Understanding Cultural Diversity in Design Consciousness

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to explore cultural diversity in design consciousness in light of the Popperian world-view. An additional aim of the study is to describe issues pertaining to cross-language design research. The paper focuses on the following question: What do Finnish and French users know about *designer products* and *designers*, *designing* and *design*, and *design brands* in the national and international context? The findings provide a number of insights into the essence of design consciousness and how design consciousness evolves in different social and cultural contexts. The study suggests that while design consciousness can be explored within a specific group, multicultural research – in particular across linguistic boundaries – is essential if we are to understand the phenomenon as a whole.

Keywords: Design, consciousness, cultural diversity, cross-language research

1. Introduction

Globalisation is a megatrend that we have all encountered in recent years. In the area of design, globalisation has been associated with multinational brands and international business yet little attention has been paid to the implications of cultural diversity for qualitative design research or to differences in user experiences across cultures and languages. Cultural influences seem to be strong determinants of informants' design consciousness, and the awareness of design values may vary considerably when we cross cultural and social boundaries within or between ethnic cultures and communities. The same holds true for the boundaries between languages and societies. In order to succeed on the multicultural level, global brands need to create their own 'language system' (Oosthuizen, 2004, 62)

Psychologists and neurologists have explained in various ways how inner models and consciousness are constructed. A model that is particularly suitable in the present context is Karl Popper´s ontology of three worlds. Popper distinguishes natural objects as part of world 1; subjective awareness as an aspect of world 2; and cultural products, events and social situations as manifestations of world 3 (Popper, 1977). Crucial to Popper's theory are what he terms the *emergent* features of organisms, that is, the features that produce innovation but which cannot be predicted on the basis of lower-level features or laws (Niiniluoto, 1990). The theoretical perspective chosen for the present study views the phenomenon of design consciousness as mainly associated with subjective experiences and senses, which relate to the qualitative research tradition in general and hermeneutics in particular. On this basis, consciousness may be seen as a subjective experience -- an object of world 2 -- and as a culturally shared understanding or awareness -- an object of world 3. This theoretical point of view can be supported from phenomenological philosophy, where the concept of consciousness is central.

2. Research Context and Method

The purpose of the article is to explore cultural diversity in design consciousness in light of the Popperian world-view. A second aim is to describe issues related to research design in cross-language research, where co-operation among the researchers, informants and interpreters is essential. The paper focuses on the following question: What do Finnish and French users know about *designer products* and *designers*, *designing* and *design*, and *design*

brands in the national and international context? In our theoretical framework, designer products and designers are seen as objects of Popper's world 1, designing and design as objects of world 2, and design brands as objects of world 3. The focal question is what kind of meanings high-quality designer products provide for the user and how design consciousness is manifested in this process. Table 1 illustrates the focus of the paper.

Table 1. Design consciousness in light of the Popperian world-view.

	World 1	*World 2*	*World 3*
World 1	Designer products and designer		
World 2		Designing and design	
World 3			Design brands

The present study is associated with two research projects. The first is the recently completed *Future Design and Discipline*, funded by the Academy of Finland through a Senior Research Fellow grant for the years 2004-2005 (grant no. 105775). The second is *Emergence of Luxury,* an ongoing project that will receive support from the Academy of Finland until the end of 2007 (grant no. 205608). The findings of these projects on the appreciation of high-quality designer products and the pleasure associated with products have been used as a basis for this study. The project research has also provided empirical material that allows us to better illustrate and examine cultural diversity in design consciousness.

2.1 Research Design: the Finnish Context

Data collection in the Finnish context was conducted through group interviews during fall 2004 and spring 2005. The interviewees consisted of men and women who regularly engage in golf, yachting and hunting. The final sample of informants consisted of 18 golfers, 15 sailors, and 16 hunters. The decision to interview individuals representing a number of different sport and leisure activities was an attempt to achieve findings that would be attributable to design consciousness and the pleasure associated with products generally rather than to the preferences of a single activity group.

We confine our analysis here to the golfers. In this focus group, the interviewees were women whose ages ranged from the category of 40 to 49 years to the category of over 65 years. Since the golfers were the first group to be interviewed, the data they provided have been examined in greater detail than that obtained from the other focus groups. The group provides enough material to investigate the questions of interest here and thus to gain insights into cultural diversity in design consciousness. The analysis of the data for the other groups is ongoing and will be reported in due course.

