What's It Worth?: The Emotional Value of Future Design and its Impact on Design Education

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Abstract

This study explores how designers and associated industries are evolving the concept of "value" in their products and systems, and how this shift is impacting design education. Contemporary culture's obsession with design, coupled with a knowledge-based economy and an over-saturated marketplace, requires designers to contextualize their work in unique ways if they are to attract consumers. To succeed, designers must shift their focus from creating mere products to developing highly complex narratives and design processes utilizing sophisticated research methods that, in turn, create strategic emotional resonance (the new perceived value). Designers must engage with other disciplines, understand interconnectivity of global systems, and adopt a "designer-as-social scientist" approach. This shift from "what to design" to "how to design" is, in turn, evolving the traditional vocational foci of design education. This essay aims to provide design educators with an awareness of how they can improve their students' preparation for the professional practice.

Key Words: design – design education – narrative – design research – design thinking

1. Introduction

We live in a society where the obsession of contemporary culture with design is heavily influenced by the growing knowledge-based economy and highly saturated markets (Pink, 2005; Postrel, 2003). As a result, designers all media must consider, develop, and contextualize their work in new and novel ways in order to differentiate themselves in the market. To accomplish this, designers are now required to shift their focus from the rudimentary act of creating products to cultivating highly complex narratives that imbue design with new forms of perceived "value." Creation is no longer the primary objective of designers. Rather, designers today are focused on creating artifacts that possess an emotional value that addresses specific consumer needs. Because of this, designers' focus has shifted to the "how" of design throughout the design narrative and process. The development of new design processes and compelling narratives will foster the assignment of a new type of value inherent in the product, namely that of emotional value. The resultant discourse in academia will shift; design school curricula will shift from outdated vocational emphases to those that grounded in social science research methodologies. In doing so, graduates will be better equipped to created design proposals that better target and meet consumers' emotional needs.

The purpose of this essay is to provide design educators and program directors with an awareness of how they can improve their students' preparation for entry into the rapidly evolving design practice that must comprehend advanced forms of consumer psychographics. It also aims to provide professional design practitioners and attendant industries with an awareness for how they may develop, strengthen, and sustain their work.

2. What is Value?

Across all types of design, the idea of "value" is fundamental. Historically, value is developed by issues relating to supply and demand, consumer demographics, zeitgeist, availability of materials, and the brand's reputation. Not everything has value, but when rarity combines with a high level of demand "value" grows. The design period in which an object is made can also impact the value. For example, the rarity of availability of specific historical or nostalgic items can create great demand and, therefore, value. Specific materials incorporated into its design can imbue an object with universally understood value. Additionally, a designer can offer value through the caché of the brand.

How does "value" change when the market is saturated with design? How does this saturation affect buyer behavior and perceptions about design? What can designers—both individually and as an industry—do in response to this saturation? For example, in fashion design, there are 330 fashion shows during New York Fashion Week alone, and there are more than 150 fashion weeks all over the globe (Johnson, 2016). The market is over-saturated with "things" for consumers; yet, for most consumers, their basic needs are already being met, and even surpassed. When viewed through the framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), once their basic necessities are met, today's global buyers climb up Maslow's pyramid to its peak, where these buyers are actively seeking self-realization and meaningful life experiences. The buyer's search for self-realization and meaning alters his previously held views of design and, subsequently, the importance of the designer. Because buyers' demand for meaning as part of overall design value, designers must ensure they design products that have both the physical attributes demanded by the market as well as meaning, with intangible value that meets the complex needs driven by the buyers' emotions.

The emotional needs of buyers make it important that designers employ a design framework to create valuable narratives for their designs. These narratives are unique and strategic to the value of the product. In turn, the designer is differentiated in the market. As with any saturated market, designers are charged with finding ways to differentiate from their competition while successfully capturing the emotional demands of the buyer. Because of market evolution and buyer behavior, designers must change their focus from creating an object (the "what" in the context of design) to the creation of complex narratives and design processes (the "how" in the context of design). As a result, designers will create new forms emotional value. The buyers' search for value in design has led to a fixation with design that is evident in nearly all parts of contemporary life (Postrel, 2003; Pink, 2005).

