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Bling?

Roles and Contradictions in Design

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Licentiate Thesis 2013

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In memory of HC Ericson,
mentor and friend.

ABSTRACT

In their professional practice, designers serve different roles as experts in user behaviour, taste experts and conveyors of symbolic meaning. Combining these roles, however, is not necessarily unproblematic, especially so in contexts that are incongruent with the personal preferences of the designer. In seeking to understand this challenge in designers' professional practice, it is relevant to highlight the contradictions surrounding these roles. Thus, the main focus of this project has been to identify the potential challenges designers face in dealing with expressions which are strongly value-laden in relation to the norms and values of the designers themselves.

A seminar for design researchers and a workshop for design students were held on a theme characterized by strong and contrasting product expressions, "Blinging up Eco", which they were to discuss and explore as a source of inspiration. Insights from these interventions indicated that designers found the Bling theme provoking – at least they did so initially.

Making explicit underlying norms and values and understanding the mechanism behind them can be quite challenging. This thesis suggests that contradictions and breaches can be utilized in design practice in order to increase awareness regarding personal prejudices. Transforming prejudices into conscious breaches through informed provocation can thus serve as an entry point for a creative design practice, as powerful and useful as any other source of inspiration for designers in their work.

KEYWORDS

Designers' roles, Bling, breach, contradictions, cultural norms and values, informed provocation.

PREFACE

During my adolescence, my family moved back and forth between Sweden and Greece a number of times. The frequently recurring changes in environment were adventurous and also quite challenging, which to some extent has shaped the person I am today. As I at times was confined to communicating only what I was able to put into words and gestures rather than all that which I would have liked to communicate, I became a shy observer, a voyeur trying to understand new contexts. During these confusing periods, the natural sciences became the one constant in my life; apart from my family, of course. I found the logic that characterizes the field very reassuring and, for a long time, I believed myself to have an aptitude for the natural sciences. When it came to the decision of what to study, however, I was compelled by a growing desire to explore social interactions to challenge myself, thus leaving the observer's cloak behind. The connecting thought behind my studies was communication and they came to include subjects such as the social sciences, art history, cultural studies, etc.

For the last decade, I have been working with education in design and with designers. On the one hand, thanks to wonderful colleagues and the fact that design largely focuses on communication, the division of Industrial Design at Lund University felt like home right from the start. On the other hand, as the only non-designer among designers, I found myself a parvenu once more. The journey I have undertaken in this project is by no means a straight forward process. Eventually, I came to perceive the project and the process as an intertwined endeavour to make sense of and take part in an unfamiliar context.

However challenging it was to enter unexplored territory or even zones of discomfort at first, it has in my experience always been very rewarding in the end. It has helped me cultivate communication skills, become more creative, flexible and tolerant, and also allowed me to comprehend things from different perspectives. Better yet, it has allowed me to understand and accept myself and others on a deeper level. Hopefully, the reflections brought forward by this project will encourage and inspire others to take on any opportunities to challenge given frames of thinking and acting that present themselves. Designers in particular, may find it fruitful to challenge mainstream ideas by integrating thought provoking strategies into their work processes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the help and support of a number of people and I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude.

My deepest gratitude and appreciation goes to my supervisors, who have guided me along the way during the various phases of my research studies. First and foremost, I would like to thank Viktor Hiort af Ornäs, PhD, for helping me structure and converge the research project in a coherent way. You are always thorough, constructive and insightful and I am grateful for your tricky questions and for your firm, yet kind and patient way of helping me focus. I look forward to the continuation of our work together. Professor Lisbeth Svengren Holm and Associate Professor Anders Warell, thank you for countless inspiring theoretical and methodological discussions and for invaluable help and constructive criticism, especially during the planning and realization of the empirical studies. Last but not least, I would like to thank Professor Claus-Christian Eckhardt, for giving me the opportunity to make this journey and for helping me shape the topic of this project. The support you have shown me through the ups and downs of this process has encouraged me to challenge my own comfort zones.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Associate Professor Britt Östlund and Associate Professor Sofia Ulver for their constructive feedback on the earlier versions of the thesis. Your insightful comments have helped refine the text considerably.

Furthermore, I would like to acknowledge the two research schools I have been enrolled in. First of all, I would like to mention the very first network of design researchers and research students I encountered as a fresh PhD candidate, the Nordcode network (the Nordic Network for Research on Communicative Product Design), as it has been an invaluable source of inspiration to me. Thank you for the open and supportive climate that has come to be synonymous with Nordcode. I would also like to express my gratitude to Designfakulteten (the Swedish Faculty for Design Research and Research Education) for funding and arranging top-notch doctoral seminars and courses and for providing an extensive research network.

Moreover, my deepest appreciation goes to my co-authors: to Shahrman Bin Zainal Abidin, PhD and Damien Motte, PhD for a great co-operation and for helping me broaden my research perspective and, especially, to Elin Olander, PhD for being my Bling partner. Although we saw some stressful times together, it was great working with you.

I am both happy and grateful for all the inspiring meetings I have had over the years with colleagues, both present and former, at the Division of Industrial Design/Department of

Design Sciences at Lund University. As ever, our discussions are as thought-provoking as they are fun.

I would like to acknowledge Anna Persson, industrial designer and assistant lecturer at the division of Industrial Design for doing an excellent work transforming the manuscript into a book and composing the layout with great sensitivity and clarity. My appreciation also goes to language editor Magnus Persson at Enodios.se. Thank you for your critical eyes, eloquent style and constructive suggestions in proofreading and improving the language of this thesis.

It was a great pleasure to work with the entire group of the trend course during the autumn semester of 2009. Thank you for sharing your personal thoughts and ideas openly and honestly and for joining this exploration of expanding horizons, you were all great! Special thanks to Florian Roualin, Ibis Lucero Urrutia, Manuel Navarro Payá, Thea Basthus Nilsen and Tuva Sverdstad Eikås for providing material from their projects and for giving me permission to publish it.

Finally, I would like to give my love and warmest appreciation to my family and friends and especially to Jakob and Aris, for the love, joy and support you give me every day. Thank you for reminding me of the important things in life.

Lund, April 12th 2013.

PUBLICATIONS

Appended publications

Paper A

Authors: Christoforidou, D. and Olander, E.

Year: 2008

Title: *Bling and How it's Message Captures Our Interest*

Conference/ Publication: Proceedings of 6th Design and Emotion conference, Dare to Desire, 6-9 October 2008, School of Design, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Editors: Desmet, P. MA., Tzetanova, S. A., Hekkert, P. PM., & Justice, L. Hong Kong, China.

Contribution: Christoforidou and Olander had equal shared responsibility in planning, data collection, analysis and writing.

Paper B

Authors: Christoforidou, D. and Olander, E.

Year: 2009

Title: *To Bling or not to Bling? Cultural transformations of consumer products.*

Conference/ Publication: Nordic Design Research Conference (Nordes), Engaging Artifacts. Oslo: The Oslo School of Architecture and Design.

