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Corporal Implications of Design Practices and Methods

Niklas Henke, Ph.D.

Université Grenoble Alpes

France

henkeniklas1@googlemail.com

Abstract

In this paper, I analyze the characteristics of method-guided and non-method-guided design practices from the perspective of their corporal implications. To this end, I refer to the most common design methods reported in the literature as compare them to participative observations in the French and German design and innovation sectors over the last five years. While design methods are supposed to frame the project set-up with a high level of rationalization, non-method-guided design practices demonstrate a higher mobilization of intuition, experience, and tacit knowledge. I trace these differences along with their varying corporal implications and highlight their underlying epistemological approaches. In conclusion, I argue for the need to integrate affective and corporal education in design curricula.

Keywords: Design, Management, Innovation, Marketing, Embodiment

Introduction

At present, design practices are being reshaped by two major tendencies. On the one hand, design practices become increasingly influenced by artificial intelligence (Mazzone & Elgammal, 2019). On the other hand, design practices are partly merging with other communication professions (Miège, 2017; Henke & Martin-Juchat, 2021). In this article, I focus on the latter trend and take a closer look at similarities and differences between design practices commonly used by designers and those realized by other communication professionals. My particular focus is on the role of design methods and their link with the participants' human body.

According to Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013), modern progress can be conceptualized as a constant aestheticization of products, services, and brands. This aestheticization promotes the socioeconomic importance of design as a professional discipline for marketing, product development, and brand management (Zec & Jacob, 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Rieke & Schwingen, 2021). Accordingly, design has the potential of adding value and meaning to communication (Heilbrunn, 2017; Michel, 2017), and it is able to do so, in a tacit manner (Henke, 2021b), thus addressing affects and the human body. The growing importance of design for the development of new technologies and services can be traced in the transition from Marketing 1.0 to 5.0. Specifically, as proposed by Kotler et al. (2021), marketing transformed from product-driven (Marketing 1.0) to customer-oriented (Marketing 2.0), human-centric (Marketing 3.0), digital (Marketing 4.0), and, ultimately, to Marketing 5.0: "*for the good of humanity*" (Ibid.). In this article, I argue that an important task of design is to add such emotional and ethical value to communication. Therefore, integrating design and exploiting creativity in industrial processes is essential to stay competitive (Kogan & Andonova, 2019; Reckwitz, 2019).

Design in an industrial context is frequently realized not by designers, but by other professionals—most notably, those in the communication domain. Different professions show varying approaches of integrating design in industrial processes, which changes the project set-up, the participants' interaction framework, and, consequently, the corresponding design outcomes. For instance, design methods are more frequently applied by communication professions than by designers (Henke, 2021a). Nowadays, we can observe a heterogeneity of design practices. Different agencies, projects, or designers lead to different design practices, methods, and epistemological approaches, which makes it difficult to compare design practices. One of the main differences that sets apart different design practices is the presence or absence of methods.¹ In what follows, I will trace their differences more precisely and discuss the emerging consequences.

Research Questions

In this article, I address the following two main research questions. First, what is the link between the application or non-application of design methods (as well as the gradations between those) and the role of the human body in design projects? Second, which consequences can be identified for the project itself and the involved practitioners?

Hypothesis

My leading research hypothesis is as follows: Method-guided design practices differ from non-method-guided ones by varying corporal implications. Specifically, I predict that non-method-guided practices

¹ While other variables are for instance, the project context or the designer's education, in this article, I focus on the mentioned one.

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prioritize intuition, affects and, consequently, the human body. To formulate my prediction even more straightforwardly: I expect that the heterogeneity of design practices can be located along the different gradations attributed to the role of the human body.

Method

To address the aforementioned research questions, I refer to design methods as described in the literature, as well as my professional observations in the French and German design and innovation sectors over the last five years. My active participation in innovation and design projects gave me the possibility to approach my research questions taking the perspective of a “reflective practitioner” (Schön, 1983).

