Model and Mobilise Imaginary for Innovative Experience Design

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Abstract: Emotions and imaginary are tightly interconnected to how people live experiences with products, services or brands. This workshop aimed at revealing the potential of imaginary to trigger innovative positions and ideas. We consider imaginary as a complex and plural layer, in-between reality and symbolism, composed of narratives, images and texts – that can be modelled and leveraged. We engaged participants into the early stages of a design process, driven by specific narratives. They were asked to choose a brand and to create an imaginary card, combining four emotional attributes and an artwork chosen from 84 Dixit cards with a rich narrative potential. Once anonymized, the imaginary cards were used to gather new narratives from other participants of the group. The goal was to find inspiring and exploitable matter for designers to build innovative visions for the specific brands based on emotional and imaginary dimensions. This workshop was an opportunity to challenge our process and tools among a multicultural designers’ audience.

Keywords: Experience design, imaginary, narration, analogy, brand identity

1. Conceptual frame

1.1 Imaginary

For contemporary pragmatist philosophers, rational examination operations include valuations that are based on affects and emotions, which are indiscriminately in our bodies and in our environment (Dewey, 2005; Hennion 2007). They combine to form what we call the “imaginary layer”, from the French “imaginaire” – to be distinguished from imagination. Piled up in-between the layers of reality and symbolism, imaginary is tacit narrative content which operates over very long periods at large societal scales, though intensified and accelerated in innovation (Balandier, 1996; Musso, 2005). It is also intrinsically ambivalent, involving tension between polarities. Imaginary is collective, but it allows individual variations due to our intimate layers of interpretation (Korzybski, 2007). Imaginary is inherited, but it may also be used to build upon.

Imaginary is embedded into every object, device or piece of information we interact with. As we perceive and manipulate an artefact, our own affects and emotions are combined with embedded values, symbols and biases – be they deliberately assumed or unconsciously conveyed by their...
designers (Heschong, 1979). In this line, our workshop process aims at revealing some imaginary attached to brands and to use it as a raw material in the design process.

1.2 Brand identity
Brands are the first imaginary crystallizers of our societies. They are mental representations composed of objectifiable elements (products, price, placement, promotion as per the four Ps of marketing) and subjective sensations (narration, history, symbols, values...). Tangible items, relationships and reflected image combine to create brand identity. Though, since perception is an active process, intention and reception may differ, resulting in various connection patterns between brands and their audience (Lewi, 2005; Borja de Mozota, 2006).

For design researchers exploring imaginary, brands are hence a rich reservoir. Though, our workshop process extensively applies to non-corporate entities such as cities, countries, public figures... For instance, one of the Design for Next participants chose to work on the European Union.

1.3 Embodied experience
Since the advent of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), successful designs must offer more than products or services, caring for holistic experiential dimensions. As living experiences appears more memorable and transformative for people than consuming goods (Van Boven, 2005), artefacts need to be designed not as ends in themselves but as conditions for and supports to experience.

For designers, this involves taking into account more than the traditional functional, sensorial and emotional triptych, to go beyond a satisfying user experience (Norman, 1995). Unique and transformative experiences are shaped over time, combining social relations, purposes, motivations and meanings (Dewey, 2005; Schaeffer, 2015). As they are highly personal, the narrative format appears relevant to report about human experiences.

1.4 Purpose of the workshop
As a research track, we believe in the importance of producing dedicated tools to encourage the sharing of views and ideas between designers and other actors of the design process. By using the imaginary dimension, we intend to raise awareness about the specific cognitive representations brought into the design by each person taking part.

This workshop particularly addresses the early key stage of problematizing a design issue. We take the stance that exploring imaginary may trigger inspiring narratives, on which designers can build innovative visions. Combined with an empathetic view extended to all the dimensions of experience, this material shall enrich the relevance of design proposals, based on a subtle understanding of life situations. The workshop process aims at accompanying the gradual drift from a focused brand point of view to a representation of the imaginary and emotional dimensions of experience.

The imaginary card is a tool we designed to help express and leverage the imaginary attributes attached to a brand, articulating collective and individual work. It had first been used in a workshop gathering a dozen innovation professionals from French companies (October 2016), each working on his/her own brand. EAD Design for Next was an opportunity to address a designers audience and assess the adequacy of the tool regarding their professional skills.
2. Workshop process

2.1 Questioning brand imaginary

First, each participant secretly chooses a brand to work on. As they came from nine different countries worldwide, we focused on worldwide known brands/entities – though it would also be interesting to address locally known entities from a multicultural perspective.

Everyone fills in an imaginary card with:

- The name of the brand written inside.
- Four associated attributes (values, emotions...), be they positive and/or negative, observed and/or claimed.
- An artwork that most closely fits their own image of the brand’s identity. Graphics were taken from the game Dixit, chosen for their high appeal to imagination.

The cards are then sealed, brand hidden at the centre, and grouped on the table.

2.2 Sharing narratives

During twenty minutes, the participants browse all the cards, taking some time to immerse themselves into the universes that the attributes and artwork elicit. When a card inspires them, they...
write down stories in a few words on the backside. We insist on the ‘materiality’ of narratives: they should not be general but embody a singular experience – recalled or fictional, be they myths, memories, creative works or life rituals.

This phase ends up when each card gathered several stories.

