



Aalto University
School of Business

Design management as the hub of meaning in organizations

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1. Introduction

Meaning has been suggested as central to the design activity, within different streams of research.

Humans do not respond to the physical properties of artifacts – to their form, structure and function – but to their individual and cultural meanings (Krippendorff, 1998).

1. Introduction

Meaning is also particularly central to **brand management** and it has been widely researched how brands can become meaningful for consumers and act as sensegivers in the contemporary marketplaces.

The increased integration of the design profession with management is greatly due to the rise of **branding** in the contemporary societies

1. Introduction



1. Introduction

If design is related to meaning creation then managing design will necessarily imply addressing meaning.

1. Introduction | Purpose

To develop a theoretical frame from where it is possible to regard design management with an underlying focus on **meaning**.

1. Introduction | Approach

Our research is developed within the **social constructionist paradigm**.

The meaning of an artifact is **the understanding that is constructed** about that artifact. Meaning and understanding arise with individual cognition but are influenced by social, historical and cultural contexts.

1. Introduction | Approach

This study is essentially **conceptual**, built upon interrelated literature by integrating the results of different conceptual and empirical researches.

Our research is **exploratory** and we intend to start **laying the foundations for future research** on design management and meaning.

2. Development of the framework

I. MEANING

Design activities imply proposing meanings and sense through design. Meaning is central to design and branding practices.

Krippendorff (1989, 2006);

Cross (2001);

Karjalainen & Snelders (2009);

Jahnke (2011).

2. Development of the framework

I. MEANING

Jahnke (2011, 21) observed that the designers “problem solving was completely integrated into the process of interpretation – that is, problems were solved as needed in order for the intended **meaning of the artifact to be expressed**”.

2. Development of the framework

II. ARTIFACTS AS PROPOSALS

If one regards meaning as an unfolding construction, then designers cannot impose the meanings of artifacts to others. In this way, designers can only make proposals of intended meanings.

Cross (2001);
Krippendorff (2006);
Jahnke (2012).

2. Development of the framework

II. ARTIFACTS AS PROPOSALS



2. Development of the framework

III. IMMERSION IN SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS

Designers must be actively immersed in the evolution of society and culture since it is critical that they can be aware of how meanings and understandings are being constructed.

Cross (2001);

Bertola & Teixeira (2003);

Verganti (2008).

2. Development of the framework

III. IMMERSION IN SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS



2. Development of the framework

IV. PROCESS THINKING

A constructivist view on design has to embrace change as a principle of its practice.

The emergent process thinking theory focuses on the dynamic constitution of organizational phenomena.

Krippendorff (1992);

Langley & Tsoukas (2010).

2. Development of the framework

IV. PROCESS THINKING

Process organization studies are inspired in process metaphysics - “the world view that sees processes, rather than substances, as the basic forms of the universe” (Langley and Tsoukas 2010, 2).

2. Development of the framework

V. FRAMING

Design practice can be regarded as a set of framing and re-framing activities that go beyond a linear view of problem solving.

Schön (1993).

2. Development of the framework

V. FRAMING

Framing and reframing are subtle processes of analysis that allow designers to shift semantic perspectives in order to see things in a new way (Kolko 2010; Dorst 2011).

2. Development of the framework

I. MEANING

II. ARTIFACTS AS PROPOSALS

III. IMMERSION IN SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS

IV. PROCESS THINKING

V. FRAMING

Sensemaking theory in organizational studies (cf. Weick 1995).

2. Development of the framework

Sensemaking can be characterized as processes of construction of **meaning**, through which people generate what they interpret.

Making sense is imposing frames on continuous flows of experience. Meaning arises from the relations established between cues and elements of a frame.

2. Development of the framework

Sensegiving is a related concept and can be defined as the processes by which individuals attempt to influence the sensemaking of others.

2. Development of the framework

Sensemaking theory allows to:

- integrate interrelated ideas on design and meaning;
- explore **design management as an activity embedded in meaning.**

What the sensemaking theory can add to the **design management** field is an approach on meaning that purposively addresses organizations and management.

3. Discussion

Designers act as sensegivers through the artifacts they create.

Through products, environments, catalogues, packages and many other designed artifacts, designers are **proposing meaning and sense** to others.

3. Discussion

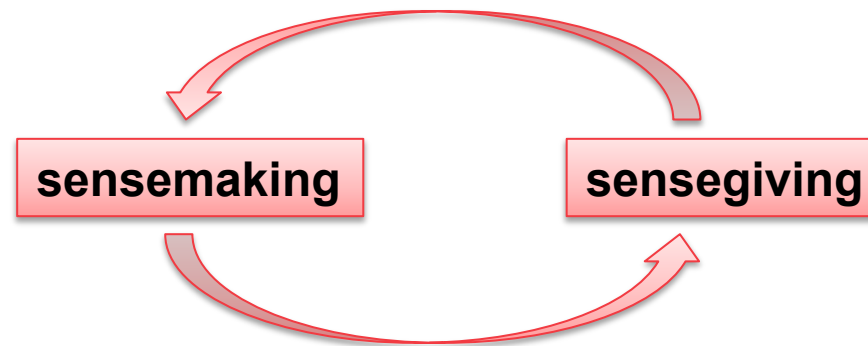
Design management, from a macro-level perspective, and regarded as embedded in meaning creation, is the **tentative management of sensemaking and sensegiving**.

3. Discussion



3. Discussion

There is a circular relation in the activities of **sensemaking** and **sensegiving**, within a design setting, because each activity is dependent on the other in a continuous recursive way.



3. Discussion

Design management activities embrace the **boundary area** where organizations **are inserted in the continuous flows of events that characterizes their environments.**



3. Discussion

The continuous unfolding processes of construction of **meaning of brands** are of utterly importance for the business success in the contemporary marketplaces.

It is critical to **manage the design processes in a way that potentiates an effective strategic alignment with the business activities.**

3. Discussion



4. Conclusions

A perspective on design management as the strategic development of sensemaking and sensegiving activities in a brand setting is valuable because **it positions meaning at the core of the management practices.**

4. Conclusions

A sensemaking lenses provides insights on the **unfolding nature of meaning** and **highlights the process nature** of managing design and brands.

4. Conclusions

Assuming that the **contemporary markets are characterized by permanent dynamics**, the unique capabilities of designers to **continuously make sense of how meaning is created** and **can be proposed** are increasingly becoming critical for organizations.

5. Future research

The sensemaking theory is full of potential to expand the development of new understandings about design management, namely:

- The social and processual nature of design management;
- The role of narratives and stories;
- The concepts of enactment and mindfulness.
- The prospective dimension of sensemaking and sensegiving activities;

Managing design implies the ability to **understand and influence the processes of making and giving sense within a strategic business orientation.**



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Managing design implies the ability to **understand and influence the processes of making and giving sense within a strategic business orientation.**

Thank you!

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