.

In this discursive analysis, the author traces a number of specific themes from interview transcriptions (n=24), publicly available DSP case studies (n=21) and DSP reports (n=10) to provide a critical overview of the DSPs. Interviews used for the analysis were undertaken by the author with individuals representing SMEs, design consultancies, DSPs and government agencies. The findings of this study provide a critical discourse analysis on the effectiveness of DSPs and aim to improve the collaboration between SMEs and designers.

Keywords: Design support, SMEs, design promotion, innovation

1   INTRODUCTION

SMEs represent over 99% of all private sector businesses in the UK and in Europe. The importance of SMEs for a country's business and economic growth and the recognition of the problems they encounter have resulted in business support being provided for SMEs in most industrialised countries. Consequently, considerable resources are spent on 'SME support', which often takes the form of information and advice provided by professionals from various disciplines, and which relies on financial incentives provided to SMEs.

Design innovation has become the focus of many scholars, educators, practitioners, regional governments and design institutions. Design scholars and practitioners encourage a better exploitation of design by taking a strategic approach. Approaches such as design thinking and design strategy which focus on using design as a strategic business tool rather than developing discrete services and products for business have created considerable interest. 'Intuition', 'creativity', 'holistic' and 'lateral thinking' are part of a new set of values that have become important for business by supplementing and even replacing the traditional values of business such as rationality and calculation (Lank & Lank,

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1995). As a result of these new values and the acceptance of design as an element of innovation at the policy level (Swan & Birke, 2005), in the last few decades, there has been an increase in the number of government-funded entities that aim to support innovation strategies for new product/service development and organisation change, such as 'Designing Demand' (Design Council, n.d.) in England; the 'Centre for Design and Innovation' (C4di, n.d.), and 'Design in Action' (n.d.) in Scotland; the 'One-to-one Advisory Service' (Design Wales, 2006) in Wales. These design support programmes (DSPs)[1] in the UK assist SMEs for innovation, which are historically known as, or approached with the assumption of, reluctant to work with designers and as unaware of the value of design. DSPs promote design as a strategic source for SMEs and address SMEs' limited knowledge of using design by providing information and advice about design and a design-driven innovation perspective. The aim on behalf of DSPs is to bring about increased sales, employment, company growth, strategic exploitation of design and cultural change amongst SMEs.

The literature focusing on DSPs covers reports and documents that are generally descriptive in nature, are written by programme deliverers and present a self-promotion of design support activities of the programmes rather than providing academic debate, producing theoretical frameworks and applying academic methods of investigation. Amongst a few peer-reviewed papers focusing on the evaluation of DSPs for SMEs in the UK (e.g. Bruce et al., 1995; Choi et al. 2011, 2012, Gulari et al., 2013, Raulik et al., 2006; Roy & Potter 1990, 1993; Whicher et al., 2011), Roy and Potter (1990,1993) and Bruce et al. (1995) investigated the effectiveness of the FCS/SFD programme[2]. Raulik et al. (2006), from Design Wales, reported on the findings of seventy-five case studies with the aim of evaluating the effectiveness of the transfer of knowledge as a result of design assistance provided by Design Wales to businesses. Whicher et al. (2011) raised the question of how effectively DSPs were evaluated by using a self-assessment questionnaire that was sent to the eleven project partners of the SEE project.[3] Choi et al. (2012) compared two national DSPs: Designing Demand (UK) and Design Innovation (South Korea) through desktop research, in-depth interviews conducted with experts from the Design Council and the Korean Institute of Design Promotion and surveys with SMEs. Gulari et al (2013) assessed the effectiveness of design programmes supporting SMEs in the UK without focusing on one particular programme by in-depth interviews, participant observation and desk research. However, neither of these papers provides an evaluation based on the discourse around the design support, which is significant to address why

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[1] DSPs, in this thesis, refers to funded projects and time-limited programmes that are aiming to assist businesses externally in achieving their objectives by working closely with them and by using design methods, skills and knowledge (Raulik-Murphy & Cawood, 2009).

[2] The 'Funded Consultancy Scheme/Support For Design (FCS/SFD)', which was implemented in the UK between 1982-1987, provided small subsidies for SMEs to use design consultancies (Roy & Potter, 1993).