Contribution: Christoforidou and Olander had equal shared responsibility in planning, data collection, analysis and writing.

Paper C

Authors: Olander E., Christoforidou D. and Warell A.

Year: 2012

Title: *The love and hate of Bling products: An industrial design student case.*

Conference/ Publication: 8th International Design and Emotion Conference. London: Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design.

Contribution: Christoforidou and Olander had equal shared responsibility in planning and data collection. Warell had the main responsibility for the analysis and Olander the main responsibility for the writing.

Paper D

Authors: Christoforidou D., Olander E., Warell A. and Svengren Holm L.

Year: 2012

Title: *Good taste vs. Good design: A tug of war in the light of Bling.*

Conference/ Publication: The Design Journal, Volume 15 (2), pp. 185-202.

Contribution: Christoforidou and Olander had equal main responsibility in planning and data collection and main responsibility for the analysis and the writing. Warell and Svengren Holm helped outline the study, contributed in the analysis and discussion chapters and reviewed the paper draft.

Additional publications

Authors: Zainal Abidin S, Christoforidou D. and Liem A.

Year: 2009

Title: *Thinking and re-thinking verbal protocol analysis in design research.*

Conference: International Conference On Engineering Design, (ICED). U.S.A., CA: Stanford University.

Authors: Christoforidou D. and Motte D.

Year: 2009

Title: *Responses to product features: An affective neuroscience perspective.*

Conference: International Conference on Research into Design (ICoRD). Bangalore, India: National Science Seminar Complex, Indian Institute of Science.

Authors: Christoforidou, D. and Olander E.

Year: 2010

Title: *From “Absolutely not!” to “Why not?”: Expanding Designers Horizons through Bling.*

Conference: Cumulus Conference. Belgium, Genk: Katholieke Hogeschool Limburg, Media & Design Academie.

Authors: Warell, A., Christoforidou D. and Lidgard C.

Year: 2010

Title: *Informed provocation: Industrial design research at Lund University.*

Publication: DIID, Disegno Industriale Industrial Design, no. 42-43, pp. 110-115.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Abstract</i>	v
<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Publications</i>	x
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 People and possessions	2
1.2 Design for experiences	4
1.3 Products as signs	7
1.4 Designers' roles	9
1.5 Eco vs. Bling	11
1.6 Aim and research questions	12
2 APPROACH	15
2.1 Theoretical starting points	15
2.2 Methodological starting points	17
3 THE STUDIES	19
3.1 Affective neuroscience	20
3.2 Ecological values and consumption	20
3.3 Design meets Bling: an unintentional clash	21
3.4 Understanding Bling: definitions and use in the media	22
3.5 Exploring Bling: an intentional clash	26
4 THE APPENDED PAPERS	29
4.1 Paper A: Bling and how its message captures our interest	29
4.2 Paper B: To Bling or not to Bling?	29
4.3 Paper C: The love and hate of Bling products	30
4.4 Paper D: Good taste vs. Good design	31
5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	33
5.1 Contrasting Eco and Bling	33
5.2 Contradictions and designers' roles	35
5.3 Reflections on methodology and trustworthiness	37
6 FINAL REFLECTIONS	41
6.1 Implications and future research	41
6.2 Concluding remarks	43
7 REFERENCES	45
<i>Appendix</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Paper A</i>	<i>53</i>
<i>Paper B</i>	<i>63</i>
<i>Paper C</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>Paper D</i>	<i>83</i>

1 INTRODUCTION

In many respects, we are what we have.* The capacity to use and create things has been crucial for the survival and development of our species. Artefacts are significant to people for a number of reasons, e.g. we build and communicate our identity through them and they are important carriers of meaning in a particular social context. At the same time, however, our over-consuming lifestyle poses a threat to the planet and a sustainable future. The Brundtland Commission's report, "Our Common Future" (1987), provided the modern and frequently quoted definition of sustainable development:

"... development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Although over-consumption is one of the key characteristics of our lifestyle today, our happiness is not enhanced by increased consumption (e.g. Durning 1991, 1993; Belk et al., 2003). On the contrary, what seems to provide real meaning in life is the ability to develop and strengthen sustainable relationships with people and things (e.g. Shankar and Fitchett, 2002). It is therefore essential to come to terms with understanding the positive qualities of products that could facilitate such relations.

Understanding peoples' norms and values in relation to product expressions has been the motivation behind this project. Initially, the project set out to explore a product category of a specific material expression which is relevant due to the complex challenges of sustainable consumption, i.e. eco-products. The outset of exploring the "eco-ness" of identity and values in relation to eco-products (see Figure 1), turned out to be quite one-dimensional. By way of serendipity, the project came to concern another distinctive product category with a totally different material expression: Bling. As it turned out, peoples' norms and values were brought to light louder and clearer by this diametrically opposed product category. Bling-products provided a more nuanced empirical material and a useful contrast to the set of eco-values. This thesis endeavours to shed light on a couple of incidents of common frustration and blockage caused by proposing the "wrong" kind of trend as a source of inspiration in a design context.

Figure 1. Four different packaging examples of Basmati rice: two well-known brands to the left and two organic fair trade brands, made of recycled cardboard and paper with restrained form language and colour range, to the right.**



* There are however other opinions on the subject as well. Aristotle for instance, argues that we are what we repeatedly do (Durant, 2006).

** Collage by the author made of pictures available at: http://norrkoping.matvaran.se/i_vara.asp?icalID=7318693148712
http://www.mysupermarket.co.uk/tesco-price-comparison/Rice_Pulses_And_Grain/Uncle_Bens_Basmati_Rice_500g.html
http://www.claro.ch/shop/USER_ARTIKEL_HANDLING_AUFRUF.php?javascript_enabled=true&lang=de&darstellen=1&Kategorie_ID=42&Ziel_ID=2267&anzeigen_ab=0&PEPPERSESS=6uqr94snn93ovikrko26cju35
[http://www.macrobioticshop.co.uk/sites/default/files/product-images/Basmati%20Rice%20\(Brown\)%20-%20FairTrade.jpg](http://www.macrobioticshop.co.uk/sites/default/files/product-images/Basmati%20Rice%20(Brown)%20-%20FairTrade.jpg).
 Accessed 28th December 2012.

The coming section will elaborate on the focal areas of the research conducted and explain how these areas are intertwined.

1.1 People and possessions

“What is it about objects that induce us to include them in our emotional life? I wonder, too, about the great comfort we seem to derive from the possession of certain objects.” (Busch, 2005).

The link between material possessions and the construction and communication of identity in a cultural context is a recurring topic that is of great interest to many researchers.

The importance of material possessions in relation to our feelings and to how we extract meaning from our domestic environment were central topics for Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's and Eugene Rochberg-Halton's work (1981). The main finding presented in their study “The Meaning of Things - Domestic Symbols and the Self”, was that one of the major reasons why people value things is that things provide information about their owners and their owners' relationships to others (ibid, p. 239). Furthermore, the authors concluded that the only hope of addressing the crisis of environmental and material exploitation is offered by the human capacity to create and redirect meaning (ibid).

