Thinking, design.
A construct of (and for) change

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Semantically speaking, design thinking is easily mis-used, resulting in potentially exclusive decisions, and unintentional steps backward. Contemporaneously, design philosophy has evolved; largely due to the need for flexibility in delivery of solutions for a rapidly moving market and clear methodology. A modern interpretation of the evoked discipline suggests a gradual cross-over of research and design (Holliday et al., 2014). This paradigm shift incorporates philosophical thinking and qualitative research standards of replicable methods, sampling, informed ethical conduct and robust evidence to inform the ‘art’. We propose that such a design construct is advantageous, not being instrumentally nor emotionally based.

The traditional design-process can result in complex coded opportunities. Additionally, the balance of power to decode opportunity appears to have changed with a democratisation of design (KEA, 2018). Democratic design whilst once associated with the analysis of Scandinavian workplaces, has transcended to the maker-marketplace, evident in the crowdsourcing of new products. Selection of designs and solutions is according to small scale investment preferences i.e. the maker produces the options that are most liked and consequently invested in, prior to reaching production variables and logistical expenses. It is showing that user interaction with designed prototypes can result in successful, market ready propositions.

At the development end of a proposition, an increasing compatibility between designer, user and researcher is resulting in, and from, participatory methods that gather deep insights. Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods conceptualised since the 1930’s (Sawin et al., 1946 onwards) led to operational methods as a catalyst for change. Rapid evolution of methods, and application in 1960’s social change has led to Co-creation, encouraging wider participation with fuzzy-ends problems (Sanders and Stappers, 2008) to seek mutually successful solutions. But participation is not the same as autonomy, Co-creation often requires facilitation, with interaction during a typically short-time frame. Consequently, unless responsibility to proceed with outcomes is established at the outset, propositions can remain conceptual (with lack of progression and disillusion for those involved). Co-creation can be a valuable tool with which to establish narrative, which can otherwise be difficult to express and is often poorly represented by static personas. A sensitive can be expressed in a multitude of ways but a common favourite involves constructing experiential prototypes, i.e. a room layout, poster or cardboard cut-out smartphones to illustrate interactions. The act of making something tangible introduces a sense of play, supported by the additional sense of relatedness (Marschall et al., 2014) being addressed with personal experience exemplars enable an individual to re-tell narrative and make it easier to understand the context which underpins the experience.

Stimulating such meaningful dialogue results from interaction with the widest community of experts in life, where sensitivity needs to be applied to natural hierarchy in order to establish balance. When working collaboratively, PAR methods present empowerment issues related to the hierarchical balance between ‘researching-experts’ and ‘using-experts’; the latter’s needs motivated by aspiration and emotion, rather than professional rigour of the former. Externally empathising with user-read presents difficulty, yet designers are frequently challenged to solve issues of user groups about whom they have no real insight. As a threshold capability (Woodcock, et al 2018) empathy is an intangible notion, distillled in experience and emotion. Consequently, empathy without experiencing context is problematic and may result in neglect during the process, toxicokinetic consultation or exclusion of vulnerable user groups, such as people who experience Intellectual Disability (ID). Intellectual disability is most prevalent in men (although not exclusively) whom experience more health conditions (Emerson and Baines, 2010) and that health inequalities (Emerson and Baines, 2018) may result from limited health information literacy. Working with such a marginalised user group can highlight the advantage that might be achieved, through experience of a collective user narrative focussed on the actual need, rather than introducing bias of external interpretation.

Figure 1 illustrates the iterative stages employed to develop men’s health information content for the My Health project (Bollard and Magee, 2018). In collaboration with members of an advocacy group, the collective defined the health information that desired or of concern. A subsequent iteration explored the level of detail required; how to effectively communicate health messages in a format and style that is more than just acceptable, but actually preferred and useful. The resulting simplicity and clarity of the design avoids the stigma of ID material that might otherwise have been created and renders this communication method suitable for wider male population. Thinking, design is focused by a lens of prospective and introspective user-led enlightenment.

This poster introduces an interplay of disciplines in Thinking Design from recent research involving Co-Creation and Design Empathy. The poster aims to show that inclusive, democratic design does not inhibit the artistry for which design is so famed but rather that embedded collaboration to address experiential bias of external interpretation.

Thinking, design can be represented by the emergence of a convergent empathic space, where core collaborators meet as equals to enrich the designed experience for all.

References

Elizabeth K. N. Sanders & Rick Pan: ‘Join Shoppers’ 2008 Co-creation and the new landscapes of design, Colliggion, 4.1 9-10, DOI: 10.1381/1718253978790368


Michael, S., and Blackman, C. 2019 Co-creation of Design


Figure 1. The iterative process for definition of language and design for mens health postcards. Co-created by men, for men. Development team led equally by men with Intellectual Disability, Designers and Researchers.