

Assessing the performance of styling activities: An interview study with industry professionals in style-sensitive companies



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In this paper, we study the design activity of styling and its performance assessment within style-sensitive manufacturing companies. Based on interviews with industry professionals at such companies, we analyze how the contribution of styling and expressive products is perceived and assessed. We delineate how these companies stimulate sales and profits, enhance their brand visibility and promote the wider acknowledgment of their capabilities in the market through styling. We also describe how press coverage and design awards function as performance measures for styling activities alongside product sales. In addition, we describe how the perceived contribution of styling activities and its assessment are codependent on how the companies and their designers operate and make decisions on the expressiveness of products.

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Keywords: design performance, new product development, styling

‘It will never be possible to measure exactly the worth of design in financial terms, but that is true of many resources on which managers draw. However, design has always suffered from too much subjectivity; from a view of it as a ‘soft’ activity linked to the creative and the unqualified. Anything we can do to point out where to look in order to attempt some measurement will help to ensure that managers use design more effectively, above all treat it seriously.’ Peter Gorb (1990, p. 2)

A reoccurring theme in literature on design is the challenges involved in assessing the performance of design activities. On the one hand, it is a basic concern for designers to articulate the contribution of their work to companies, and to the professionals they work with during product development (Bangle, 2001; Dreyfuss, 1950; Wallace, 2001). Being explicit about the commercial interest of design work is key in propagating ideas throughout a company (Ravasi & Lojaco, 2005) and/or bringing ideas to market (Roy, 1993). On the other hand, the difficulty of pinpointing the contribution of design is widely recognized as a concern for designers in selling their services and for companies

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www.elsevier.com/locate/destud
0142-694X *Design Studies* 42 (2016) 33–55
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2015.10.001>
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in profiting from design (Bruce, Cooper, & Vazquez, 1999; Candi & Gemser, 2010; Hertenstein & Platt, 1997; Valencia, Person, & Snelders, 2013).

In this paper, we focus on the performance assessment of product styling activities. Based on a review of the literature and focused interviews with industry professionals in style-sensitive manufacturing companies in Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands, we study how designers' work in styling products is assessed and how styling activities are seen to contribute to product and company performance. We focus on styling as a defining and central capability associated with the work of designers. At the same time, styling activities have a troubled history in design, due to their lack of a rational foundation. Concerns about subjectivity are visible in discussions on design and styling (Kotler & Rath, 1984; Lorenz, 1990), and designers themselves have been compelled to distance themselves from the concept of styling and from holding a position as stylists (see e.g. Sparke, 1986). Styling was also long treated as being of secondary interest for studies on design in new product development and, accordingly, only addressed implicitly in studies on industrial design. For example, in a review of the literature on new product development decisions, Krishnan and Ulrich (2001, p. 14) concluded 'that there is essentially no academic research on industrial design, the activity largely concerned with the form and style of products' (p. 14). This conclusion remains relevant today, as can be shown by the recent calls for more research on styling and the contribution and significance of the work of designers more generally (Creusen, 2011; Person, Snelders, & Schoormans, 2012; Tonkinwise, 2011).

We recognize that new products are created through the joint efforts of professionals from many fields. However, in comparing the contribution of designers with those of other professionals, industrial designers have long been recognized as the only professionals with the necessary training and the final responsibility for shaping the look and feel of products (see e.g. Doren, 1954; GM, 1955; Lippincott, 1947). Reports from practice show that styling and the capacity of designers to shape the look and feel of products remains an important reason for contracting designers (see e.g. Bohemia, 2002; Valencia et al., 2013). The Danish Design Centre positions styling as the most fundamental type of professional design involvement in its renowned classification scheme (Designtrappen) for design utilization (Nielsen, 2008). Recent literature on design also stresses the strategic relevance of styling for companies (Person, Schoormans, Snelders, & Karjalainen, 2008; Person, Snelders, Karjalainen, & Schoormans, 2007; Tonkinwise, 2011; Wang, 1995).

Following a renewed interest in the capacity of designers as stylists (Person et al., 2012), we adopt the view that styling is part of a broader design activity of creative problem solving in new product development, encompassing a variety of technical, functional and symbolic problems (Lawson, 2006;

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