The interviews were conducted using the focus group method, which has been found to be fruitful in research designs concerned with user experience (Kuniavsky, 2003). Developed from social research methods, this technique is often used in product development research. According to Kuniavsky, at its best the focus group method can be expected to yield knowledge of what the participants think about a given subject, how they think about it, what they value most about it and why. The main purpose of focus group discussions is not for the participants to produce a single meaning but to share experiences from which multiple meanings can be extracted (Finn et al., 2000). The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the individuals' relationships to their sport as well as their opinions and preferences regarding designer products and high-standard services in both their sport and in other sectors of their personal lives. Several questions dealt with the participants' perceptions and experiences of luxury.

2.2 Research Design in the French Context

The data from France were collected in spring 2005. The participants were selected with the help of two local research assistants, one working mainly in the Paris area, the other in Normandy. Of the seventeen interviewees who participated in the study, ten were from the Paris area and seven from Normandy. Fourteen of them were women and three men, with ages ranging from the category of 20 to 39 years to the category of over 65 years. It should be noted that one person took part in the interviews twice in the role of hostess or acquaintance of the other participants. Only the latter of these two interviews has been included in the data here.

In the French context, the interviews were also semi-structured and focused on the individuals' relationship to luxury products and their experiences of luxury. Due to the use of research assistants, the research design employed in France differed from that used in Finland: the research conducted in Finland was carried out entirely in Finnish, whereas in France cross-language research was required.

In their article on the role of interpreters or translators in cross-language research settings, Temple and Edwards (2002) demonstrate the need to involve the interpreter as an active contributor in producing accounts of the research. The authors stress that the interpreter is pivotal to the final research, because 'the researchers, research participants and interpreters will all present constructions of their own identity borders during interactions.' (ibid.). They also show how the interpreter is not invisible in cross-language research; he or she can convey his or her emphatic understanding of the situation. The writers also refer to the literature, which suggests that there is no one correct translation but an 'array of possible word combinations that could be used to convey meaning.'(ibid.)

In our research procedure, the two research assistants took part in the interview sessions. Their work included producing the transcriptions required in both interpretation and translation; that is, they listened to the audiotaped interviews, transcribed them and then provided a written Finnish version. A sample of such a transcription is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Sample transcription.

Researcher	What does the word 'design' mean to you? (originally in Finnish)
Interpreter	Qu'est-ce que ça vous évoque le mot design?
Interviewee	Rien. Pour l'instant rien peut-être plus tard -
Interpreter	Nothing as yet. (originally in Finnish)
Translation	Nothing as yet. Maybe later it will. (originally in Finnish)

Authentic conversations and translations were used for the analysis and explications. Interpretation was necessary and helpful at the research location in order to ensure successful communication and to help the researcher to be an insider, not an outsider, in the research situations.

2.3 Data Explication

Our purpose is to organise the data in terms of the Popperian world-view and to explicate design consciousness, especially the consciousness of *designer products* and *designers*, *design* and *designing*, and *design brands* as depicted in Table 1. Here we prefer the term 'explication' to 'analysis', for while explication refers to analysis, it does not suggest splitting the data into parts.

The data collected in the Finnish and French contexts were coded using Atlas-Ti software by the first author, who focused on the three main thematic areas derived from the theoretical assumptions presented above. The five main codes used were: *consciousness of (design) brands*, *consciousness of designer products*, *consciousness of designers*, *consciousness of designing,* and *consciousness of design.* After the data from the two contexts had been organised, the researchers looked for similarities and differences between the groups studied. The idea was not apply a comparative research setting and analysis but rather to gain insights into and illustrate the phenomenon under the study. The initial explications and findings from the data are presented in the following sections.

3. Cultural Diversity in Design Consciousness and its Manifestations

3.1 Consciousness of Designer Products and Designers

The way in which the informants described their relationship to designer products brought very much to mind a love affair between two people. What is stunning here is the strength of that relationship. It is very passionate. '*C'est un coup de foudre en fait*', as one French informant put it. A Finnish female golfer described 'love at first sight' for a designer product:

> *An object walked into my life. When I saw it for the first time, I was told right away who the designer was, but that didn't make any difference. But when I saw it, I thought 'I've got to have it'. No doubt about it. I bought it right away. It's Sarpaneva's Barcelona.* (Female golfer)

The other Finnish woman interviewed was in love with the glass birds designed by the Finnish designer Oiva Toikka (see Figure 1). '*I love Oiva Toikka's birds and couldn't*

imagine buying any others', she said. Being in love with a product is a feeling which can be experienced in an artistic manner regardless of whether the product is new or old, or even from the Stone Age: ' --- *enfin moi je ressens une émotion que ce soit pour un objet je ne sais pas moi, qui daterait du néolithique comme une œuvre plus récente. C'est vraiment quelque chose qui me dit « tiens » ça existe.'*

Figure 1. The designer product by Oiva Toikka.