[3] The SEE Project, Sharing Experience Europe - Policy, Innovation & Design, is a "network of eleven European partners engaging with national and regional governments to integrate design into innovation policy" (SEE Project, 2013).

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and how a programme can be effective. Therefore, this research has focused on the discourse of design support and identification of the existing assumptions of DSPs while they are supporting SMEs.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows, first data collection and analysis method that were adopted in this research are explained before moving on the presenting the findings and discussion. The section presents an analysis of key aims of design support including raising awareness, innovation, knowledge transfer and cultural change. The final section concludes the research, notes limitations and suggests areas of future research.

2 METHOD

This research applied an interpretive paradigm, wherein the reality is considered as multiple, local and socially constructed. Events are understood through interpretation. This perspective views the relationship between the inquirer and the research phenomena as value laden.

The key stakeholders with an interest in design-innovation support to be interviewed belonged to one of the following categories: SMEs, DSPs, design consultants, and government agencies[4]. To avoid the problem of perpetuating the myths of the designers it was considered better to include perspectives from other key stakeholder categories. Similarly, building solely on the experiences of SMEs can be problematic; in comparison to design consultancies, SMEs may have a limited experience in working with designers externally.

To study DSPs, seven representatives were interviewed about their experiences involving work with SMEs. The interviewees were selected from amongst design associates, project managers and directors possessing either a business background or a design background and who were involved in design support activities in the UK. To gather perspectives from SMEs, eight directors or owners of SMEs, who have worked with either these support programmes or design consultancies externally within the last five years, were interviewed. The companies were selected from various commercial sectors. In addition, six design consultants and three representatives from government agencies were also interviewed (See Figure). The interviews were conducted over a fifteen-month period in 2012/2013. Each interview was between 30-90 minutes in duration and audio-recorded.

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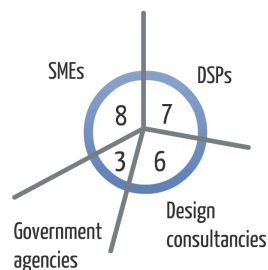
[4] Government agency in this study means non-departmental public body that encourages economic development, enterprise, innovation and investment in business.

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Figure 1 Number of interviews conducted with key stakeholders

The websites of all the DSPs interviewed together with the website of the Design Council were included as part of the data collection. In addition, all of the websites of the SMEs who participated in the study as well as eight SMEs that were mentioned in case studies were included in the data collection. Twenty-one case studies conducted elsewhere were included in the data gathered. These case studies were mostly retrieved from the websites of DSPs and evaluation reports. Eight reports of the UK DSPs published in the SEE project websites were examined and two additional reports published independently were also studied. In total, ten evaluation reports were gathered for analysis.

This paper is concerned with the social contexts in which discourse is embedded, therefore to examine the data, discourse analysis approach applied to identify set of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that constitute perspectives on design support. Language connects with the social through being the primary domain of ideology, and through being both a site of, and a stake in, struggles for power (Fairclough, 2013). How we think and suggests that the kind of knowledge we can develop depends heavily on the symbolic languages available to us (Mercer, 2002). The analysis is based on the theories of Foucault and focuses power relationships while designers supporting SMEs as expressed through language and practices. The analysis attempts to reveal how designers view SMEs, the value of design support and categorises, personal and institutional relationships, and politics.

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 RAISING AWARENESS

Raising design awareness appears to be a desirable outcome from a designer's perspective. The reports of DSPs that were examined for this research displayed an emphasis on raising awareness. The announcement of European Design Innovation Platform (EDIP) by the Design Council further exemplifies this attitude:

> "The EDIP will be delivered over 3 years and aims to accelerate design-driven innovation in order to boost innovation, growth and job creation across the EU. It will do this by raising awareness of how design-driven innovation already increases efficiency in public services and drives business growth across Europe". (Dexigner, 2013)

The emphasis on design awareness and its profile within businesses can be traced back to the Cox Review of Creativity in Business (Cox, 2005), a foundational policy document, which led to the establishment of several DSPs. The review recommended that the issue of raising the profile of design within SMEs be addressed. The underlying premise of 'raising awareness objective' is that if the value of design for innovation and business growth is clarified, SMEs' problems will be resolved when using design. This line of thought seems reasonable at first glance because some existing research (e.g., Bruce & Morris, 1994) suggests that SMEs need to have a knowledge base and an awareness of design even before working with designers. However, this research offers a critical stance and questions the value of raising awareness as an aim for the effectiveness of DSPs.