While there is extensive literature on design theory, an exhaustive analysis of the application/non-application of design methods in the light of their consequences for the human body is yet to be conducted. This is particularly striking in the context of the recent growing research interest in grounded cognition, embodiment, and affects. Therefore, my approach links the aforementioned questions with my in-field observations as a reflective practitioner grounded in professional experience. The general and re-occurring mechanisms that I can identify, are more important in my approach, than the specific details of the observed design projects.

Theoretical Framework

Design practices show a particular mode of reasoning and follow their proper epistemological and socio-psychological logic (Cross, 1984; 2006; Beyaert-Geslin, 2012). Specifically, Doorst (2017) proposed to consider *design abduction* as a different mode of reasoning distinct from deduction, induction, and normal abduction. Similarly, Gentes (2017) proposed *projective abduction* as the principal mode of design reflection. As I will argue later, the mode of reasoning becomes

relevant to my research questions when taking an embodiment perspective (Niedenthal, 2009). According to Lévy (2018), design can be understood as both a transformative and a transforming practice, which suggests that, through its impact on citizens' daily life, design possesses its socio-political power. This capacity of design represents an economic potential for socioeconomic actors. Accordingly, design gets more and more finely integrated into industrial processes. By now, design has become an indispensable element in the construction and maintenance of brand communication (Michel, 2017; Zec & Jacob, 2010; Rieke & Schwingen, 2021). Its capacity to address the affective dimension of communication is particularly important for its economic value. To understand affects, I will follow the anthropological perspective of grounded cognition and embodiment (Niedenthal, 2009). The core idea of this approach is that affects should be understood as grounded in the human body. Accordingly, affective experiences and higher cognitive processes are conceptualized as grounded in the individual's physiological structure. This perspective resonates with the approaches previously proposed by Varela et al. (2016), Martin-Juchat (2008, 2020), and Damasio (2018). In contrast to computational cognition models, the anthropological perspective of grounded cognition and embodiment posits that cognition and creativity are constituted by practitioners' bodies. The essential consequence of this perspective for my research question is that it underlines the physical properties of design projects, including those of practitioners' bodies, the involved materiality, and the chosen places. This line of thought also reflects the perspective of Dourish (2001) and Smith et al. (2021), showing that the materialities of design tools (e.g. software, post-its) also constitute a design project. Similarly to actor-network theory (ANT), meaning can be understood as constructed through the interaction between practitioners and the involved materialities and places (Hummels et al., 2019, p. 61). The results of these processes frame the interaction with new products and services. Therefore, I aim to specify how the application of design methods influences design projects.

Results

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In this section, I will briefly present the design methods I refer to in this article, without going into detail about their respective mechanisms, particularities, as well as advantages or disadvantages. The presented methods are the most common ones in the observed design and innovation projects. Most of them include Design Thinking (Seitz, 2017; Bonnet, 2021), Creative Problem Solving (Marchal, 2012; Vial, 2020/2015), the Double Diamond of the British Design Council², the Concept-Knowledge (C-K) theory (Hatchuel et al., 2017), the Kano model (Sauerwein et al., 1996), and the Theory of Inventive Problem Solving (TRIZ) (Livotov, 2009). What is particularly relevant when analyzing these methods is that they share several underlying mechanisms. A dominant parallel is the alternation between phases of divergence and convergence. Another one is the repetition of these phases in iteration cycles (differing according to each project). For each of these methods, it is essential to define input information maximally precisely. Throughout the project, they aim for a high level of transparency and traceability. Each step, idea, and artifact is documented as precisely as possible, which, among other things, helps to track the emergence of ideas. Therefore, project managers are supposed to document project artifacts in a maximally tangible and explicit way. Overall, the design methods are meant to frame the project set-up in a transparent manner. However, the described guidelines represent ideal cases—the reality of each design project adapts itself to the particularities of the specific project context and the flexibility of the involved participants.