People have always strived to achieve high social status and gain prestige among their peers. Referring to consumption undertaken in order to impress others with one's high social status or wealth, Veblen (2001) coined the term “conspicuous consumption” over a century ago. Bourdieu (1977, 1984) argued that in order to achieve a high position in various cultural fields, a person has to rely on several kinds of capital, of which economic capital is only one kind. People may differentiate their status from others and maintain existing hierarchies in a given cultural field through various types of symbolic capital, which are relevant to the specific context: economic, social and/or cultural capital, which can be manifested through possessions, e.g. expensive watches. The obtained forms of capital are internalized in people's experiences and memories and forms the so-called habitus. Broady (1991, p. 225) describes habitus as a “system of dispositions that allow people to act, think and orient themselves in the social world.” The system of dispositions, i.e. inclinations regarding perceptions, thoughts and actions, refers to the result of an organized action aimed at structuring and is, at the same time, an attitude. The basic idea of this construction is a system of durable dispositions, which are both structured and, at the same time, structuring in practice (Bourdieu 1977, p. 214).*

The concept of the “extended self”, i.e. that we are what we own and control, was introduced by consumer researcher Russell Belk (1988, 2003). According to Belk (1988), possessions are very important components of our sense of self because they reflect our identity.

* Bourdieu and his theories are elaborated further in chapter 5, Discussion and Conclusion.

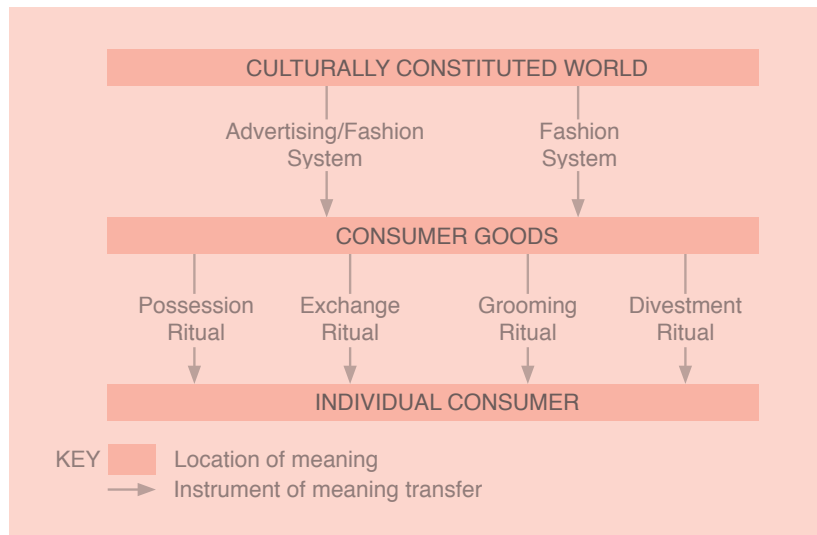
Furthermore, these possessions contribute to that identity. The fact that our possessions are important to us is supported by observing how our sense of self is diminished when our possessions are lost or stolen. Possessions may only be understood in light of the meaning the owner ascribes to them.

The importance of material possessions in the social construction of the self was also stressed by social psychologist Helga Dittmar (1992). She argues that the meanings ascribed to goods are socially shared and that these meanings are internalized by individuals who take the perspective of the objects to define themselves. Individual identity is thus objectified in a way that allows others to place and to evaluate us in terms of these material signs. Despite the close interrelation between material possessions and the self, Dittmar (1992) claims there is a paradox in Western culture: on the one hand, we are what we have whereas, on the other, there is no connection between how happy we feel and the amount of things we possess.

Richins (1994) argues that people own objects for the value they provide, a value which is connected to the meanings residing in and communicated through the possessions. Furthermore, Richins (ibid) makes a distinction between private and public meanings. Private meanings are the meanings a particular individual assigns to an object and public meanings are assigned to an object by a group.

Meaning has also been a focus area in the work of McCracken (1986), who investigates the trajectory of meaning and offers a theoretical account of the structure and movement of the cultural meaning of consumer goods. According to McCracken (ibid), meaning can be found in three locations, illustrated in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Movement of Meaning
(McCracken, 1986).



Furthermore, McCracken (1986) identifies advertising, the fashion system, and consumer rituals as the means by which meaning is elicited from and transferred between the locations mentioned above. Advertising and the fashion system move meaning from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods, while consumer rituals move meaning from consumer goods to the consumer. According to McCracken (ibid), this is the trajectory of the movement of cultural meaning in modern, developed societies.

The focus of consumer behaviour researchers and material culture researchers reaches beyond mere consumption aspects. They go further and also take into account the social context and the value people attach to the meanings which artefacts carry and embody,* i.e. the role material artefacts play in the construction of identity.

The research reviewed in this section ascribe material artefacts a central role in the construction of social contexts and personal identity. They seem, however, to take the products themselves more or less for granted. Products, possessions, material artefacts, etc., are suddenly present in a social context. It is not discussed where they come from or the nature of the sets of values attached to them in relation to the appearance and character of products.

1.2 Design for experiences

“We made the buttons on the screen look so good you’ll want to lick them.” - Steve Jobs, on Mac OS X’s Aqua user interface (Fortune, January. 24, 2000).**

Within the design field, tangible objects hold a natural, central role. Models addressing product experience, i.e. how designers work with product form and communication of meaning, will be presented in the following, in contrast to and in order to facilitate comparisons with the above.

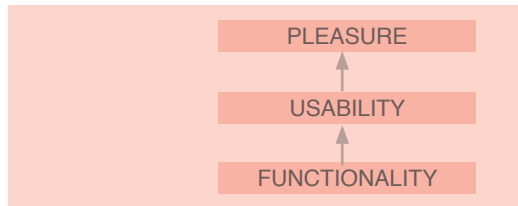
1.2.1 Products and pleasure

As consumers’ demands increase and markets mature, it is not enough for products to compete merely through their level of functionality or usability. In order for design to be successful, it has to present people with a holistic appeal. The product has to address people’s hopes, dreams, fears, aspirations, etc. in addition to providing functionality and usability. Drawing parallels to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970), Jordan (2000) argued for a Pleasure Hierarchy in design, Figure 3:

* How the meaning of a product is communicated is also dealt with by product semiotics, which will be further discussed in section 1.3, Products as signs.

** Link accessed January 23rd 2012:
<http://www.wired.com/gadgets/mac/commentary/cultofmac/2006/03/70512?currentPage=all>

Figure 3. Hierarchy of pleasure in design (Jordan, 2000).