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Raising awareness appears as a promotional aim and not relevant for effective design support, one interviewee commented that:

> "That's what we've been trying to do rather than simply raising awareness […]. We're not doing design promotion, which is about shouting out loud about design and helping the people buy that message." R16, DSP representative

Although it was acknowledged by some DSP associates the emphasis should not be on design message, but the same representative then commented

> "Then parallel to that, we raised awareness of service innovation and design in the manufacturing sector" R16, DSP representative

Aforementioned quotations represent an existing line of thought amongst DSPs. In addition, from an SME's perspective, the DSP events rely too much on design promotion. An attendee of a DSP workshop claimed,

> "…there was already many like minded people who already believe what they believe. […] I know the essence is design but I think it was all about design, I think there was too much reliance on design or industrial design background I know design is important, I was looking for something else." R28, SME owner manager

The very term brings designers to an authoritative position and draws a distinction between those who value design hence so called enlightened and those who do not and hence ignorant and unaware. It implies a lack of understanding by SMEs towards design. This might be a prejudiced statement. It also dismisses possible shortcomings of the designer's knowledge working with SMEs. Jonathan Ball echoes a similar concern in his critical reflection as 'ivory towel mentality' (Ball, 2005, p.5). He also highlights the concern of designers about design message, "I think there is a lingering ivory tower mentality in some quarters, a little bit of 'we have got this message you have to listen to', particularly to small businesses". Once DSPs have the attention of SMEs, SMEs may want to know what to do next in a very clear and detailed way without being overwhelmed by the 'design message'.

'Raising awareness' as a term also reveals that there is a lack of action implied by this phrase. Foster (2013) discusses what 'raising awareness' means and describes it as a passive statement. He comments,

> "I really don't like the term 'raising awareness'. There's no action to the words, no movement. They sound so passive. Besides, I've met very few organizations dedicated to raising awareness that had a quick response when I've asked, "Okay, I'm aware now. You've made me feel sufficiently concerned/terrified/responsible. What do I do next? […] 'I know X exists' is a very different message to spread than 'Because of X, we will take action Y.' But it's the latter that will make the difference". (Foster, 2013)

Although Foster's observation is a general one concerning the value of raising awareness, it could equally apply to the interventions of DSPs. Building on this argument, design support requires more specified actions. It is hard to convince SMEs to allocate their precious time to listen to design promotion.

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In addition, governments have been increasingly unwilling to provide funding for design promotion schemes (Ramlau & Melander, 2004; BIS, 2010). It might be because design awareness, as an aim, is not quantifiable and objective, and it is difficult to measure, as identified by Whicher et al. (2011). It is hard to translate design awareness into business impacts that would appeal to government funders. Awareness does not necessarily lead to action; a company owner may become familiar with the value of design and still fail to apply it to his business. The present research has matching recommendations with Borja De Mozota (2005) and Cawood et al. (2004) who suggest separating design support for SMEs from design promotion, as these two activities have different objectives and impacts. Their view puts an emphasis on methods and delivery. Design promotion raises awareness through workshops, exhibitions and publications, while design support provides hands-on experience and advice through the design process (Raulik-Murphy & Cawood, 2009). However, the difference between promotion and support is beyond the methods and tools that are applied for delivery or the form of delivery. The difference is also in the perspective, mindset and in the rhetoric of design support.

3.2 INNOVATION WASH

DSPs often aim to achieve innovation as an outcome resulting from their support. Consequently, the term 'innovation' is employed widely to communicate the value of the design support and to attract attention. Innovation has become the new panacea, to Seelos and Mair (2012), short-term governance, global economic failures and a frustration with old development recipes have legitimised a collective and urgent quest for a new solution to every problem; this solution is innovation. This research argues that there might be a number of issues with the widely adopted innovation focus of DSPs. Firstly; innovation is vague, complex and difficult to apply (Oke et al., 2007). Although, the literature focusing on business growth has demonstrated a positive bias towards innovation, "the most consistent theme found in the organizational innovation literature is that its research results have been inconsistent" (Wolfe, 1994, p.405). Even the innovations bringing success in a specific situation may fail when transferred to other contexts; this characteristic of innovation provides little guidance to practitioners (Seelos & Mair, 2012; Wolfe, 1994).