Currently, demand for "high design" and society's fixation with it are at record levels (Pink, 2005). The "need" of buyers in western society to possess only things that are "designed" has driven retailers across price-points to apply "design" to products they sell that, previously, had been considered mundane. In 2012, Michael Graves, the globally renowned architect, designed over 2,000 household items for the mass-retailer Target (Target, 2012). These products ranged from spatulas to dining tables. In a similar vein, Umbra's production of Karim Rashid Garbo collection of garbage bins has sold over seven-million units and is featured in the permanent collection of The Brooklyn Museum of Art (Volf, M., 2016; Postrel, 2003). The internationally acclaimed artist and designer has even designed a "Millennial Manhole Cover" for New York City's Consolidated Edison (ConEd) Company after beating out seven other artists in a competition juried by panelists representing such esteemed institutions as New York City's Museum of Modern Art, The Cooper Union, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Roane, K., 1999; ConEd, 1999). It would seem that no object now goes untouched by design.

Design has filtered into every aspect of our daily lives. It has permeated the culture of buyers from virtually all socioeconomic strata and cultural communities. An example of this increasing obsession by the middle class for value and design are the "guest star" fashion collections, where internationally renowned designers such as Karl Lagerfeld, Balmain, and Comme des Garcons temporarily partner with national U.S. retailers like Target and Hennes & Mauritz (H & M) to produce high design products for a set time period. These high-profile collections directly target buyers' demand for "high design"—and buyers have responded very well. For example, in 2011 the Italian design house Missoni created a selection of products for Target. This collection included items ranging from clothing to crockery and even to bicycles. Buyer demand was so high that online shoppers crashed the store's website in fewer than two hours following the products' availability through Target online (Clifford, 2011).

A key driver for this mass-market demand for design is its relatively low cost. For example, in the retail apparel market, the cost to dry clean a garment can be equal to the price of the garment itself. As a result, many buyers wear a garment a few times and then simply discard it.

In lieu of dry cleaning the original garment, the buyer instead spends that money on a newer version that continues to satisfy the buyer's emotional needs. A recent study revealed that thirty-three percent of women stated they consider clothing to be "old" after less than three uses (Barnardo's, 2015). This approach to apparel consumption means the buyer's cycle of emotional connection and product is accelerated. Buyers purchase more and more, faster and faster, to meet their emotional needs that are satisfied by design.

3. Designers in Historical Context

In the historical context of design education, designers studied Bauhaus principles which gave students a practical aspect of design, that is, making and doing. Students studied the fundamentals of design before homing in on a specialization within design. Professors were design practitioners who shared their vocational experience with students by emphasizing design and perfection with the craft. As a result, designers often considered themselves to be trained traders, namely the creators of the "what" of design.

Historically, education in design emphasized the development of skills, such as the creation of patterns, the construction of garments, the design of fashion collections, and the understanding of diverse markets rather than emphasizing the development of skills required to create narratively rich, highly conceptual, process-oriented, and contextual designs. The academic curriculum focused on standard methods of creation, both in design and industry, enabling graduates to enter and serve the industry as it was, rather than preparing them for the industry of the future, which will require graduates to innovate, challenge, and upset the strict status quo of the design industries.

This approach to design education was suitable when the majority of consumer goods were manufactured in the country. Students had a smooth transition from the classrooms that taught them to "do" into the design rooms where they "did." However, in 2009, the percentage of American clothing manufactured in country decreased to only 5%, and the design aspects of our knowledge-based economy of the country took over from where the manufacturing fell (Pinkerson & Levin, 2009; Muratovski, 2010). If designers intend to flourish in the new emerging knowledge-based economy, then the historical role of the designer must move from being that of a vocational practitioner who dictates personal taste to that of a conceptualist or innovator who uses well-researched methodologies when approaching the process of design (Marshall, 2009). Education in design also needs to eliminate the narrow confines of its history by becoming involved with other creative and academic practices. The ability to make significant advances in thinking and innovation is often due to the variety of designers' backgrounds (Marshall, 2009).