Paying special attention to the “Pleasure” dimension, Jordan (2000) developed the “Four Pleasures” framework based on the philosophies of Tiger (1992), which is an operative model that may serve as an explanation to when and why products become popular among people and, consequently, successful in the market. The “Four Pleasures” framework provides a typology of the causes of a “positive affect” based on human needs rather than design attributes and consists of the following levels of pleasure:

- *Physio-pleasure*, which is achieved through stimulation of the five senses: touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing.
- *Psycho-pleasure* relates to people’s emotional and cognitive reactions.
- *Socio-pleasure* is found in the enjoyment of social interaction with others and, also, in a person’s relationship to society as a whole, e.g. status, image.
- *Ideo-pleasure* is related to beliefs, values and preferences.

Another usability expert who gradually moved focus from use to experience is Donald A. Norman. On the one hand, Norman (1988) pleaded for the usability of things and argued that no matter how beautiful an object is, it is of little importance if it is difficult to understand how to use it.

On the other hand, a beautiful form puts users in a positive state of mind, which in return increases patience and problem solving ability. People in a state of “positive affect” are more inclined to find solutions when a problem comes up. Beautiful things work better because with their help, we have a better starting point when exposed to difficulties. Norman (ibid) argued that benefit and pleasure go hand in hand. His main aim was to point out that emotions are an important part of our thinking as it helps us reach decisions and reason.

1.2.2 Product attachment

Mugge (2007) tried to tackle the question of whether and, if so, how designers’ work can contribute to strengthen the bond a person experiences with a specific product, i.e. product attachment. Mugge argued that if people feel strongly attached to a product, they will probably handle the product with care, repair it when it breaks down, and postpone its replacement

(Mugge, Schifferstein and Schoormans, 2006). As product attachment may increase the lifetime of a product, it may be valuable, with sustainable development in mind, for designers to try to enhance the degree of attachment of people to their products.

Based on past research suggesting that people become attached to certain products because these products convey a personal and special meaning over and above their utilitarian meaning (e.g., Richins, 1994; Kamptner, 1995; Kleine, Kleine and Allen, 1995), Mugge (2007) distinguishes four influential factors for product attachment:

- *self-expression* (can I distinguish myself from others through the product?)
- *group affiliation* (does owning the product connect me to a group?)
- *memories* (related to the product) and
- *pleasure* (provided by the product)

Mugge (2007) suggests that all four factors are relevant in stimulating the experience of attachment to products. However, the self-expression factor holds special interest in the design context because it provides designers with the potential to strengthen the degree of product attachment. Furthermore, Mugge (ibid) proposes product personality and product customisation as possible means to influence the self-expression factor during the design process. Consequently, the experience of product attachment may be enhanced.

1.2.3 Framework of product experience

Desmet and Hekkert (2007) introduced a general framework for product experience that addresses the affective responses that can be experienced in human-product interactions. They identify three levels of product experiences, each level with its own distinctive underlying processes (see Figure 4).

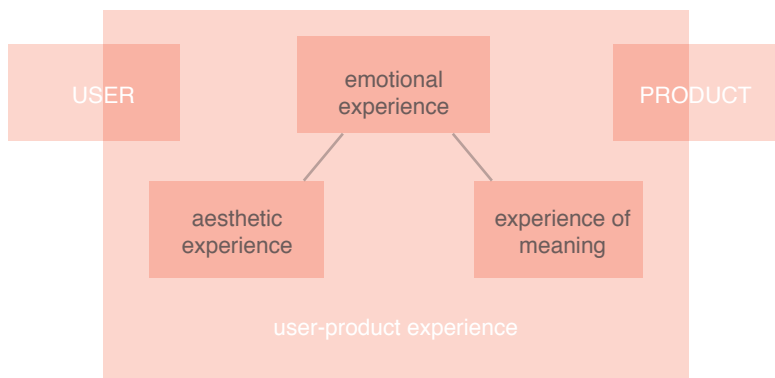


Figure 4. Desmet's and Hekkert's (2007) framework of product experience.

- The *aesthetic experience* level regards the capacity of a product to delight one or more of our sensory modalities.
- The level of *experiencing meaning* involves our ability to assign personality traits or other expressive characteristics to products and to assess the personal or symbolic significance of products.
- The *emotional experience* level involves experiences that, in emotion psychology and in everyday language, are typically considered to be concerned with emotions, e.g. love and anger, and which are elicited by the appraised meaning of products.

The product experience framework indicates patterns for the processes that underlie the different types of affective product experiences, which are in turn used to explain the personal and layered nature of product experience.

1.3 Products as signs

Most objects are designed to fulfil a main function: practical, communicative or both. Product attributes referring to some sort of meaning can be treated as the physical embodiment of a sign (Vihma, 1995). This notion is central in product semiotics, the theoretical foundation of which comes from linguistics.

The meaning of product signs is especially dealt with by product semantics, a subdivision of product semiotic theory. Product semantics provides explanations for the relations between attributes, i.e. the symbolic qualities of a product and the interpretations a person may form about the product. Treating the appearances of products as signs with regard to what functions the signs fulfil has been the focus of the work of several design researchers (e.g. see Krippendorf, 1984; Vihma, 1995; Monö, 1997; Warell, 2001; Wikström, 2002; Karjalainen, 2004).

One framework that focuses on a classification of product functions is “The Contemporary Theory of Product Language” (Gros, 1976; Steffen, 2007; 2009). The classification in this theory goes beyond practical functions and also takes into account communicative functions which may be perceived by the senses (Sinnlich) and functions that carry meaning (Sinn). In 1976, Jochen Gros published an article regarding an “extended functionalism”. His term “Sinnliche Funktionen” refers to functions that are sensual or that may be perceived by the senses (Sinnlich) and functions that make sense, i.e. carry meaning (Sinn). Based on this theory, he introduced several additional functions as complements to the classic practical functions of a product (Oswald, 2010) and provided a basic categorisation of product functions by dividing them into practical functions and product language functions (see Figure 5 and also Steffen, 2000; 2007; 2009).

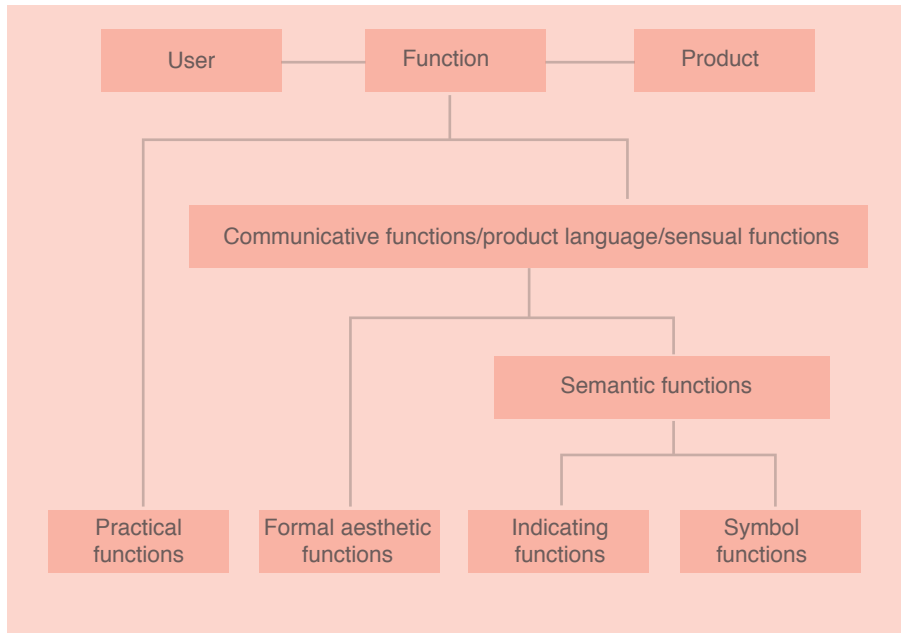


Figure 5. Classification of product functions according to the Offenbach Theory of Product Language (Gros 1976, Steffen 2007; 2009).

