

THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

THE COLLECTIVE UNFAMILIAR: TOWARDS A COMMUNAL DESIGN APPROACH

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INSTITUTE OF PSYCHOLOGY

BOULOGNE BILLANCOURT
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PARIS COLLEGE OF ART
ISTEC PARIS

**Alexandros
Skandalis**

Manchester Business School

Alexandros.Skandalis@postgrad.mbs.ac.uk

**Athanasia
Daskalopoulou**

Manchester Business School

a.daskalopoulou@mbs.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Inspired from diverse bodies of research, our aim is to address the issue of value in design research through a communal consumption oriented lens of the design process. Such a conceptualisation is argued to be heavily influenced and triggered from the collective aspects of contemporary consumer society. We suggest that a communal oriented design approach might act as an alternative mode of design inquiry, one that implies a shift of focus from the consumers as individuals to consumers as members of a subculture, community or tribe. In this regard, design is no longer situated at the end of the producer but converts into a bricolage of dynamic interactions between groups of engaged consumers and designers. Designers are encouraged to embrace the collective uncomfortable and the unfamiliar that is in contrast with the traditional concept of producing design ideas and throwing them to the consumers. This suggests re-establishing the power dynamics between organizations and consumers; design is driven by collective emotions, aesthetics, and tastes while it is inherently a matter of co-creation between designers and consumers. We offer a description of how a communal-oriented design approach can be theorised. We also move further to provide a set of conceptual guidelines towards the direction of designing for collective value.

Keywords: communal design, value creation, collective taste, design value, user-centred design

1 INTRODUCTION

In a relatively recent conceptual paper about the past, present and future of design research, Buchanan (2001) arrived at a formal definition of what constitutes design: *"the human power of conceiving, planning, and making products that serve human beings in the accomplishment of their individual and collective purposes"* (Buchanan, 2001: p. 9). While Luchs and Swan (2011) refer to design as a *"set of properties of an artifact, consisting of the discrete properties of the form (i.e., the aesthetics of the tangible good and/or service) and the function (i.e., its capabilities) together with the holistic properties of the integrated form and function"* (Luchs and Swan, 2011: p. 338). A close interpretation of these definitions reveals two important elements. First, a direction towards the conceptualisation of design as a process that implies a dualism between the designer/marketer and the user/consumer in the product design process with a strong emphasis on the formal characteristics of products, either tangible or not. Such a conceptualisation is argued to indicate the perceived notion of design in (post)industrial societies as a distinct, self-conscious professionalised and institutionalised activity (Louridas, 1999), which marked and influenced the rise of contemporary consumer society through its power of representation (Meamber 1995, as cited in Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

Second, a direction towards the conceptualisation of design as a process whose powerful outcomes consumers utilise in order to communicate symbolic meanings and emotional experiences that are related with collective purposes. Although design constitutes a core feature of the post-industrial era, it is argued that design research and practice has yet to fully realise and incorporate the collective aspects of contemporary consumer society in its theorisations. The context of consumption within which individuals act is of great importance for the design discipline since this is where the design message is interpreted and from where the influence of this interpretation comes from (Crilly et al., 2004). Using a set of diverse theories from sociology, marketing and consumer culture research, the aim of this paper is to account for these issues through the proposition of a communal oriented design approach and to offer a set of initial guidelines for designers towards this direction.

2 DESIGN AND CONSUMER SOCIETY

In an attempt to depict the existing state of contemporary consumer society, one might refer to two of the most widely discussed perspectives within marketing and socio-culturally oriented consumer research, namely the experience economy perspective (e.g. Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999), and the tribal consumption perspective (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Maffesoli, 1996; Cova, 1997). The former refers to the employment of consumption as the means through which individuals search for emotional pleasures, dreams, desires and fantasies (e.g. Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Such a perspective indicates the multisensory, experiential, and emotive facets of consumers' experiences with products and/or services (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982) where consumers are not only perceived as rational human beings but also as emotional and narcissistic (irrational) agents who utilise consumption as the means to the construction of meaningful experiences (Ostergaard and Jantzen, 2002). The latter perspective argues for a shift from a rational period with increasingly evident signs of liberatory individualism and fragmentation to an empathetic period with a focus on the immediate and the affectual linked with a collective sense of shared feelings and experiences in which individuals come together into fluid, temporal and free-floating (neo) tribes (Maffesoli, 1988; Maffesoli, 1996). The tribal stream of thought initiated a novel concept within marketing and consumer culture research circles, most commonly labelled as tribal marketing (Cova and Cova, 2002), where groupings of consumers are formed which are united by common shared passions and emotions for a consumption activity, brand, product or service and are normally dissimilar in terms of demographic, geographic or psychographic characteristics (Cova, 1997).