What, then, is the role of the designer in this 'love affair'? Consciousness of designer products and consciousness of designers are somehow related, but it is the product itself that comes first. In other words, the love triangle between the user, designer product and designer unfolds in a specific order of priority. As one Finnish interviewee commented:

> *I have never, ever, gone to a store to buy anything saying, 'I want to buy something designed by Aalto or Lindfors' or because I want to buy something designed by a certain person. That makes no difference to me whatsoever.* (Female golfer)

The Finnish informants at least were not prepared to pay more for a product because of who designed it*: 'I hear it has been designed by a particular designer and that I should be ready to pay more because of who designed it. Well, I won't.'* Yet, the fact that a product is a designer product – that it has a name behind it – is considered important, above all as a guarantee of quality. Here we see correspondences between the French and Finnish views: '-*je vais pas acheter parce que c'est le nom de quelqu'un.'* People buy products because they

like them, not because they are the work of a particular designer: '*Moi je n'acheterai que parce que j'aime mais pas parce que c'est tel ou tel...*' People first fall in love with a product and it is only then that they want to know who has designed it and why. The importance of the designer thus derives from the 'positive experience' that the product creates. On the other hand, one of the French informants emphasised the importance of the designer and, in particular, his or her signature:

> *Moi j'aime bien – j'aime bien quand il y a une signatur – j'aime bien quand ça correspond à une vision, à la vison de quelqu'un. Ca m'intéresse de suivre quelqu'un qui a une vision peut-être plus haut que moi et ça m'intéresse de faire partie de son univers.* (Parisian male)

Design is thus the vision, the insight of an individual designer. In France, everything that is considered modern design is associated with a particular artist, an individual.

3.2 Consciousness of Design and Designing

The individuality and uniqueness of a product and the vision of the designer behind it is the point of departure for examining the consciousness of design and designing.

> *…to think that someone has sat at a table with a sketchpad and thought about how a coat or jacket like this should be made and then decided on a design like this and made it so that it fits perfectly in a particular situation. I realise that this has been designed; someone has had an insight and known how to combine just the right cut and the right material and that this is the end result. Ok, I can see that this all adds to the price and makes it expensive, but this expensive! Wow! (Female golfer)*

This excerpt indicates that one of the hallmarks of design is the feeling the user gets about a product that 'this has been designed' or that someone has made refined sketches or outlines. Several of the French informants mentioned this as well: '*Et quelq'un qui fait des dessins, des traits.*' or '*Pour moi c'est un objet dessiné par un créateur.*'

The French and Finnish data reflect a certain appreciation for the design work and the commitment of the designer to his or her work. This can be seen in the French way of expressing the importance of design: '*oh c'est design*'. What is essential is that the designer has committed him- or herself to making a good product. One thing that appeals to the French user is a successful combination of form, colour and material, in other words, the ability to make something that is useful beautiful as well: '*rendre agréable ce qui est utile*'. The French data indicate specifically that design involves the search for and study of form: '*En fait ça serait d'après vraiment de la forme, de la recherche de la forme.*' Then again, it also involves modern and industrial production. In fact, one of the interviewees said that the term 'design' did not emerged until the rise of industrialisation:

> *Pour moi je le lie en plus plutôt bizarrement au contemporain alors que il y a du design dans des choses plus anciennes, c'est-à-dire que - mais je pense que je l'associe au contemporain parce que ça a été vraiment pensé et créé. Voilà.* (Female Parisienne)

In addition, a designer product can help the user discover the things he or she appreciates, as is seen in the following excerpt from an interview with a Finnish informant: '*And it started with me finding the things I value. I thought 'this is good, the material is high quality, the cut is good and someone has gone to a lot of trouble in designing this.'* Design can also improve and change the ways in which we use a product: '*Et peut-être améliorer et faire changer nos habitudes par rapport à – je ne sais pas - peut-être une nouvelle fourchette on ne va pas tenir sa main de la même manière.*' But among close friends and family design may have no meaning whatsoever: '*This not a designer product. The idea is that home is home and you can lie around on the couch with it on if you want. When something strikes you as good for the purpose, that's all there is to it.*' According to this mindset, design is not the least bit significant; the French expression that captures this notion is '*farfelu'*.

3.3 Consciousness of Design Brands

The question of the consciousness of design brands and branded products is quite challenging, because there exist several French design and luxury trademarks that are well known all over the world. Oosthuizen (2004) refers to McRae's publication *The World in 2020* when stating that the European global brands tend to dominate the specialist areas of chemicals, pharmaceuticals, fashion, food, wine, tourism, and luxury goods. The concepts of

Scandinavian Design and Finnish Design are established ones, but in Finland there are many design brands and designer names that are famous nationally but not as well known internationally as the real global luxury brands. This background should be borne in mind when comparing the responses of the Finnish and French informants.