The latter group involves *formal aesthetic functions* and *semantic functions*, which are further divided into *indicating functions* and *symbol functions*. *Formal aesthetic functions* are functions that may exist regardless of content or meaning, e.g. order and complexity. *Semantic functions* refer to representational product qualities, thus emphasising the symbolic communication aspect of products. Krippendorf (1989) distinguishes various semantic dimensions, mostly describing operational meanings of objects. For example, identities and qualities are two such aspects. *Indicating functions* identify the product as a member of a category, i.e. having the ability to perform certain functions (e.g. a saw or a hammer). *Symbol functions* refer to what a person associates a product to and the conceptions a person has about the product, e.g. in terms of the product having a certain style.

According to product semantics, a product may represent or refer to something beyond itself (Krippendorf and Butter, 1984). The understanding of the aim of a product is communicated to its users through the form of the product, i.e. how to use the product, who should use it, where it comes from, etc. There are many dimensions in determining the quality of this communication transaction. Furthermore, products can also be seen as means for communication between designers and end users. In this perspective, products are supposed to communicate, more or less successfully, what designers intend them to and consumers respond accordingly (see

e.g. Monö, 1997; Coates, 2003; Crilly et. al., 2004; Crilly, 2005). The professional practice of a designer involves functioning as an intermediate between products and people, working with the form and communicative attributes of the products. Thus, there is reason to pay some attention to the different roles designers have and how these roles have developed over time.

1.4 Designers' roles

Designers have several roles in their various professional practices. In design literature they are referred to as representatives of the users (e.g. Eason, 1995), solvers of problems (e.g. Rittel and Webber, 1973; Buchanan, 1992), taste experts (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Julier, 2008), form experts (e.g. Pye, 2007; 2008), contributors to a sustainable future (e.g. Manzini and Cullars, 1992), etc. Stereotypes about designers' creativity and innovative capacity stress the importance of their ability to "think outside the box" (e.g. Buchanan 1992; Kelley, 2001; von Stamm, 2008; Brown and Katz, 2009; Cross, 2011). Three strong, overall perspectives are recurrent in how designers are described:

- User-centred problem solvers
- Taste experts: magicians who know what is beautiful
- Conveyors of (symbolic) meaning: design as communication (e.g. of values)

These roles are aligned with the frameworks addressing usability mentioned above. Although Jordan (2000) and Norman (1988, 2004) both start out from the perspective of usability and problem solving, they also stress the importance of meaning and pleasure. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the recurring themes in describing the roles of designers correspond to the classification of product functions according to the "Offenbach Theory of Product Language", previously illustrated in Figure 5 above:

FUNCTIONS	DESIGNERS
Practical	User-centred problem solvers
Formal aesthetic	Taste experts
Semantic	Conveyors of (symbolic) meaning and communication

Finally, from a historical perspective, Valtonen (2005), in her investigation of the development of the design profession after the Second World War, also supports the notion that the classification of designers' roles described above is central.* An overview of the main roles of the designer and statements regarding the design practice from the 1950s to the 2000s are presented briefly in Table A below.

* The early focus on aesthetics of design practice expanded successively also to include dimensions of use, problem solving and meaning. Although Valtonen (2005) only described the development of the design profession in Finland and primarily deals with Finnish conditions, she argues that the Scandinavian countries broadly followed the same pattern.

DECADE	DESIGNERS ROLES	FOCUS
1950's	When the professional practice of designers began to take on a stable form after the Second World War, the designer was seen as a creator whose work was compared to and equated with that of artists. Prior to the 1950s, designers' work was mostly limited to applied arts and styling. Aesthetic sensitivity was central for the artistic expression (Ilstedt Hjelm, 2005). Today, the myth of the individualistic designer is still popular and is often portrayed in the press and media.	Aesthetics
1960's	As industrial production developed during the 1960s, there was an intense debate on design in which it was stated that design was more than merely product aesthetics and styling. Designers emphasised that they needed to be involved earlier on in the product development process and that there was a need for them to be integrated into the engineering and marketing teams at the companies. In the traditional area of applied arts, industrial designers were considered to be too technical, whereas in the industry they were considered to be artists. Gradually, the "star" designer came to be more of an anonymous team player in the industry.	
1970's	During the 1970s, ergonomics became an independent scientific subject, which resulted in the theorisation of the professional design practice. The main focus was placed on the individual who was to use the product – the end user. In many cases, this meant designing for groups of people with special needs, i.e. children, the elderly and the disabled. Ergonomics and user understanding became tools for industrial design to distinguish itself from areas such as applied arts and arts and crafts with a scientific approach. Within the field of design, there are several traditions that work with the end user in mind. One aspect that differentiates them concerns the role end users are ascribed, i.e. whether the approach primarily relies on including the users in the development process, thus acknowledging them as experts on their own needs ("design with users"), or whether the development process relies on general knowledge and professional expertise ("design for users") (Eason, 1995; Hiort af Ornäs, 2010).	Use & problem solving
1980's	As managerial aspects of design became increasingly important for companies in the 1980s, a typical role for designers during this period was to work as co-ordinators, working with e.g. product portfolio consistency, roadmaps, etc.	
1990's	Eventually, the importance of brands grew for the companies. During the 1990s, it fell upon industrial designers to ensure customers' total experience of the brand. Focus was placed on trying to attract customers to the brand on an emotional level rather than on a functional one. This meant that designers became involved in the strategic planning of most aspects of the brand, from the beginning to the end of the process. The brand perspective has also been elaborated by Karjalainen (2004) who addressed the way in which the strategic intentions of a company can be actualised through the use of visual communication tools, e.g. through explicit and implicit cues used in products.	Meaning
2000's	After the turn of the century, the focus of companies has increasingly shifted to innovation and competitiveness. Accordingly, a typical domain of work for designers has become to focus on the visions of companies and to push for innovation.	

Table A. Historical development of designers' roles.

Following the development of the design profession in the past, this overview is a good starting point for understanding the challenges designers face in their professional practice. Furthermore, it may provide some indications as to the possible directions in which designers' roles may develop in the future.