4. The Evolution of Designers, Design Education, and Attendant Industries

The current design industries are failing and must be fixed. Our world is in dire need of solutions to the alarming issues we face, such as the depletion of the environment and unsustainable methods of production. For instance, "fast-fashion"—fashion that is constantly refreshing at an ever-increasing speed—has now reached unprecedented rates of production and unceasing consumption are destroying our environment (Leonard, 2010). Worldwide, consumption of material goods has skyrocketed; the market value of all goods and services purchased by households has grown to $44.5 trillion in 2014 from $1.7 trillion in 1970 (Index Mundi, n.p.). Globally, consumers of fashion now demand approximately four times the number of garments they did in 1980 and the same number purchased will be disposed of in the garbage each year (Leonard, 2010).

To satiate this ceaseless demand for design, the cycle from design conception to product distribution averages only twenty days for mass companies (Leonard, 2010). This rapid technology-enabled "sketch to floor" system now allows some retailers to release twenty-six fashion collections per year; this equates to one new release every two weeks (Leonard, 2010). To meet the demands for production, the volume of textiles manufactured is reaching unimagined heights; research from The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) shows 16.22 million tons of textiles were manufactured in 2014 alone, while buyers discard 10.46 million tons into a landfill that year (EPA, 2016). This results in a close one-to-one ratio of acquired garments to discarded garments. The short length of the useful life of a garment diminishes the emotional value that the consumer gives it. As a result, clothes—and virtually all other consumer goods—become "things" without meaning or emotional value.

Simultaneously, the design world is also being affected largely by globalization. For example, a designer could study in Belgium, design for a brand in Germany and produce garments for presentation in Milan, move to an iconic French house in Paris, and then join an American house that is shown in New York.

This is the history of Raf Simons, whose designs are available in retail venues worldwide. The industry has a growing global commitment to service diverse buyers, who possess their unique emotional needs. This means designers must understand the idiosyncrasies of these markets and the subcultures of these markets. In response, the curricula of design schools are increasingly more influenced by issues around technology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, ethics, and a growing sensitivity to diverse cultures and the problems facing our environment (Marshall, 2009).

By instilling design school curricula with these aptitudes, graduates of design education gain the knowledge they need to succeed in the ever-changing global industry while simultaneously being able to combine their design skills with skills in other fields in order to innovate their practice.

This combination of skills derived through seemingly disparate fields—and the ability to look beyond the confines of design discipline itself—is fundamental to innovation. For example, the LZR Racer swimsuit by Speedo was made possible due to the advanced software provided by the National Air and Space Administration of the United States (NASA) and collaborative design with Comme des Garçons. Less than a week after its launch, three swimmers in the LZR Elite suit broke three world records. Another example is the iPhone. All the technology incorporated into the iPhone design had existed for years before Steve Jobs conceived the idea of combining disparate functionalities—such as those from a phone or an MP3 player or a video viewer—into one device that has established the standard for the design of consumer electronic products.

Designers today can have significant impact on both local and global economies and the environment. To differentiate themselves, designers must embrace their new role for the future, namely that of "agents of change." Designers must identify new opportunities and make connections between them, much like what Speedo and Steve Jobs did. As agents of change, designers will be required to think both more critically and more holistically about design. No longer is it "what" that drives design education and the craft of design, but the "how" that inspires both contextual and conceptual thinking.

As agents of change, designers' shift in their design practice will be reinforced by changes in the vocational skills required for a specific design area. These agents of change will resultantly move towards a design area that uses qualities innate in the design process as a whole: the ability to communicate and collaborate, the capacity for empathy, the skill to be able to articulate design ideas to colleagues in other fields, and the skill to act strategically overall (Marshall, 2009). As leading designers and academics recognize, a narrow approach to design may sometimes be necessary; however, the increasing complexity of our world requires a greater expanse of knowledge in various fields, both in design and, more largely, in society. This wide swath of knowledge, which may be viewed as the proverbial tools one keeps in a toolbox, will equip designers with the various skills they need to confront and resolve the increasingly nuanced demands of design.