A further issue is the relevance of innovation to SMEs' needs. Interview findings indicated that especially small businesses are predominantly occupied to establish the basics about their business operations first, which makes it difficult for them to concentrate on innovation. Interviews with SMEs showed that SMEs are sceptical about the uncertainties and risks associated with undertaking innovation (See Table 1).

EXAMPLE QUOTATION	SUMMARY STATEMENT	THEME
"You've got to be careful that you don't become **too innovative**". R2, SME non-owner-manager	Cautious-avoiding major innovations	Cautious and incremental
"Innovation is to me when you come up with a new way of doing something that has obviously got benefits so everybody else is doing so. I don't think we do that in how we deliver services. It is more small innovations rather than	Cautious-avoiding major innovations	

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one **big ta-da**. It is all about lots of small improvement you can make in how we work." R7, SME owner-manager		
"[Innovation is] Obviously doing things differently. But the construction industry is very conservative because it is producing a long-term durable product. If something is tried, tested and proven, we are keen to keep doing that because we know it is **safe**." R3, SME owner-manager	Important of tried and tested methods	

Table 1 – SMEs approach to innovation

This finding corresponds to Ravasi and Stigliani (2011) who claim that SMEs avoid risks, which leaves little room for innovation. Some DSP associates who were interviewed stated that innovation could be difficult to achieve, whereas design is easier to apply to specific problems of SMEs. Existing studies suggest that SMEs also achieve business growth without focusing on innovation (Oke et al., 2007). Innovation often requires a longer-term investment, which is much harder to achieve (Oke et al., 2007; Seelos & Mair, 2012; Wolfe, 1994). Due to these complexities and difficulties, it may be unlikely to achieve innovation as a result of a couple of DSP events.

Not all the interventions lead innovation outcome. Although the aim of DSPs is stated as supporting SMEs with innovation, several DSP workshops focus on new idea generation. Therein lies the issue of assuming the idea as innovation. Innovation is, on the other hand, more than just a new idea. It is applied, matured and marketed. The new ideas that are generated do not necessarily mean that innovation is achieved. Innovation outcome is contingent upon a match between a firm's internal capabilities and its external context.

SMEs are concentrated on innovation as an outcome i.e. looking for the noun verb. DSPs focus on innovation as a process and the activity –i.e. innovation as a verb. According to John Dewey this fragmental approach is problematic. He (1934, p. 51) says, "It is no linguistic accident that building, construction work designate both a process and its finished product. Without the meaning of the verb that of the noun remains blank. The verb signifies the process, and the noun signifies the outcome. The role of design in innovation constitutes likewise both a process and its finished product. Just as the word "building" designates a process and its final result, so does the word "design." Therefore, we should not try separating the verb and the noun since this effort only short-circuits the complementary relation between the two.

3.3 KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER (SHARE AND USE) AND LEARNING

An increased capacity for using design effectively is also an aim of many DSPs. DSP workshops, which also function as learning platforms, are often highly interactive and require the participants to be fully involved in the process to apply the methods themselves, to maximise the benefits and to transfer their learning back into their companies. Raulik et al. (2006, p.4), from Design Wales, state, "the transfer of knowledge should be clear in a way that will provide companies with the confidence to undertake future design projects by themselves". The content of DSP workshops is based on different forms of tacit

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knowledge, such as best practices, insights, holistic perspectives and intuition and mental models (Meso & Smith, 2000). The effectiveness of DSPs is related to the success of tacit knowledge transfer. However, tacit knowledge transfer is a challenging task (Holste & Fields, 2010). Choo (2000) states that tacit knowledge is often learned through observation and imitation and can be shared through analogies, metaphors, and stories. It often resembles the "from master to apprentice" process (Holste & Fields, 2010; Lam, 2000). There is always unavoidable master attitude amongst designers who help SMEs as apprentices. This approached can be observed in the following quotation:

> "So most of the time, it's focusing on helping small-to-medium sized companies understand specific aspects of design, *to hold their hands* about how to understand what design is about and hold their hands about how to process managing design and using design […] This aim requires SMEs to learn about design and design approaches". R14, DSP representative