Accordingly, during the last decades, design and design-oriented researchers have attempted to explore and investigate the emotional, aesthetic and experiential aspects of users'/consumers' engagement with products/services/artefacts. In particular, design research and practice has initially moved from function, form and usability, to emotional dimensions that enhance user experiences (e.g. Jordan, 2002; Desmet and Hekkert, 2002; Norman, 2004). Later studies aimed to address the triad of the aesthetic, symbolic and emotional aspects of users' experiences with products in their theorisations (e.g. Desmet and Hekkert, 2007). A certain portion of product design-oriented marketing researchers dealt with the investigation of the relationship of product design, consumption experiences, and consumers'

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emotions and linked them with concepts of customer satisfaction and/or loyalty (e.g. Chitturi et al., 2008; Chitturi, 2009) while others explored the importance of formal or visual product characteristics in consumers' interactions with products and the aesthetic or symbolic responses towards them (e.g. Bloch, 1995; Veryzer and Hutchison, 1998; Van Rompay et al., 2009). Being heavily influenced from the area of cognitive psychology and the view of the user/consumer as an information-processing agent, most of these studies aimed to theorise emotions, feelings, and experiences as psychological constructs and relate them with the design process. A small amount of studies also aimed to move towards phenomenological aspects of consumers' experiences with products (e.g. Braun, 2004; Trotto et al., 2012) and in some cases on the participatory aspects of the design process itself (e.g. Margolin, 1997; Kalviainen, 2002; Fokkinga and Desmet, 2012). Finally, a small stream of research, heavily influenced by the 'open source model' of design in software development argued for an open collaboration between communities of developers and organisations (Raasch et al., 2009).

These design-oriented studies might be broadly seen as aiming to provide an extra conceptualisation of the individual consumer as a more irrational and narcissistic human agent, who dwells into the present and takes advantage of all the immediate experiences of everyday life in order to reveal significant aspects of the overall experiential/design relationship that has been hitherto understudied. We argue that what is missing from the picture of design research and practice is the consideration of the collective aspects of contemporary consumer society. We argue that the design discipline might consider moving towards a conceptualisation of the design process as a more participatory and collective process where consumers will be also perceived as tribal agents. As shown in the next section, such a conceptualisation considers a more active engagement of consumers in the design process and also destabilises designers' attention from both mass-marketing and customized design oriented approaches; rather it forwards a communal oriented design perspective, which lies at the meso level and is assumed to be able to offer rich and innovative insights for the design of novel products, services, and experiences.

3 TOWARDS A COMMUNAL DESIGN APPROACH

In the context of tribal consumption, consumer culture research has illustrated individuals' desire for tribal behaviour and its relation with consumption phenomena through a vast array of empirical studies. Several researchers started to explore the communal consumption practices of experiential and extraordinary activities (e.g. Arnould and Price, 1993; Cova and Cova, 2002), of lifestyle subcultures (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Kates, 2002), of brand-centred communities (e.g. Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Cova and Pace, 2006), and of virtual communities of consumption (e.g. Kozinets, 1997, Kozinets et al., 2008). The tribal stream of thought urges researchers to study and conceptualise not just the functional and symbolic aspects of consumption but also the emotional, aesthetic and experiential ones that are linked with consumers' collective or tribal identities. In this sense, a picture of consumer behaviour is created where individuals are not solely searching for products and services that make them fulfil their needs and desires but also for products and services that link them with others and make them part of a community or tribe.

From a product design-oriented perspective, there are two main aspects of the

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tribal marketing thought that are explicitly relevant with the design field and are introduced here (Figure 1); First, there is the concept of co-creation or co-production of value, which might be seen as a way to extend and enhance participation in the design process and to create and diffuse collective innovation in the design process. Second, there are the concepts of tribal aesthetics and collective emotions that indicate the desire of individuals to choose to consume certain products, services and experiences over others. These concepts become signs of collective sensibility, signs of membership and participation to certain groups or communities that might lead to the creation of collective consumption choices and preferences within a given consumption community or tribe. A challenge of the design discipline would be to discover a formula to integrate these elements within the design process.



Figure 1 –Communal-oriented design approach.

One of the underlying principle that connects the tribal aspects of consumer culture with design and might serve as a driving factor of design inquiry towards this direction is the concept of taste mainly because it includes consumers' embodied aesthetic experiences, judgements, identity building and social display (Kalviainen, 2002). Taste has become a crucial element of contemporary consumer society as it acquires a special significance of negotiating and balancing consumers' everyday aesthetic experiences and judgments. Collective taste might be seen as both supporting the coherence of the consumer tribe to which individuals belong (Nancarrow and Nancarrow, 2007) and incorporating the whole spectrum of the tribe's collective aesthetics and emotions. However, in the design field, form has been hitherto utilised as a substitute for taste (Christoforidou et al., 2010). It is contended that the investigation of collective tastes within any type of consumption communities will be able to reveal consumers' tribal aesthetics and collective emotions and relate them with the design process. Designing for collective taste implies mapping consumers' collective aesthetic judgements where aesthetics are to be understood as being part of consumers' ordinary lives (that involve participation in certain tribes or communities) and include experiential, emotional, and symbolic aspects of consumers' practices.

