THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

PLANET OR PEOPLE? REDEFINING THE IDEOLOGICAL POSITION OF SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing awareness of the concept of sustainability society-wide, the diffusion and uptake of sustainable innovations and practices remains slow and niche. Many have attributed the lack of uptake to an ineffective sustainability discourse, which fails to drive the desired behaviours due to the limited appeal, relevance and meaning it bears in people's lives. This paper contributes to a better understanding of the discrepancies between intended and perceived meanings generated by discourse framing and representations.

The study first maps a trajectory of the sustainability concept in culture (its past, present and emerging cultural associations) using Raymond Williams (1977) Residual, Dominant and Emergent methodology. The analysis is structured in three periods, reflecting two important cultural shifts in the sustainability discourse: the ecology era, the sustainability era and the innovation era. These map the transformation of the meaning of sustainability over time, and from 'marginality' towards (potential) 'popularity'.

Secondly, as the 'value proposition' of sustainability poses an unapparent opposition of interests between 'planet' and 'people' – a dilemma posed by sustainable consumption – we set to analyse the positions and ideologies in tension within the discourse by mapping these polarities in a Greimasian square. Some conclusions are drawn upon how these positions might influence people's views, engagement and behaviour towards sustainable products and practices. The results suggest that propositions which present sustainability as a means for 'environmental protection' (environmental benefits) might be unfavourable to generate mainstream appeal and engagement, while discursive frames which present it as a means to enhance 'quality of life' (personal and/or social wellbeing benefits) may offer better predisposition and appeal.

The study also exemplifies the value of integrating socio-semiotic and cultural analysis methods into design research and design ethnography for 'decoding' possible unarticulated socio-cultural meanings of artefacts and communications. In this particular case, the methodology has helped to identify a favourable path to strategically advance the legitimation and appeal of sustainability values and accelerate its cultural transition.

Keywords: sustainability discourse, semiotic and cultural analysis.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the West, the scale and extent to which lifestyles need to change in order to be sustainable is radical – the target carbon emission reduction is estimated at 90% (Monbiot 2007). Although awareness of environmental challenges and

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sustainability is growing society-wide, mainstream societal adoption of sustainable production and consumption is well off-target (Mont, Neuvonen & Lähteenoja 2014). On the other hand, cultures are at constant flux with radical technological advances (e.g. smartphones) and cultural practices (e.g. exercising) widely and happily adopted all the time (Norman & Verganti 2014). But they are welcomed and incorporated on the basis of their underlying 'value proposition': *to enhance people's lives in tangible and meaningful ways.*

Design has acknowledged the need to address social and environmental concerns (Melles, de Vere & Misic 2011; Papanek 1985). But while great advance has been made in terms of efficiency in production (i.e. eco design, cradle to cradle), modes for disrupting the dominant forms of consumption (e.g. eating local, seasonal produce; reusing, repairing making our own goods) lie within the next challenges (Mylan 2014; Vergragt, Akenji & Dewick 2014). Much remains to be explored on the diffusion and adoption of sustainable design output at a mainstream level, where both sustainable production and consumption remains a niche (Mont & Plepys 2008).

The socio-cultural meanings of goods (i.e. products and services) have been well documented in marketing management (Oswald and Mick 2006), design (Crilly, Good, Matravers & Clarkson 2008; Julier 2013; Shove, Watson, Hand & Ingram 2007; Verganti 2008) and material culture (Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2007) literatures. There is general consensus that meanings flow among cultural categories and consumer goods via cultural intermediaries, including designers, marketers, and consumers (Maguire & Matthews 2012). However, these meanings are not fixed; contemporary technological, environmental and socio-cultural shifts disrupt the extant codes, values and relationships that constitute meanings. Such cultural reconfigurations can be signified via design output that activates, reflects or accelerates them (Fuad-Luke 2009). Thus, from watches to telephones, design has leveraged new technologies and shifting cultural values to play an essential and powerful role in redefining the meaning of specific categories (Verganti 2008).

Sustainable development 'seeks to improve the quality of human life whilst living within the carrying capacity of the ecosystems' (IUCN, UNEP, & WWF, 1991, p. 10). Since values are embodied in design artefacts, it is important to pay close attention at what values sustainable design should seek to shift or legitimise in order to support this goal.

Therefore, we question: what is the proposition of sustainability and what underlying values and ideologies drive sustainability's proposition discourse? How are they 'framed' or represented and how do these representations affect people's predisposition, attitudes and behaviours towards sustainable living? By systematically analysing discourse representations we can uncover the meanings that might be generated by different discursive frames, to better understand how design can advance the legitimation of sustainability values and accelerate cultural transition.

As this enquiry is driven by a critique of the dominant social structures of consumption and production, and the need for design to contribute to systemic change, it draws from the empirical and theoretical knowledge that social semiotics, critical theory and cultural studies offer for studying meaning in social contexts, and in this particular case, the social representation of values through designed products and services.