However this mind-set, which seems to undermine SMEs knowledge base, can be problematic. Because SMEs want their knowledge and expertise to be recognised, as illustrated by the following quotation:

> "We know that the university has that knowledge and experience. The expertise we bring is how to make things, what works, what does not work, what is acceptable to the market that we are trying to address". R3, SME owner manager

3.4 CULTURAL CHANGE

Transforming the existing culture within SMEs to an innovative one was observed as a key aim for some DSPs. This is possible when the design knowledge is absorbed by SMEs. This aim/outcome is highly challenging and requires a great deal of time, as reflected by respondents. Expecting this change to happen after only a couple of workshops is naïve and undervalues the complexity of design. For example, Bryan Boyer, from Helsinki Design Lab, comments:

> "If design is like a magical seed that you can drop into the board room and after a couple of days workshop, suddenly the executive suite is transformed into a design facility that pretty significantly undervalues what designers bring". Bryan Boyer, Strategic Design Lead at Helsinki Design Lab (VonAntwerp, 2012).

Many designers adopting a facilitator role use a workshop format for delivering design interventions. This seems to convey the message that 'design as magic' has been overcome by adopting a transparent and open process; however, it can be observed that expectation of a cultural change following a number of DSP workshops is also an implication of seeing 'design as magic' and 'designers as magicians'. Facilitation through workshops can initiate change, but it is a not a quick and magical transformation. The existing literature on organisational change also supports that learning to change is a difficult task for SMEs. There is also an organisational inertia against change reported in the literature on organisational change (Gray, 2002; Petroski, 1992).

4 CONCLUSION

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This paper has analysed the rhetoric of design support in order to identify the discourse embedded. This analysis produces knowledge and insights is novel in design support field. Although some of the interview quotations are a discourse at the micro-level of social interaction in the specific situation of a debate, but at the same time may enact or be a constituent part of professional perspective at the macro-level. The analysis questioned whether 'raising awareness' term for other stakeholders is convincing and whether it should be altered to become more attractive to SMEs. An aim triggering action and recognising the knowledge of SMEs will be more helpful for DSPs assisting SMEs. As indicated by the results of this study, the main message of DSP workshops should not be solely design promotion, if these DSPs aim to empower SMEs and assist with innovation. DSPs that solely rely on raising awareness of design as a means to make SMEs use design effectively and to produce positive financial outcomes are likely to fail. Increased design awareness is not equivalent to being able to use design strategically and take design actions independently, though it could be a first step of design support. When the awareness rhetoric applied to DSP, it result in emptied of meaning, actions loses their relevance for SMEs, drift free of meanings and be more merely design washing like green washing. Support that is tailored and specific towards the needs of SMEs seems more appropriate without overwhelming SMEs with the importance of design and how it solves their problem.

Innovation wash is another issue has been discussed in this paper; innovation is neither a development shortcut to solve big problems faster nor a collaboration shortcut to establish the relationship between SMEs and designers. Therefore, this research study suggests that innovation should not be emphasised so much; instead, potential benefits of design for SMEs' need to be clearly communicated and not be obscured by the innovation rhetoric.

Studies concerning tacit knowledge transfer and identified the importance of a long-term relationship and trust. Claiming a transformational change in SMEs via a number of workshops is a perspective is misleading. A perspective that recognises SMEs knowledge should be adopted.

A key contribution of this paper is extending our knowledge of design support from discourse base analysis. Designers and programme deliverers need to reconsider the implications of the rhetoric of design support while assisting SMEs. However, certain limitations to this paper are evident. An exploration of language does not provide direct access to *the truth* but offers the reader a way to explore how meaning is negotiated through discourse therefore competing claims may be possible regarding the design support discourse. This researcher has studied DSPs and design consultancies assisting SMEs in the UK. However, the generalisability of the research does not necessarily apply in other countries or design support for large enterprises or public sectors.

The discourse of design support preliminarily outlined. There other themes in design support discourse could be further analysed including expertise of designers, the focus on idea generation, and design prescriptions on innovation and success. In future research, the argument should theoretically be further developed and be strengthened by empirical accounts in order to give more detailed descriptions of the problematic issues only briefly touched upon here.

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