When comparing the presented principles of design methods with design practices that I observed during the last five years in the French and German design and innovation sectors, I obtained the following picture. First of all, I observed a nuanced heterogeneity of practices. Most of these practices are guided by intuition, experience,

² <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/news-opinion/what-framework-innovation-design-councils-evolved-double-diamond>

and tacit knowledge.³ In these cases, conception and perception of designs are guided by the designers' cognitive evaluations and affective reactions. Interestingly, a common quality judgment is when the result *feels right* to the designer. This kind of affect is blended with the designer's prior knowledge about the project, its sociocultural context, the project owner, and the brand. Thus, what is happening here is that a designer synchronizes the emerging affective reactions with internalized conceptualizations of the target group. The designs are sensibly screened for *what do they evoke? Might this work for the target group?* During this process of affective screening, the role of the human body remains for most part implicit. I rarely observed that the human body is explicitly considered as a variable that affects the design process. As mentioned previously, the guiding questions are similar to the ones used in user research. At this point, let me recall that we observe different approaches towards user research—for instance, some designers always apply it, some never, and some punctually according to each project. However, the affective reactions and cognitive evaluations of a design are blended with pop-cultural and sociopolitical trends – constantly aiming to evaluate whether a design proposition is suitable for the corresponding market and the respective brand positioning. In that sense, the competence of the designer is to sense the project in the holistic context of the society. This aptly captures daily working practices of successful designers. Using a term coined by Kees Overbeeke, the approach of Bierut (2015)⁴ can be described as *educated intuition* (Overbeeke & Hummels, 2014).

In conclusion, for both method-guided and non-method-guided practices, the precise definition of input information is an important feature in order to augment the probability of satisfying outcomes. However, unlike method-guided practices, their non-method-guided

³ Following the understanding of *tacit knowledge* as described by Polanyi (2009/1966).

⁴ For examples, see the website of Pentagram (www.pentagram.com).

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counterparts show a higher level of improvisation, spontaneity, and flexibility. The project relies on the affective—and in most cases implicit—screening of design propositions. For method-guided practices, project artifacts and affective evaluations are meant to be made more explicit. In summary, while method-guided practices demonstrate a higher level of rationalization, non-method-guided ones remain more intuitive. Of note, this conclusion should be taken as somewhat schematizing—admittedly, most practices are located in-between the two extremes and show fine nuances of the described principles, thus illustrating the aforementioned heterogeneity of design practices.

Discussion

In previous sections, I described the common underlying logic of design methods and compared them with observations of design practices. My results revealed that, while method-guided practices imply a higher level of rationalization, non-method guided ones show a higher mobilization of intuition, experience, and tacit knowledge. In non-method-guided practices, a designer evaluates the quality of designs through the affective screening of design proposition, informed by the designer's knowledge about the sociocultural context of the project. In the theoretical framework adopted in this article, affects are assumed to be interwoven with the designer's physiological structure. Accordingly, the described design practices can be understood as following a higher level of corporal implication. The application or non-application of design methods therefore changes the designers' attitude towards the project and the respective design propositions. Said differently, the application of design methods implies different affective and corporal dispositions. These varying corporal implications between method-guided and non-method-guided practices correspond to different epistemological approaches.

Conclusions

In this article, I analyzed design methods as presented in the literature and design practices as observed in the French and German design and innovation sectors over the last five years. The application or non-application of structured methods influences the attributed role of the human body and the consideration of affects. I identified varying corporal implications corresponding to different underlying epistemologies. While the indicated design methods aim for a high level of transparency, rationalization, and explicitation, non-method-guided design practices are mostly guided by intuition, experience, and tacit knowledge. In the latter case, the project follows a designer's affective screening of a given design. The grounding of affects in the human body is present in an implicit manner. Therefore, it corresponds to Polanyi's (2009/1966) definition of *tacit competences*. In the process of affective screening, the designer senses whether or not a design *feels right*, and this evaluation includes a consideration of the respective sociocultural context of the project and the involved brand positioning. In conclusion, while I differentiated method-guided practices from non-method-guided ones, this differentiation should be perceived as somewhat schematizing, as, in fact, each design project is unique and there is a fine gradation between the two aforementioned types practices. Further research will be necessary to precise all the gradations between those extremes. Yet, the results underscore the importance of affective and corporal education in design curricula. Developing concrete concepts and formats for doing so is a promising task for future research projects. In further research, it would also be meaningful to evaluate the respective design quality.

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