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2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The urgency to transition society to more sustainable production and consumption patterns has been widely recognised among many stakeholders (Akenji 2014). But the lack of resonance that current approaches generate has raised concerns, which are being increasingly voiced in academia (Ehrenfeld 2008; Hamilton 2010; McKenzie-Mohr 2013; Mont & Plepys 2008; Vergragt et al. 2014) the media (Clark 2013; Grinnell-Wright 2013; Locskai 2013) and the business sectors (Gillispie 2012; Jaber 2009; Makower 2013). There is consensus on the 'lack of effectiveness' of the sustainability discourse to mobilise and transform behaviour. The issues have been problematised around the following:

2.1 FUZZINESS OF THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY

Concerns have been raised about how sustainable consumption is often misinterpreted and reduced to 'green consumerism' (Akenji 2014; de Burgh-Woodman & King 2013). Although awareness of sustainability as a concept is growing society-wide (The Hartman Group 2013a), there is still generalised confusion among the public about what sustainable practices and options really are – beyond products clearly labelled as 'green' or 'eco' (Hanss & Böhm 2012). Also, sustainable lifestyles do not appear to be a very popular concept so far because they are often equated with 'settling for less' (Luchs, Naylor, Irwin & Raghunathan 2010). According to Robins and Roberts (1998) people believe that sustainable consumption means giving up and losing out, 'colder, darker and offering less choice and comfort' (p. 30). Ehrenfeld (2008) argues that a reason why the sustainability concept seems ill-defined in people's minds is that sustainability can be 'practiced' in manifold manifestations, but he points out that the lack of clearly defined meanings impacts on the significance it bears in people's lives.

2.2 RATIONALITY VS. EMOTIONALITY

Another misconception is that providing information around environmental issues (scientific proof, statistics and hard facts) is compelling enough for people to adopt more sustainable lifestyle options. As evidence shows, awareness does not necessarily correlate to sustainable behaviours (Makower, 2013; McKenzie-Mohr, 2013). Reisch (1998) refers to the results of a study which showed the discrepancy between extremely high environmental concern on the one hand (60–90 per cent of the European population think of themselves as environmentally conscious) and low and inconsistent behaviour on the other. This is normally referred to as the 'value-action gap' (Kollmuss & Agyeman 2002). What underpins this 'hard facts' approach is an outdated assumption that human decision-making is based on rational calculations. However, as behavioural theorists have evidenced, when people make decisions, perceptions and emotions seem to have a greater weight on our choices and preferences (Kahneman 2012). The dominant consumerism discourse, on the contrary, is well aware of that fact, banking on well-developed sales strategies targeted to our sensitivities and emotions (Hamilton 2010). Grimmer & Woolley (2012) recommend that 'sustainable offerings would benefit from a stronger appeal to the emotionality of customers to be more effective' (p.16). However, de Burgh-Woodman and King (2013, p. 146) warn that we must be weary of counting on

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the emotionality or empathy generated by 'depletion and destruction scenarios' as motivators for lasting behaviour change, evidencing that 'humans enjoy a historically embedded relationship with nature in either its literal or metaphoric sense', which renders nature a passive constant that is 'just there' and hard to imagine it gone.

2.3 MOTIVATION

Although sustainability's goal is to 'improve quality of life' – i.e. happiness and well-being – the sustainability discourse rarely acknowledges the emotional driving potential of this 'promise' for communicating with mainstream audiences. As universal, cross-cultural legitimate pursuits they are within the deepest and strongest intrinsic motivators that drive our aspirations and goals, and consequently our priorities and behaviours (Kasser et al. 2013). Their effectiveness as deep emotional drivers is demonstrated in the extent to which we have surrendered to the allure of consumerist illusions that reflect them (Kasser 2002). Evidence suggests that emulating the commodity discourse (Connolly & Prothero 2003) by representing sustainable offerings with references around personal benefits of 'greater happiness and well-being' (Sääksjärvi & Hellén 2013) and establishing an emotional connection with users' sensibilities pose a better chance for their wider appeal and uptake.

In summary, in order for people to see meaning in sustainability, they must see some degree of personal benefit, regardless of their orientation in the 'world of sustainability' (The Hartman Group 2013a). Thus, below we consider how sustainability, as a lifestyle value proposition compares against its competing 'consumerist' one. Table 1 summarises extant views on why the current sustainability framing may not be compelling enough to provoke radical adoption and uptake.

Table 1- Sustainability vs. consumerist discourse value proposition.