Also, the tribal status of contemporary consumer society has led, amongst other reasons, a significant stream of researchers to support the view that today there is no longer a clear distinction between production and consumption as they both take place simultaneously and it appears to be a cyclical relationship between them (*cf* Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). Consumers seem to be active

participants in the production of value by constantly reshaping the nature of the consumed product or service and, thus, any institutionalised effort is limited to value propositions (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Such consumers have been conceptualised from diverse theoretical standpoints as 'craft consumers' (Campbell, 2005), 'prosumers' (Ritzer and Jurgeson, 2010) or 'working consumers' (Cova and Dalli, 2009), with the general assumption being that they co-create or co-produce the products and/or services they consume. It has been argued that the tribal context is one of the most common and illustrative spaces in which such cases of co-creation or co-production take place, usually centred on a brand, product or consumption activity. There is a plethora of empirical studies mainly within the marketing and consumer research literature that illustrate the undertaking of such efforts. For example, Kozinets et al. (2008) illustrated through the proposition of a theoretical framework the diverse types of online consumption communities which are full of elements of collective value production, innovation and creativity and they call for researchers and practitioners to tap into them in order to realise the social and economic advantages that these 'collective consumer crowds' are able to offer.

In general, it is indeed argued that a tribal design approach broadly aims to address, following Crilly et al. (2004), the need for studies that take into account the cultural context of contemporary consumer society and its impact on both consumers' responses to product design and on the design process itself. Consumption communities contain their own cultural space comprised by shared meanings, symbols, language, rituals, myths, ethos, structure and so on (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Cova, 1997; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), through which individuals collectively experience products and ascribe meanings to them. Taking into consideration these collective meanings and experiences, it means to move towards a broadening participation in the design process (Margolin, 1997). Under the initial guidelines of such an approach as neatly presented at the following section, any future inquiries are to be seen as efforts that are moving towards the exploration of consumers' tribal journeys and their intersection with the design process.

4 **INITIAL GUIDELINES OF A COMMUNAL DESIGN APPROACH**

What a communal oriented design approach infers is any systematic investigation of consumption communities that might offer valuable and innovative insights for the design of new products and services and/or refinement of existing ones, either by exploring these spaces and then incorporating the insights into the design process, reflecting in this way the tribal aesthetics and consumers' collective emotions (collective taste), and/or by utilising these tribal spaces as design platforms in which parts of the design process might take place, leading thus to a more participatory design approach with the inclusion of the members of these spaces (collective value creation). Such a communal oriented design approach can be applied in all industries, where consumption communities exist. We move further to offer a set of conceptual guidelines for designers towards this direction as follows:

— ***To embrace the collective uncomfortable and the unfamiliar***

The idealised vision of design usually changes with user input. Designers often regard their designs as 'polluted' after actual use. However, this view of designers working in isolation has been heavily criticised by advocates of user-centred or human-centred design approaches which maintain that good design is always user-driven (Veryzer and Borja de Mozota, 2005). Receiving insights

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and criticism from consumption communities throughout the design process renders design into a collaborative process as opposed with the monochromatic concept of producing design ideas and throwing them to the consumers.

— *To maintain an open feedback loop between consumption communities and designers*

The interaction between consumers and artefacts can be hypothesised but cannot be dictated. Consumers often fail to understand how to use due to design constraints (Norman, 2004; Oppenheimer, 2005). We suggest that design shall become an ongoing dialogue amongst engaged consumers and designers. In this sense, design ideas and prototypes are collectively derived and evaluated from both consumers' and designers' insights. Hence, organisations might benefit from tapping into the creative power of consumers instead of only trusting them to comment on outcomes (Ulwick, 2002).

— *To familiarize with the cultural context of consumption communities*

By understanding the cultural context of communities, designers can become more sensitive when screening consumer feedback. This sensitivity could possibly be achieved through observation and conversation with community members. Ethnographic approaches, in-depth interviews with members of consumption communities and other interpretive approaches can be employed across this direction (*cf* Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

— *To tap into collective tastes, emotions, and aesthetics*

Consumption communities are united by a common shared passion for a consumption activity, brand, product or service (Cova, 1997). Collective taste can be regarded as supporting the tribal bond and reflecting collective aesthetics and emotions. We therefore suggest that designers should investigate and take into consideration these elements.

— *To consider consumption communities as co-designers*

The notion of design as a product of talented individuals gradually shifts towards design as a form of team work (Lawson, 2007). Designers are encouraged to consider community members as equals in the design process by re-establishing the power dynamics between the organization and the consumers. Consumers are no longer regarded as the 'target'. They become co-creators of value, and ultimately co-designers.

5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to introduce a communal oriented design approach as an alternative or supplementary form of design inquiry that aims to take into consideration certain aspects of the dynamic and changing status and context of contemporary consumer society. In doing so, we suggest a move towards a more collective and participatory design process that shall arguably offer novel insights to the design of new products, services and/or interfaces. Drawing from diverse bodies of research (e.g. sociology, marketing, consumer research, affective, emotional, and experiential design), the main elements of the communal design approach that were brought into play here, namely the concept of co-creation of value and the concept of collective emotions, aesthetics and tastes. This paper can be seen as an initial attempt to offer a set of conceptual guidelines towards the direction of *designing for collective value* where designers are encouraged to step out of their comfort zone and step into

consumption communities. Future research might aim to empirically explore and investigate the viability of a communal oriented design approach and to further develop and extend the initial conceptual guidelines introduced here.

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