1.5 Eco vs. Bling

A two and a half year old boy and his mother are running late for an appointment with the paediatrician. Just when they are about to leave the house, the boy, who tries everything in his power to stall their departure, declares in a very determined manner: "I want a cheese sandwich to go". The stressed mother replies: "No. You can't have a sandwich now, but you can have a crispbread instead". Her suggestion unleashes a total tantrum and she quickly realises that she has to adopt a different strategy: "Would you like a gingerbread biscuit instead?" The new offer is joyfully accepted and they almost make it in time for their appointment.

Due to the complex challenges of sustainable consumption today, it seemed appropriate to choose eco-products as a value-laden product category to work with empirically. As such, these products were intended to serve as a suitable point of entry in order to understand people's norms and values in relation to strong product expressions.*

In terms of product expression, it is quite often the case that some product categories, in particular sports products, disability aids, ecological products, etc., communicate on a rather one-dimensional level: sports equipment radiate performance, assistive aids functionality and ergonomics, and ecological products environmental friendliness. A holistic approach is often lacking when it comes to methods of reasoning about products and the way in which products actually communicate with users. Regardless of the nature of the product or product category, it would be ideal if *all* product choices we face were to be *both* environmentally friendly *and* meaningful on *all* levels of pleasure (Jordan, 2000),** i.e. on the levels of physio-, psycho-, socio- and ideo-pleasure. This applies in particular to eco-friendly products as they are important ambassadors for sustainable alternatives. If organic products are to appeal to people in more ways than primarily at the ideo-pleasure level, which is the case today, they would reach a wider audience and would, as they cease to be confined to an audience who already "believes", become an important contributing factor to a sustainable development.

When the gingerbread incident entered the picture, it instigated an epiphany. Eco-products, as well as crispbread, are good and wholesome and should be the obvious, reasonable choice. In spite of it being irrational, the favoured choice is, however, quite often gingerbread, as crispbread is often considered dull in comparison.

* This part of the project will be developed further in section 3.2, Ecological values and consumption.

** See section 1.2.1, Products and pleasure.

Eco-products that are as competitive as non-eco alternatives considering aspects other than ecological content are not as rare as they used to be. On the contrary, ecological and healthy alternatives are meanwhile presented in an emotionally appealing manner without being hindered by stereotypical appearance, i.e. either a bland, uninspiring expression or an overly “organic” character. Thus, eco-products today have the potential to contribute to a more sustainable lifestyle. However, it is important to mention the gingerbread metaphor in this context because it influenced the reasoning around the research topic and helped concentrate the attention towards product expressions occupying the opposite end of the scale to that of eco-products. Supposing that eco-products can be presented the way gingerbread is, rather than in the manner of crispbread, what constitutes the equivalent of gingerbread qualities in the context of eco-design? How could these qualities be utilised actively and consciously in order to increase the attractiveness of eco-products? Setting out from opposite poles such as Crispbread-Gingerbread and Eco-Glamour, the final choice fell on an extreme opposite of Eco: Bling. Thus, the antithetic pair of Eco as non-Bling, and Bling as non-Eco entered the scene.

The gingerbread metaphor highlighted differences but also similarities between Eco and Bling. Like two sides of the same coin, they are both distinct expressions of value-laden materiality.

1.6 Aim and research questions

Consumer researchers and sociologists point out that the material world is of great significance to people in many respects: we define ourselves, others and our environment through the objects surrounding us and develop strong bonds to them.* Moreover, according to the models addressing experiences in design, many factors influence how people relate to and feel about products: functionality, use, aesthetics, meaning, values, etc. Designers act as intermediaries between people and material artefacts and provide the material world with shape and meaning. Although the design models explain how designers may address user expectations,** they do not highlight designers’ own values and beliefs in this context or what happens when they are faced with projects implying a sharp contrast to their own norms and preferences.

Hence, the overall aim of this project has been to understand people’s norms and values in relation to objects with strong material expressions. Within this general scope, this thesis is particularly concerned with the challenges designers face when working with giving products character and expressions that sometimes are incongruent with their own values and taste preferences. Becoming aware of this tension and understanding the underlying reasons behind it is important to being able to deal with it in a conscious manner, developing toward a deliberate reconciliation of different goals within their professional practice.

By way of exemplifying value-laden product expressions, this study introduced design

* See section 1.1, People and possessions.

** See section 1.2, Design for experiences.

researchers and students to the theme of Bling contrasted to Eco in order to make any preconceptions explicit. In short, this thesis addresses the following issue:

*What challenges do designers face
when creating strong, value-laden product expressions,
as exemplified by Bling products?*

2 APPROACH

This research project is descriptive in character and the approach adopted has been inspired by interpretative research, qualitative methodology and grounded theory. I have consciously strived to be as transparent as possible in relation to the material. Throughout this process, I have shifted perspective between the parts and the whole in order to understand (rather than explain) the phases and outcomes of the project. This approach is influenced by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1989): a process signified by pendling phases between the theoretical and the empirical parts of the project and also iterations of reframing and adjusting the initial research questions. As the project unfolded and new insights matured along the way, I became increasingly aware of details I had been unable to discern at first.

2.1 Theoretical starting points

One of the underlying assumptions on which this project rests is that reality is socially constructed, i.e. the reality people experience is developed, negotiated and re-negotiated in social contexts (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Ehn & Arvidsson, 1993; Searle, 1995; Hacking, 1999). Consequently, the focus of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived social reality. Social constructs are understood as the by-products of countless human choices rather than laws resulting from divine will or nature. Therefore, they should be studied based on the subjective consciousness of individuals and not merely through observable behaviour.

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is an approach that shares the above assumptions, i.e. the focus on socially constructed meaning, while also dealing with face-to-face interactions, why it was considered to be a natural theoretical starting point for this project. As a research approach, SI tries, among other things, to answer questions about how people define themselves, others, their points of departure and activities, and the way in which people define development and change. The SI outlook seeks to grasp the distinctive features based on the individuals' own perspectives.

SI is an American, anti-positivistic sociological tradition from the interwar period which stresses qualitative methodology and field studies. It has its roots in pragmatism, social psychology, the Chicago school, ethnomethodology, social behaviourism and, particularly, the works of George H. Mead and Herbert Blumer.

Mead* was a pragmatist with a focus on the development of the self and the objectivity of the world within the social realm:

“the individual mind can exist only in relation to other minds with shared meanings” (Mead, 1934).

* Although Mead is considered to be the founder of SI he never used the term himself. He called his approach “social behaviourism”.

He opposed existentialists such as Heidegger, who emphasized the uncovering of Being from the perspective of the experiencing human being and how the world is revealed to this experiencing entity within a realm of things. Mead (ibid) believed that people's selves are social products and, furthermore, that people give meaning to the world by defining and interpreting it in certain ways. The world is never experienced directly but always through the ideas we have about it. The individual is the one who actively creates meaning.