	CONSUMERIST DISCOURSE	SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSE
BENEFITS	Clear, personal	Unclear, global
MEANING	Clear, targeted	Unclear, generic
AFFINITY	Mainly emotional	Mainly rational

While the literature offers evidence on how the meaning of sustainability is currently perceived and negotiated by users, research on the textual representations that contribute to such perceptions is underdeveloped. Considering the responsibility that design bears as an enunciative practice (Floch 2000), it is important to explore how its output affects the current framing of sustainability, and how it can contribute to make the discourse more clear and effective.

3 AIMS

This study investigates how different frames support underlying values and ideologies in the sustainability discourse, with the aim to better understand how

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certain representations might be negatively affecting the predispositions towards mainstream adoption of sustainability.

The objectives are: (1) to map a trajectory of the sustainability concept in culture (its past, present and emerging cultural associations) in order to update Design for Sustainability current understanding and assumptions; (2) to establish the *positions* and *ideologies* in tension within the discourse; and (3) to establish the most favourable discursive frames for legitimising the values that support a wider societal transition to more sustainable consumption patterns (Crompton 2010).

4 **METHOD**

In the interest of studying the social representation of values through designed products and services, our study draws from social semiotics, critical theory and cultural studies methodologies for studying meaning in social contexts. Sustainability representations are first analysed diachronically using an RDE (Residual, Dominant, Emergent) categorisation (Bourne Taylor 1997; Bryson 2013) to establish the changes in meaning and its corresponding cultural ideologies and associations. Secondly, Greimas (1993) semiotic square is used to clarify the tensions present in the sustainable consumption dilemma (people–planet). A semiotic square is the elementary structure of signification, marking off the oppositional logic that is at the heart of both narrative progression and semantic, thematic, or symbolic content. Therefore, it is useful for uncovering the logical relationships between key semantic themes or concepts.

4.1 SAMPLING STRATEGY

Given their pre-eminence and predominance in consumption culture, the investigation was located within mass media texts in the English language. By definition, mass media is created for a broad audience, therefore reflecting meanings and holding appeal for mainstream consumers (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). Equally, social and cultural norms are often discursively created within popular media where expressions of normative consumption, dilemmas and opposing discursive narratives abound (Zayer, Sredl, Parmentier and Coleman, 2012; duGay 1997). Moreover, examining press coverage and advertising narratives of sustainability over time provides an important opportunity to observe shifts in this discourse in ways that cross-sectional data would not allow (Humphreys 2010).

Three scoping searches were conducted to gather semiotic resources. Archival (newspapers, magazines and billboards) and online material was searched first, using the keywords 'sustainable', 'eco', 'green', 'environmental', 'environmentally-friendly', 'resource-efficient', 'organic', 'fair-trade' and 'ethical'. The second search (online) added the word 'design' to each keyword listed above (e.g. 'sustainable+design'). This second search led to a range of specialist websites on sustainable design and business which featured advertisements framed around 'social innovation'. Advertisers ranged from the British Council, Hitachi, Unilever and IBM, to consulting firms such as Accenture. Finding these ads prompted a third search under the key phrases 'social innovation,' 'smart solutions' and 'smart living'.

From the large amount of data retrieved, a propositional sample of resources representative of the most recurring codes (e.g. 'green globe icon', 'craft paper,

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wood, cork textures', 'term: smart') was selected for analysis. The selected data set consisted of book and magazine covers (12), online magazine, blogs and news articles (12); print (14), online (7) and street advertising (3); transcripts of promotional videos and advertising (3); newspaper articles (5), and multinational brands sustainability reports (3).

4.2 ANALYSIS

Two modes of analysis were employed: the data set was first openly coded and thematically classified under a dominant, residual and emergent categorisation[1] (Bourne Taylor 1997; Bryson 2013). This was useful for understanding how the meaning of sustainability has varied over time (diachronically), but most importantly, to identify the role that resistant and oppositional identities and ideologies play within the dominant culture, and how effective they might be in shifting or disrupting it (Williams 1977).
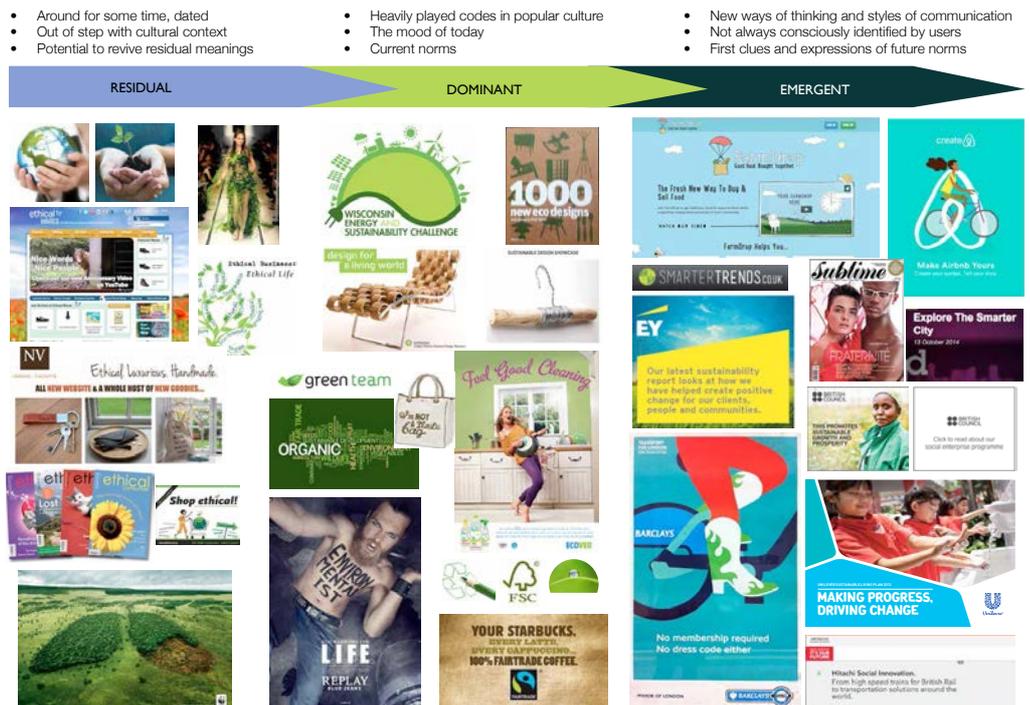