2.3 Identifying design opportunities

Each participant recovers his/her initial card and discovers the narratives offered by the group. The connexions between the brand and the suggestions might sometimes appear out of the box, but provided well-defined attributes, the results are never erratic. They simply demonstrate different representations carried by each person depending on her background, culture and experience. One or a cluster of narratives may now be used as inspiring material for innovative design.

This last consists of individual ideation phase. Participants imagine a service, product, device, place or event intending to bring new value to the brand in terms of experience design, new territories or business extension.

Finally, the ideas are shared with the group and the brands unveiled. Evaluation is twofold:

- Does the concept fit the brand’s collective imaginary? Does it appear legitimate?
- Does it draw on experiential and emotional dimensions to bring new value proposition?
3. Discussion of the results

3.1 Triggering inspiring narratives through analogical thinking

Associating emotional attributes and an artwork to a brand allowed participants to focus on individual representations. Dixit graphics precisely allow perceptual variations. Incidentally, the author of this game is a child psychiatrist interested in polysemy and the evocative power of language. Created by several artists, the artworks corpus shows high symbolic value, fusing surrealism and onirism. In line with our purpose, it fully expresses the ambivalent nature of imaginary.

From our experience, we noticed that using existing artworks instead of creating their own immersed the participants further into the exercise and encouraged divergent thinking. The point is not to guess which brand is hidden at the centre but to trigger analogies, thus stimulating the emergence of new ideas.

The process draws on analogical thinking – a mechanism of searching and detecting resemblances, which allows us at the same time to make sense of situations and to enrich our repertoire (Hofstadter & Sander, 2013). We argue that this mechanism is at the basis of designers’ thinking. “Original and interesting ideas rise from a well-trained subconscious” (Wynants & Cornelis, 2005). As the French mathematician Henri Poincaré used to say, difficulties are sometimes overcome through hard work, and sometimes by a sudden and unexpected illumination “during a walk along a cliff”. Poincaré’s inspiration was obviously not in the cliff, but in his brain experiencing emotions, recalling analogous situations... Even in hard sciences, ideas come from a subtle balance between methodical work and inexplicable illumination (Villani, 2012).

Cognitive studies of the ‘designerly way of thinking’ (Archer, 1979) has been a recurring topic in the literature (in particular Schön, 1983/1992; Simon, 1973; Cross, 1984). It appears that designers are able to tacitly make “qualitative judgments” without being necessarily able to explicit the criteria on which they base them (Schön, 1992). Designers mobilize their subjectivity to identify and frame relevant issues, relying on insights from the observation phase that are individual and qualitative rather than quantitative. The criteria for selecting such inspiring elements are mainly personal and involve “[the designer’s] creativity, way of approaching the world’s problems, [his/her] own history, learning style and view of the world” (Lawson & Dorst, 2009). Each of them express “what [their] individuality records, like a seismograph, from human phenomenon” (Mendini, 1984).

Based on instants of subjectivity and intuitive shortcuts, design concepts may be qualified as “generative metaphors” (Schön, 1983). Triggering imaginary and divergent thinking, our process aimed at making the ground for “creative emergence” (Cariani, 2012).

3.2 From brand identity to experiential focus

When confronted to the unknown, strong analogical links to past experiences are recalled. Designers are used to exploiting this mechanism to enhance affordance of use, particularly in technological artefacts (we tidy computer ‘files’ in ‘folders’ on our ‘desktop’...). What we intended to explore in this workshop goes beyond functionality and usability.

We argue that picturing embodied stories may enhance designers’ deep and empathetic understanding of life situations, in a holistic view. More important, narratives show how human experience escapes any initial prefiguration. The workshop process allowed participants to constantly assess their ideas in the light of real life situations, much more nuanced than theoretical user-centric projection. Every participant felt engaged, none suffered from writer’s white page.

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syndrome. In this line, we can conclude the articulation of individual and collective phases was relevant, as well as the narrative approach, to unlock creative thinking.

Though, we had some reservations about a few stories having a general scope, making it difficult for the recipient to step into a precise situation. This might be due to natural shyness, and emotional engagement could maybe be improved with a short icebreaker activity before entering the exercise.

3.3 Design concepts

Due to time reasons, we could only allocate twenty minutes to the ideation phase, letting the participants handle it freely. The purpose of focusing on the early ideation phase was to observe the flushing out of collective imaginary in favour of embodied stories. With unexpected situations as a starting point, designers need to step aside their predilections and biases to embrace the complexity of human experience.

During the restitution, we measured that, though all the starting points were promising, some final propositions remained in the realm of ‘design as usual’. In these cases, the drift from a focused brand point of view to a representation of the imaginary and emotional dimensions of experience did not succeed. Yet, some designers came up with radically innovative ideas, relevantly challenging brands’ business models while showing deep concern for human affects, needs and aspirations. In these cases, we tend to conclude the imaginary filter provided out of the box inspiration, encouraging participants to develop and pursue radical visions – able to lead to transformative designs.

Since we did not know the participants before the workshop, it would be hazardous to discriminate which part of the results depends on the workshop process and which part on the designers’ existing skills. In any cases, further experiments should better accompany the ideation phase to postpone the return to brand territory in favour of the experiential focus. In this line, a stronger accent should also be put on the value of embodied narratives to inspire design propositions. For instance, an extended workshop format would allow to model experiences in all their dimensions including time, in order to reveal precise insights.

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