Blumer, who was influenced by Mead, developed the SI perspective and gave it its name. Blumer's (1969) main point was that the way humans act toward things is determined by the meanings they ascribe to them. These meanings derive from social interactions with others and are modified through an interactive process where the person deals with the things encountered. Blumer focused on the methodological consequences of Mead's theories:

"My conclusion [...] is indeed brief. It can be expressed as a simple injunction: respect the nature of the empirical world and organize a methodological stance to reflect that respect. This is what I think symbolic interactionism strives to do." (Blumer, 1969: 60).

Blumer (1969) summarized the theoretical foundation of SI in the following manner:

- *Human beings act toward situations and/or things on the basis of the meaning they have for them.* Things do not have an inherent or unvarying meaning. Rather, their meanings differ depending on how we define and respond to them. How we define or give meaning to the things we encounter will shape our actions towards them. Therefore, if we wish to understand human behaviour, we must know how people define the things - objects, events, individuals, groups, structures - they encounter in their environment.
- *The meanings attributed to those things arise out of social interaction with others.* We are not born knowing the meanings of things. We do not learn these meanings simply through individual experiences, but rather through interactions with others.
- *These meanings are modified through an interpretive process.* The meanings of the things we encounter, although formed by social interaction, are altered through our understandings. Individuals' interpretations of meaning will guide and determine their actions.

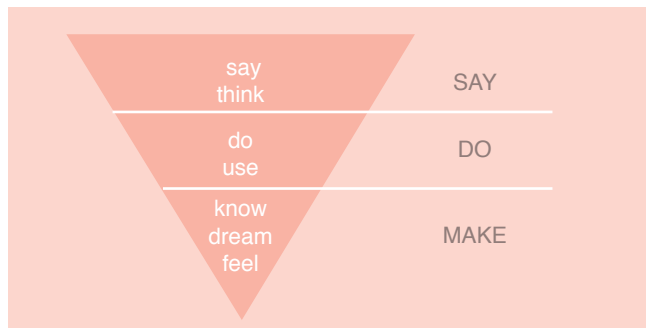
2.2 Methodological starting points

“If you want to know what’s wrong with someone, ask them - they may tell you!” (George Kelly, in Bannister and Fransella, 1986).

One could hope that accessing peoples’ inner thoughts is as uncomplicated a matter as Kelly implies. Because the theoretical understanding in this thesis is based on SI, a natural consequence would be to ask people regarding their relationship to the material world. Experiences from a study conducted early on during the project, however, suggest the opposite.*

The discussions with the interviewees provided insubstantial information regarding their true beliefs and values. Sanders (1992) claims that listening to what people say merely tells us what they are able to express in words and what they want us to hear. Sanders (2002) argues that in order to access people’s beliefs and dreams, it is necessary to reach deeper; to also examine what people *do* and *make* in addition to what they *say*, see Figure 6.

Figure 6. What people say, do and make (Sanders, 2002).



When all three perspectives (what people say, what they do and what they make) are explored simultaneously, one can more readily understand and sympathize with people.

From a methodological perspective, SI is relevant in this context as well because of Harold Garfinkel, the founder of ethnomethodology. Besides providing inspiration and guidelines for how to proceed with the Bling project, Garfinkel’s (1967) “breaching experiments” served as a tool for reaching deeper into people’s norms and values by stirring up turmoil through provocation.

As insights gradually emerged, constant re-evaluations took place regarding how to realize the studies in the best possible way. Consequently, a variety of methods for gathering empirical material was implemented during the various phases of the project: interviews, database and Internet portal searches, and workshops providing participatory observation possibilities. The respective studies and how they relate to each other, are dealt with in the upcoming chapter.

* This study is described in section 3.2, Ecological values and consumption.

3 THE STUDIES

From an early focus on the material expression of eco-products and the emotional responses they may evoke, the actual studies (see Table B) have gradually redirected the attention of the research endeavour toward trying to reach an understanding of the underlying reasons behind a provocation generated by a different type of value-laden product expression, namely Bling. The enquiries carried out during the onset of the project focused on developing an understanding of the emotional aspects of design, specifically how emotions are generated in the brain on a physiological level (see Table B, Study I). The second part of the objective of the studies was to investigate whether or not people's ecological values are manifested in a consumption situation (Study II).

These first two studies resulted in something of a dead end while at the same time giving rise to important insights and ideas. One such idea was to work creatively and experimentally to enhance eco-products in a positive way through glamour and Bling. This proposal was, however, rejected by a majority of design researchers and postgraduate students (Study III). Thus, it was necessary to take a step back from the material and try to find new ways of making sense of the puzzle. Understanding the reasons behind the turmoil stirred up by Bling became the new main goal. As a first step, a study was carried out in order to understand the nature of Bling (Study IV). Moreover, a workshop was implemented for design students where the Bling theme was explored gradually (Study V).

The aims, methods and outcomes of each study are summarized in Table B and are described in the following sections.

Table B. Details of the studies.

EVENTS	PRE-STUDIES		STUDIES		
	Affective neuro-science (I)	Eco-design (II)	Bling Research seminar (III)	BBC study (IV)	Trend course (V)
Theme	Physiological mechanism of emotions	Eco-glam	Design meets Bling	Understanding Bling	Exploring Bling
Nature	Literature review	Pilot study	Research seminar	Content analysis	Student workshop
Empirical material collection method	Database search	Shop along interviews	Participatory observation	Internet portal search	Participatory observation
Reported in Paper	Christoforidou and Motte, (2009)	Unpublished paper*	A, B, C, D	A, B	C, D

* Christoforidou, D. Design through a Neo-Green Filter, A Hollywood Ending?

3.1 Affective neuroscience

The focus of this part of the project was to explore the neurophysiological mechanisms of how we grow fond of artefacts, as a complement to the existing models of affect in design research. In order to understand how emotions are processed in the human brain, a literature study on the basics of cognitive psychology and neuroscience was undertaken.*

One of the major contributions affective neuroscience has made to design research regards the emphasis of emotion and pleasure over cognition. The literature study resulted in a paper (Christoforidou and Motte, 2009) which suggests that the first perception of an artefact always begins at the affective level. The affective state of an individual is always prior to a later, conscious cognition. Hence, emotional aspects should be, if not prioritized, then at least not excluded when designing products that are supposed to be long-lasting, congenial and meaningful.

Bearing this main finding of affective neuro-science in mind, it was important to return to the study of people's own stories and perspectives. The intention of the project was to explore values regarding certain material expressions, such as Eco.

3.2 Ecological values and consumption

A qualitative approach with interviews and observations was chosen as an appropriate next step to elucidate the research questions. It may, however, be difficult to reach people's core values through interview techniques and questionnaires. For this reason, it was decided that the interviews were to be combined with observations. These "shop/talk-along" interviews were conducted on site, i.e. in the actual shop environment. This method is a modified version of the "shop-along" or "accompanied shopping" method used in consumer research, which involves interviewing consumers while the actual shopping takes place (Lowrey et al., 2005; Hiller, 2010).

During the study, the interviewees were asked to undertake a fictional shopping round in a furniture shop together with the researcher, discussing and explaining their reflections while they were going through the assortment of the shop as if they were looking to buy furniture. Three furniture and home ware stores were selected based on different degrees of eco-profiling. The on site interviews explored how the furniture companies communicated eco-friendliness compared to how this communication was perceived by their potential customers.