Figure 1 – Sample of dominant, residual and emergent categorisation of semiotic resources.

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[1] Dominant – perspectives that are embodied in the majority of society or by ruling and most powerful class/es. Residual – those beliefs, practices that are derived from an earlier stage of that society, often very long ago, and which may in fact reflect a very different social formation (e.g. different political or religious beliefs) than the present. Emergent – beliefs and practices that are being developed out of a new set of social interactions, as societies change. Neither residual nor emergent forms simply exist within or alongside the dominant culture. They operate in a process of continual tension, which can take the form of both incorporation and opposition within it.

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The process of coding and interpretation of resources continued under an open, inductive, thematic approach (Braun & Clarke 2006) guided by the research question (*what is the underlying proposition of sustainability?*). At this stage, two overarching themes clearly emerged: *planet* (environmental concern and protection) and *people* (improving quality of life). These seem to stand in opposition in terms of benefit (benefiting the environment/planet vs benefitting people) which, in turn, correlated with an ideological opposition of values: global vs local (corporatism vs cooperatism (Hazlitt 2012)). The global is thus the site of the institutionalised, the corporative, socio-economic globalisation and the mainstream media; in opposition to the 'local': the site of the individual's lived experience, habits, aspirations, their social and material circumstances (Saukko 2003). Table 2 offers a sample of the texts that inform this categorisation.

Table 2 – Illustration of the process of coding and categorisation of semiotic resources.

CHARACTERI-SATION	THEMES	ILLUSTRATIVE TEXT	CODES	PROPOSITION
PLANET (NATURAL WORLD)	Climate change, deforestation biodiversity loss, extinction, pollution, resource depletion		Natural world Damage Violence Shock tactics Surrealism	There is only one planet and we need to take care of it for the sake of future generations
GLOBAL (SOCIO-ECONOMIC SYSTEM)	Consumerism Policy Science High-end green Clean-techs Eco-luxury		Smooth lines, Polished and shiny surfaces, Close up photography Speed, light Urban Exceptional Silent	A sustainable future is achievable via large scale systemic change and technological innovation
PEOPLE (INDIVIDUALS WITHIN COMMUNITIES)	Organic Wellbeing Community Creativity Localisation High + low tech Interdependence Sharing Technology-enabled democratisation & diversification Entrepreneurship		Naivety and ingenuity Rustic Minimal Home-made Amateur Urban + rural 2D Graphic Practical	We all benefit from each other. There could be a more personalised and meaningful way of relating while covering needs.
LOCAL (THE INDIVIDUAL)	Commodification Low-end green consumerism Eco, fair trade, ethical and green consumption		Green, browns, natural materials, nature, home, quotidian Family Suburban Every day	To do your bit makes you a responsible citizen. Feel good by doing the right thing.