In practical terms, this means that design students should increasingly participate in cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies, which many students do today as a double major. As a result, leading design schools have responded in a number of ways. Many have shifted the emphasis of their curricula from "what" to "how" in their programs. Some have introduced new double degrees, while others are offering postgraduate studies that prioritize design thinking and designing alliances with other disciplines. This can ensure students have the knowledge they require. The success of a designer will depend on much more than technical skills; success will depend on a designer's abilities to understand both buyer and that buyer's needs—particularly the buyer's *emotional* needs. By doing so, designers not only will create an aesthetically pleasing design, but can also improve existing systems. They can use their products to convey emotional value and meaning to the buyer.

Although the role of the designer is being transformed into one that focuses on conceptual thinking, the demand for strong technical skills has not gone away. Design students should enroll in educational programs that strategically balance both design thinking and skill-building—particularly during their undergraduate studies. A proper balance between the "what" of design and the "how" of design in education equips students for success in the evolving industry. This approach emphasizes competence and versatility in designers' skills, increased flexibility in thinking, and the ability to convert social trends into design trends and tangible design outcomes. The designer will still need to possess knowledge of the technical skills needed to design, the "what", but they must increase their design skills by contextualizing and conceptualizing exactly what objects they are creating and for what buyer they are creating it, namely the "how."

The buyers' commitment to products is now driven by the need for emotional satisfaction. By adopting this new perspective, the designer can develop useful narratives and innovations: the "how" behind their designs.

5. The Future Synthesis: Design Education and the Social Sciences

As technology continues to rapidly evolve, societies need keep pace, thus impacting the evolving role of the designer. Designers must shift their focus onto the conceptualization of design so they may meet consumers' continuing and escalating demand for emotional fulfillment. This consumer demand is cycling faster and faster, which impacts the speeds at which good design can be produced.

In the next few years, designers will have to move past being creators of *aesthetically* pleasing products, while simultaneously adopting the role of strategic social scientists that develop *emotionally* compelling objects via design processes and narratives that most strongly appeal to their buyers' psychographic profiles. As a result, designers will have to gain the tools needed to understand the psychology and socioeconomic elements of their buyers so they can design products that fulfill their buyers' specific needs.

As the designers' role shifts, designers will have to be flexible in their thinking skills and their ability to conceptualize—and then produce—design. The ability to execute successfully in this two-fold role will be critical if designers' wish to gain employment and remain sustainable in their practice. In addition to this, designers must comprehend advanced research techniques in the social sciences as well as design. Designers must move their approach from creating objects whose design is determined by personal preferences of the designer and speculations—not factual insights—into buyers' demands. Instead, designers must have the skills to undertake deep research into who their buyers are to determine the emotional needs and wants of their buyer. To be successful, designers must ask the question: "What kind of designs should be made, for whom, and why?" The designer should address the evolving psychographic profile of their consumer and consistently ask: "What will be the emotional needs of my consumer, and how can unique design processes and creative narratives fulfill these needs?"

This improved approach to design will encourage a more interdisciplinary and holistic approach that designers use to create products—and the systems needed to develop those products—while undertaking research to determine what their buyers want and desire.

6. Conclusion

The world of design is rapidly evolving. This evolution is altering the role of the designer. Designers are now crafting their products in an over-saturated market in which most consumers' basic needs are already over-met. In turn, consumers are increasingly driven in their purchasing by their search for design that conveys meaning and emotional fulfillment. To differentiate themselves and develop a brand that has sustained customer loyalty, designers must move beyond creating mere product (the 'what' of design) into crafting design processes and highly complex narratives (the 'how' of design) that will generate new modes of perceived (and emotional) value.

Knowing where and how the consumers' future emotional needs are headed will be a required research skill for designers. Instead of asking 'what' they should design, going forward, designers will instead ask, "What narrative will resonate emotionally with my target audience? How can I apply this narrative to the design process and design itself?" Design education is reacting to this shift by developing curricula that cultivates and refines these skills for students, as well as by offering advanced graduate studies in design that emphasize the key components of research methods and advanced design thinking.

In many ways, design is service to consumers. When designers' products become influenced by the emotional needs of the target buyers, they will respond by producing more enduring design. Thus, the difference between analyzers and creators—or researchers and designers—will dissolve as all contingents engaged in the processes of defining, planning, designing, and producing products and systems will be considered "designers." It is this path that will enable designers and the design industries to continue to be not just successful but also sustainable.

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