Both groups of informants stressed that a brand is a guarantee of quality. One of the Finnish interviewees described this in the following way: '*Yes, the brand is important to me. The brands I'm interested in mean quality to me*'. A similar outlook could be detected in the responses of the French group as well: '*Une référence, la notoriété de la marque.*' In the first place, a brand stands for quality of materials and good raw materials - not snobbery, as it is quite often thought. The next quotation illustrates this: '*Je dirai que la marque ce n'est pas un snobisme, c'est une garantie de qualité suivie, de beaux matériaux, de belle matières premières.*'

Simply owning a designer product can bring pleasure. People dream of such products when they do not have them. When they do acquire one, they value it and take better care of it than of other products. This is reflected in the following excerpt from an interview with a Finnish informant:

> *Sure, if you buy a cheap shirt like this and then buy an M-shirt, then you know you're more likely to iron and put the M-shirt in your clothes closet than one like this. And there's the difference right there. You place more value on designer clothing. (Female golfer)*

Giving a designer product as a gift can bring the giver pleasure, as this male French informant describes it:

> *Je pense qu'on a tendance à se faire plaisir en s'offrant quelque chose qui va dure avec le temps – Moi j'offert une montre à mon amie et je suis permis de lui offrir une montre « Armani » je sais que c'est une montre --- jolie montre avec jolie bracelet, qui va durer avec le temps –. (Parisian male)*

However, among both the French and the Finnish informants we find people who are not interested in designer products or for whom such products have no significance at all: *Pour*

moi les produits de luxe le terme ne veut pas dire grande chose. Ca ne m'intéresse pas et je ne peux absolument pas sentir comme les marques ou autres.' However, people may follow certain brands: *'Yes, I sort of follow certain brands, I have to admit it.'* In particular, the brands that are followed are those that have gained a place in the user's everyday life through earlier purchases and that 'suit their taste':

> *It's not like the brand has just come out of nowhere with someone telling me about it and then me going there and buying it. The brands I use have earned their place and they've become brands I lean towards [when I shop]. (Female golfer)*

But does a brand have to be recognisable, and should it be visible on the product? Answers to this question can be found in the responses of both French and Finnish informants. First, the visibility of a brand can be a problem. As a Finnish interviewee said, *'[This is] a good bag, a really high-quality bag, but it has this huge M on it and it bothers me. But I'll use this till I find a more attractive one'*. Second, a brand can be overemphasised, even to the point of being tasteless: *'Je donne comme exemple, j'aimais bien les choses de D avant, les chaussures et des sacs. Mais maintenant c'est écrit partout D. C'est une vulgarité.'* One French interviewee found the recognisability of a brand valuable and desirable. A brand should not be recognised by a prominent logo but by the quality of the product and the high quality distinctive of the brand: *'Ce que je disais c'est vrai qu'on reconnaît la marque, mais ce n'est pas écrit en gros partout. La marque se distingue par la façon, c'est bien fait, ça doit être robuste.'*

4. Conclusions

The study has shown that design consciousness itself is a strong and significant factor in users' reception of designer products and designers, design and designing and design brands, and can be the focus of strong emotions. The Finnish and French users related particular feelings toward design, which reveal an awareness of designer products, designers, and the design process, i.e. designing and design brands.

The theoretical assumptions underlying the study helped to clarify the relations between the factors associated with different areas of design and the factors that determine design

consciousness. Considering cultural diversity in design consciousness with regard to designer products and designers, it could be said that both the Finnish and the French informants valued the focal issues quite similarly. For instance, designer products tended to overshadow their designers. If we compare the design consciousness of the groups where design and designing are concerned, both seem to admire designers not only for their work as such but for their particular attitude towards the work they do.

The French interviewees differed from their Finnish counterparts in the awareness they showed of global design brands; most French 'local' brands can be found on the global level and in a multicultural context. Although the French informants mentioned more global brand names, the core value that both cultural groups associated with the brands did not differ as much as this might suggest. Features of products such as quality seem to be universal values. However, when products are considered reliable, it is not because they display the name of the brand or company but because users are constantly exploring them emotionally (cp. Fisher, 2004, 30).

The article provides some insights into and an understanding of the essence of design consciousness and how design consciousness evolves in different social and cultural contexts. It suggests that while design consciousness can be explored within a specific interest group, multicultural design research - including research across language groupings - is essential if we are to understand the phenomenon of design consciousness as a whole.

Authors' contributions

The first author was involved in conceiving the study, developing the research design and carrying out the data analysis. PA, PF and PR were responsible for data collection in Finland. MU was responsible for data collection in France and to some extent in Finland. MU drafted the manuscript. PF, PR and PA all contributed critical revisions of the manuscript.

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