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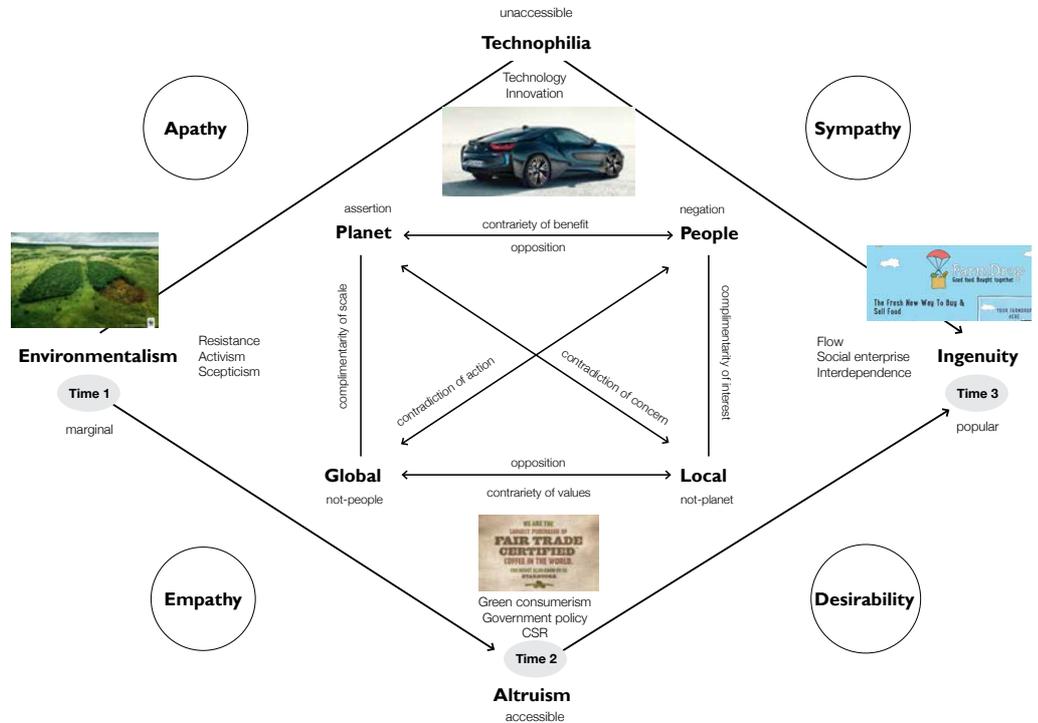
Figure 2 –Semiotic square mapping of the conceptual binary opposition, and their resulting positions and predispositions logical relationships.

This finding prompted the mapping of these cultural binaries in a semiotic square (Figure 2). Binary opposites are used to convey meaning and they organise the social world (Levi-Strauss). As Floch (2000) explains, mapping these conceptual boundaries can elucidate the conditions within which meaning is produced and interpreted. As such, this form of analysis reveals dynamic systems of signification. Thus, the 'semiotic square' helped to uncover how the dilemmas, cultural contradictions and tensions posed by the pressing radical socio-economic paradigm shift towards sustainability are, at present, being reconciled through design representation, and how these frame different ideological positions. Here, ideologies are defined as the basic frameworks for organising the social cognitions shared by members of social groups and comprise social, cognitive and discursive components (VanDijk 1999). They mentally represent the basic social characteristics of a group, such as their identity, tasks, goals, norms, values and resources. Hence, ideologies generate 'in' and 'out' social positions – groups who either support or oppose these characteristics (VanDijk 1999).

5 RESULTS

5.1 DRE - DIACHRONIC MEANING ANALYSIS

The analysis can be structured in three periods, reflecting two important cultural shifts in the sustainability discourse: Time 1: the ecology era, Time 2: the sustainability era and Time 3: the innovation era. These map the transformation

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of the meaning of sustainability over time, and from 'marginality' towards (potential) 'popularity' of individual engagement.

5.1.1 Time 1 (1962–2005) – The Ecology Era (Residual)

This period brackets at a time when environmental issues first come to public debate with Carson's book *The Silent Spring* (1962), giving ground for the rising of the environmental movement. During this period, the concept of 'sustainability' is scarcely present in mainstream media, but representations of 'ecology' are found, especially around 1972 reflecting concerns after the oil crisis. This discourse is firmly rooted on environmental issues and presently active through well-established codes of activism and social movements (ethical consumption, boycotts, campaigning). The texts exhort to 'ethical' consumption (i.e. considerate to the environment, does not harm animals and does not exploit people who produce it) with representations picturing the effects of climate change, natural resource exploitation and depletion, pollution and biodiversity extinction. The representations are figurative and vivid, employing metaphor and hyperrealism to create strong reactions and impressions. The discourse is situated in the global both in its concern (the planet) and resistance (towards the systemic). The producing agents in this discourse seem to be mostly longstanding NGOs and activist groups (e.g. WWF, Greenpeace, Adbusters), therefore this representations are generally associated with the values and beliefs of 'hard-core' and 'radical' ideological individuals and groups, rendering engagement as marginal, rather mainstream.

5.1.2 Time 2 (2006–2010) – The Sustainability Era (Dominant)

In this period, the concept of sustainability gains widespread media coverage with the publication of the Stern Review (2006), and its message is popularised with Al Gore's 'An Inconvenient Truth', di Caprio's 'Blood Diamond' and other celebrities endorsing 'green' products and practices. As this era attempts to reconcile the global and the local, there is a clear discourse shift towards making each individual accountable for the 'planetary crisis'. The values of strong environmentalism are diluted as they become incorporated into the dominant discourses of capitalism. Sustainability is equated with 'responsible citizenship', privatised into 'individual action' (personal carbon footprint, recycling) and commodified through 'green consumption' (fair trade, eco-friendly). This is also the era of 'greenwash' – sustainability is a buzz word but lacks clear local meaning (we all need to do something but we are not sure what). This discourse representations consist of products and services deliberately 'green' in their appearance, blending diverse categories such as detergents, investments, holidays and children's toys all under a single, reductionist aesthetic. The producers of this dominant discourse are government and corporations, making it highly centralised and ubiquitous. Much of 'eco-design' representations are caught up in this discourse, too; alongside many other eco-friendly offerings that cater for niche market segments of 'eco-minded', 'green' consumers. Both mainstream producers and consumers benefit from the scapegoatism (Akenji, 2014) offered by this paradox, because it allows for the perpetuation of status quo socio-economic arrangements and values, only disguising them with a superficial green veneer of 'social responsibility'.

5.1.3 Time 3 (2011-2014) – The Social Innovation Era (Emergent)

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This era is marked by a departure from the environmental and the global with a shift of discourse towards people and the local. It emerges as a response generated by disillusion and lack of trust in those power to facilitate more fulfilling, sustainable and egalitarian lifestyles, and is expressed in proliferating texts of bottom-up, localised 'innovation propositions', many of which are rapidly scaling-up due to their great appeal (e.g. in 2011, Airbnb announced its 1 millionth booking). In this discourse, sustainability as environmental protection is not predominant but featured alongside other dimensions that make-up *quality of life* (i.e. enriching experience, democracy, community, significance). Instead, what is predominant and clearly stated in the proposition are the *personal* and *social* benefits to be gained.

This is the discourse of social innovation, social networks, the circular economy, smart living and well-being. Based on ingenuity, it seeks to turn concerns into opportunities and to produce economic and social value. Here, accessible technology (e.g. smartphones) acts as an enabler for communal self-organisation. This discourse is filled with a renewed spirit of hope for more decentralised and advanced (high and low tech) ways of producing and consuming, picturing them not only as 'possible', but as places of more meaningful, democratic, enriching and satisfying life experiences. There is a re-discovery and re-invention of age-old practices as means for self-expression and individualisation and a search for interconnectedness and meaning. The discourse builds on the language of innocence, spontaneity, transparency, rural idyll, and the imagination, with bold use of colour, hand strokes, children, farm animals and bicycles widely used in illustration, storytelling and animation to envision positive scenarios. The producers of this discourse were, initially, independent entrepreneurial set-ups, co-ops and the NGOs that support them. But increasingly, government, large corporate brands and mainstream media are appropriating the codes – due to their favourable popular resonance – to enhance their credibility and reputation. The ideology seems to be that of 'people-powered' solutions. In 2011, Ricken Patel, director of social activism platform Avaaz.org comments: 'We have no ideology per se. Our mission is to close the gap between the world we have and the world most people everywhere want. Idealists of the world unite!' (Pilkington 2011).

5.2 SEMIOTIC SQUARE ANALYSIS - DILEMMAS & POSITIONS

From mapping the four initial key semantic concepts in the semiotic square (planet, people, global, local), four further positions are generated: environmentalism, technophilia, altruism and ingenuity (the outer diamond in Figure 2), which emerge as an attempt to reconcile cultural contradictions and dilemmas. It is by analysing representations of these four concepts that we can begin to elucidate the ideologies and meanings they support, and the perceptions and attitudes towards sustainability that each frame might generate (Lakoff 2010; Alexander 2008).

5.2.1 *Environmentalism*

The tension between the planet (protection) and the global (economic overexploitation) generates **radical attitudes** of engagement with sustainability (Figure 3). Provocative, incisive and anti-regulation, these positions and attitudes are not likely to disappear, but to gain favour as the dominant sees its power position threatened by raising societal awareness of injustice and inequality. Although this ideology possesses the capacity to overturn the

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dominant cultures of consumption, their success depends on their ability to reach a critical mass of following – a great challenge, as for mainstream society, living according to these ideological values is perceived as 'unpractical' and 'abnormal', due to the high level of commitment and 'sacrifices' required.
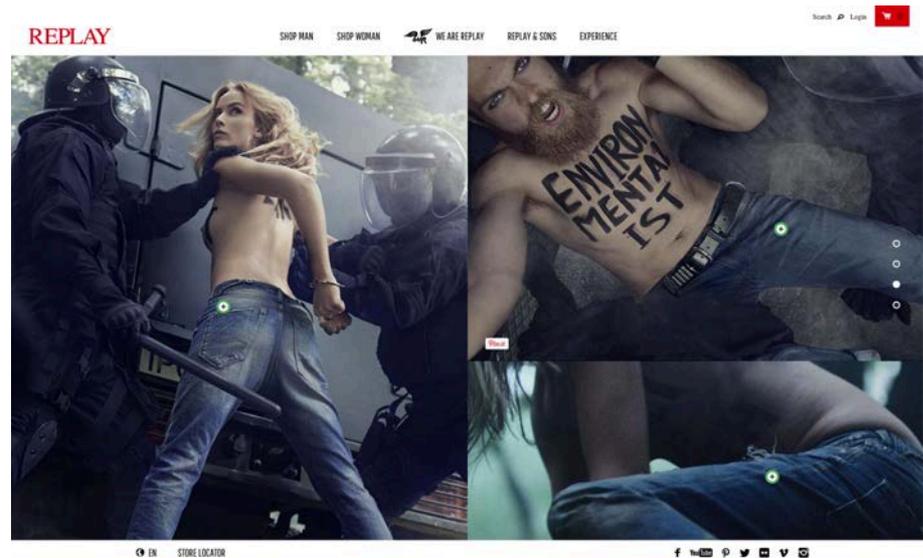
Figure 3 – Radical attitudes represented in the Replay campaign 'Eco Warriors For Life' (2014), blending consumerism (jeans, fashion model) and sustainability values. Here, 'rebellion' is morally dignified by its association to environmentalism ideology, but the material outcome encouraged (engagement with sustainability) is commodified via consumption. Image: Screen grab from http://www.replay.it/life

5.2.1 *Technophilia*

Figure 4 exemplifies how high-end technological innovation (solar panels, electric cars, expensive home retrofitting) seems to be mediating between the tension planet–people. But high-tech representations generate an **elitist attitude**, where only a few who can afford the exclusivity of such luxuries are promoted to 'living the future today'. This excludes the mainstream sector of society until these commodities become affordable and accessible, translating into a self-exclusion due to non-accessibility.

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Figure 4 – Design leverages the introduction of expensive 'clean-techs' by representing them as luxurious and desirable. Image: BMW i8 advertising, featured in http://www.autosaur.com/

5.2.1 *Altruism*

In the tension global–local there is a deep opposition of values. On the one hand, people are constantly bombarded with seductive advertising that encourages self-indulgence in the 'here and now', and on the other, ineptly prompted by unpersuasive messages to reduce consumption 'for the sake of future generations'. Those in position of power attempt to shift responsibility to the individual by appealing to moral consumption. They 'privatise' the environmental debt, comodifying participation and action through consumerist values, generating a **sympathetic attitude** (Figure 5). Self-righteous and self-serving, altruism ideology serves to pacify the conscience of the powerful and the middle-classes alike. This framing is highly ideological as it does not correspond to a material reality in its proposition: no change of values means no change in behaviours.

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Figure 5 – Altruistic representations that lead to sympathetic attitudes. Image: Starbucks billboard advertising.

5.2.2 *Ingenuity*

Most people are driven by a desire to improve the quality of their lives – be it finding a partner, eating better, etc. – motivated rarely by greed and more often by seeking to satisfy intrinsic human needs: subsistence, protection, leisure, participation, affection, freedom, understanding, creation, and identity (Max-Neef, 1992). These are defined as local concerns, as they correspond to the lived experience of the individual and their circumstances. The representations that reconcile the people–local emphasise quality of life and interdependency, which provokes a **predisposition for integration and empowerment** (Figure 6) – that which seeks to solve simple, everyday problems and make improvements by being resourceful, creative and cooperative. This frame opens people's sensitivities for engagement through proximity and familiarity, thus generating trust, openness, acceptance and, potentially, popularity.

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Figure 6 – Ingenuity representations may lead to better predispositions for the integration of values and actions. Image: Screen grab from www.farm-drop.co.uk

6 DISCUSSION/INSIGHTS

At present, the dominant view of sustainability – which is represented by many expressions in the spectrum ranging from hard-core activism to green consumption – is guided by the ideology and values of ecological environmentalism understood as protection of the natural environment. As a lifestyle proposition, aligning the meaning of sustainability to this ideology can have unintended implications in terms of mainstream appeal and uptake. On the other hand, the emerging association of sustainable innovation and practices with social innovation and ubiquitous digital technologies is shifting the meaning sustainability away from environmental ideology and closer to the intrinsic values that support human flourishing and well-being. This frame is also proving far more effective for mainstream diffusion and appeal.

6.1 FOR THE PLANET: ENVIRONMENTAL IDEOLOGY HAS NICHE APPEAL

Firstly, the tensions between the global (planet) and the local (people) analysed here help us to see the contradictions that may be creating the 'value-action gap'. When sustainability is equated with environmental protection it is bound to remain niche because it is situated in the global (i.e. a complex problem, caused by many, harming nature which is outside one's control). Although the values of

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this ideology resonate with people and informs their views on social justice and environmental problems to a certain extent, it generates ideological attitudes that only translate into radical lifestyle change for the few, rather than the many. 'Protecting the planet', though imperative, does not correspond with the material reality of a western individual as they go about their daily routine. (Here, it is worth noticing that people are constantly influenced by the global and 'happy' to make the global their concern when the global presents opportunities rather than problems. It is likely that the concern would not translate into behaviour change until it becomes a local problem).

Messages such as 'protecting our home', use emotionality in an attempt to imbue the global with local meaning, but have little impact in behaviour because they are not grounded in material reality and therefore devoid of local, experiential meaning. Whilst I can 'eat organic' and judge whether there is a difference in the taste of the produce in question compared to non-organic produce, I cannot 'experience' the effect of my household recycling. Conversely, I cannot experience the effect my reduced consumption of electricity has on climate change, but I can see that my efforts have cut my bill by a third. The further removed from personal experience, the more reliant we become on the dominant 'global' discourses to mediate the meaning of sustainable consumption for us. Therefore, current media messages, products, services and policies framed on the 'global' may well be rendering us unable to implement more radical lifestyle changes, because there is no correlation between this discourse and our 'local' values and priorities (to improve our lived experience or subjective well-being).

Secondly, environmental ideology mobilises minority (resistant or morally compliant) rather than mainstream groups. While these groups find differentiation and identity on environmentalisms moral values (i.e. believing they are supporting a 'good cause' or 'being good'), their positioning benefits the dominant culture, which dismisses their claims as radical, utopian and niche. For example, *The Guardian* reports: 'Sustainability played a role at London fashion week – just don't call it 'eco' (Pattinson 2014).

Therefore, aligning sustainability to this ideology is what might be keeping it in the fringe and preventing mainstream societal change.

6.2 FOR PEOPLE: WELL-BEING BENEFITS HAVE UNIVERSAL APPEAL

The value of happiness and well-being as indicators of a 'good life' has been steadily on the rise (NEF, 2014; The Hartman Group, 2013b). This is reflected in people's pursuit and longing for more healthy, fulfilling and enriching lifestyles, as well as in the number of government policies that account for a greater emphasis on wellbeing increasing worldwide (Buthan's framework for National Happiness, The Happiness Index, etc.). Therefore, a greater impact might be achieved by framing sustainable innovations and practices around a proposition that presents personal benefits that 'enhance our quality of life' (subjective well-being), rather than making environmental protection the primary proposition for sustainability.

The 'local' framing of many social innovations serves as a fine example of a more holistic approach to frame the meaning of sustainability, which incorporates and unifies the values of environmentalism with those of personal and social well-being. This proposition challenges consumerist values in terms of

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what it means 'to live well'. While it is centred on people's well-being, it does not seek to pursue it at the expense of the environment. Instead, it builds on obtaining benefits for the individual that benefit the wider community and their socio-economic and natural environment (Hazlitt 2012).

As Manzini has been championing for over a decade (2003, 2006, Manzini & Jégou 2003), bottom-up social innovation that offers access to local provision networks, fosters interdependence and reduces reliance on global, unsustainable provision systems provides more meaningful opportunities for engaging with sustainability while enhancing people's quality of life (e.g. growing and buying local food and other goods or learning to make and repair, for example, are meanings that correspond to material reality).

What we can learn from the social innovation discourse is that sustainable innovation and practices that satisfy these universal personal concerns can offer a much more meaningful, relevant and appealing 'value proposition' of sustainability, actionable through desirable and life-enhancing provision platforms.

Therefore, design output that equates sustainability with people's well-being may be better positioned to have a larger impact. It will also contribute to legitimise and reinforce the intrinsic values that support societal and environmental flourishing (Ehrenfeld 2013; Jackson & Victor 2013).

7 CONCLUSION

By means of critical and systematic analysis, this contribution sheds some light on the poor engagement that the dominant sustainability discourse framed on environmental benefits generates. It also finds that a better predisposition for wider engagement with sustainable innovation and practices may be gained by articulating personal benefits related to subjective well-being (quality of life) discourse and values. Digital technologies and social innovation are already proving successful enablers for popularising more meaningful – and sustainable – modes of production and consumption while aligning with the well-being discourse, and without an explicit connection to environmentalism.

While sustainable design is not solely responsible for the framing of the sustainability discourse in its entirety, it affords privileges and responsibilities in legitimising the values and cultural practices that underpin humanity's flourishing. As such, a strategic, leading role should be played to support the ideologies that mobilise and enable the largest sectors of society towards this goal.

This contribution also calls for a closer integration of contemporary cultural theory, socio-semiotics and design by demonstrating how their approach and methods can enrich design research and practice. In acknowledging the value – and need – for self-reflection and critique, much can be gained to improve strategic design thinking and practice.

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