The respondents were more than happy to share information on what they liked and disliked and, during the discussions, they were also able to directly refer to examples in the stores illustrating their statements. There was, however, very little feedback regarding environmental considerations. The only time any of the interviewees mentioned something eco-related was when some of them referred to a piece of furniture as timeless. Reasoning around ecological

* This study was conducted in cooperation with Damien Motte from the division of Machine Design at Lund University.

aspects did not emerge spontaneously. For this reason, the nature of the interviews gradually shifted from initially being of an open, conversational nature to intentionally focusing the discussions on ecology in order to take part of the interview subjects' reflections on the issue. As the eco-topic was touched upon only when the respondents were encouraged to reflect and comment on them, the responses felt anticipated, adjusted and politically correct (cf. Richins, 1994; Lippmann, [1922] 1997).

Although the “shop/talk-along” interviews did not prove to be rich with content regarding ecological values, the outcome indicated that having different approaches is beneficial when aspiring to gain access to good empirical material to analyze. Other reflections the material from the “shop/talk-along” interviews gave rise to was e.g. that it is far easier to engage with people in a setting that is perceived to be natural considering the topic of the conversation. Furthermore, one observation was that the participants rather enjoyed talking about things they either perceived as entirely positive or entirely negative: wishes, hopes, dreams, objects of hatred, aversion, and so on. Ecology, however, seemed to fall outside of these poles and although it is something one must consider, there seems to be a built-in resistance.

3.3 Design meets Bling: an unintentional clash

The challenge of accessing people's values and beliefs on ecological matters gave rise to the gingerbread metaphor* and ultimately the idea of working with the opposite extremes of Eco and Bling** as described in the first chapter. This idea was reinforced by an ongoing Bling trend: Bling was everywhere, not only as an ostentatious lifestyle, i.e. jewellery, champagne etc., but it was also mentioned in contexts such as consumer electronics and water, see Figure 7. While working with an eco-product focus, the feeling of something being overlooked occurred regularly. A picture of Angelina Jolie's and Brad Pitt's daughter's Bling pacifier provided a key to the mystery of the missing link. Could eco-products and other austere product categories, e.g. assistive technology, be cross-fertilized with Bling? Bling could potentially serve as an antithesis, an opposite pole, against which eco-products could be contrasted in order to create a context that would make surrounding values explicit.

The idea of reinforcing eco-products with a source of inspiration that is diametrically opposed to the eco-theme was presented at a design research workshop. Although the attention Bling received was overwhelming, it was not, however, of a positive nature. Where one could potentially see opportunities to utilise Bling qualities such as glamour, humour and pride, the audience saw bad taste, shallowness and vulgarity. It became evident that encountering a theme remote from one's own cultural context is not as easy as was initially and naively expected. The negative reactions to Bling and the upset feelings among designers and design researchers faced with Bling was both puzzling and fascinating. As this turn of events raised

* See section 1.5, Eco vs. Bling.

** The Bling studies were conducted in cooperation with a colleague from the division of Industrial Design at Lund University, Elin Olander.

many questions regarding the reasons behind the provocation Bling constituted for designers, it became the new focus of the research endeavour.



Figure 7. Examples of Bling representations in media from a student mood board.

3.4 Understanding Bling: definitions and use in the media

In order to grasp the reasons behind why the designers were so provoked by Bling, a major concern was to understand what Bling *is*. Observations so far indicated that Bling generated strong feelings and reactions, mainly negative ones. The definition of Bling stated below served as a starting point to illustrate the common pre-understanding that surrounds Bling:

*“‘Bling-Bling’ (usually shortened to simply ‘Bling’) is a hip-hop slang term which refers to expensive jewellery and other accoutrements, and also to an entire lifestyle built around excess spending and ostentation. In its essence, the term refers to the exterior manifestation of one’s interior state of character, normally displayed through various forms of visual stimuli.” **

The definition of Bling is closely related to what Veblen (2001) called conspicuous consumption:

*“The acquisition and display of expensive items to attract attention to one’s wealth or to suggest that one is wealthy.” ***

An Internet search was conducted to help establish a current view on how Bling was presented in the media. After considering a variety of Internet media the decision fell on a portal. The choice of the portal was guided by a variety of criteria: it was to be international, genre neutral

* Bling definition, available at: http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/1523 (Accessed 28th April, 2009).

** Conspicuous consumption definition, available at: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/conspicuous+consumption> (Accessed 28th April, 2009).

and in English; it was also to accommodate different types of media and address different types of audience segments.

The portal that best satisfied the criteria was the website of the BBC, www.bbc.com. Bling culture has a strong foothold among superstars in the U.K, but also among other groups. The BBC website covers several continents, a variation of cultures and many media dimensions: culture, news, documentaries, blogs, etc. Furthermore, it contains interesting blogs where the audience comments freely. Another important reason for the final decision in favour of the BBC Internet portal was that it provided access to a search engine making the entire content of the website searchable.

The Internet search involved using the keyword “Bling” in all three of its different spellings: “Bling”, “Bling Bling” and “Bling-Bling”. As content on the Internet changes constantly, the search results were “frozen” at one particular point in time and all Bling findings were printed onto paper. The BBC portal search was implemented in June 2008 and yielded 226 hits for Bling. All hits counted, regardless of which part of the portal a Bling related hit was found on, i.e. no distinction was made between an article published by a journalist or a blog post by a private individual.

The presentation of the study is divided into a quantitative part, in which the number of hits in each category has been summed up, and a qualitative part, which takes into account the content of the text, encoded by keywords.

3.4.1 Bling categories: quantitative outcome of the BBC study

In the quantitative phase of the analysis, the main interest was to gather as much information as possible on Bling. The concept was mapped in order to form a clear picture regarding which meanings Bling carries and which categories it consists of.

The procedure of the categorization was interesting but also time consuming. Both researchers were involved in the endeavour of reading through the publications.* The 226 print-outs of the Bling hits were divided in two piles, one for each researcher. After a first reading of the transcripts, all Bling-related texts were marked and encoded with content keywords. Some Bling hits were very explicit in their content and could thus be encoded with a single keyword. Other hits represented multiple Bling aspects simultaneously and were therefore assigned several keywords. Certain keywords formed their own categories while other, related keywords merged into a common category. When this phase was concluded, the keywords were compiled into categories. Then, the researchers exchanged their piles of print-outs and read through the material with special consideration to the highlighted keywords, sorting the contents in piles determined by keywords that could either form a separate category or fit into one. Initially, each pile was worked through separately in order to optimize the process and keep the categories being employed fresh in mind. Finally, the two piles were merged and

* I.e. Elin Olander and myself.

differences of opinion and uncertainties concerning the categorization of the Bling findings were discussed and negotiated.

The Bling categories found in the material are illustrated in relation to the total number of hits for Bling in Figure 8.

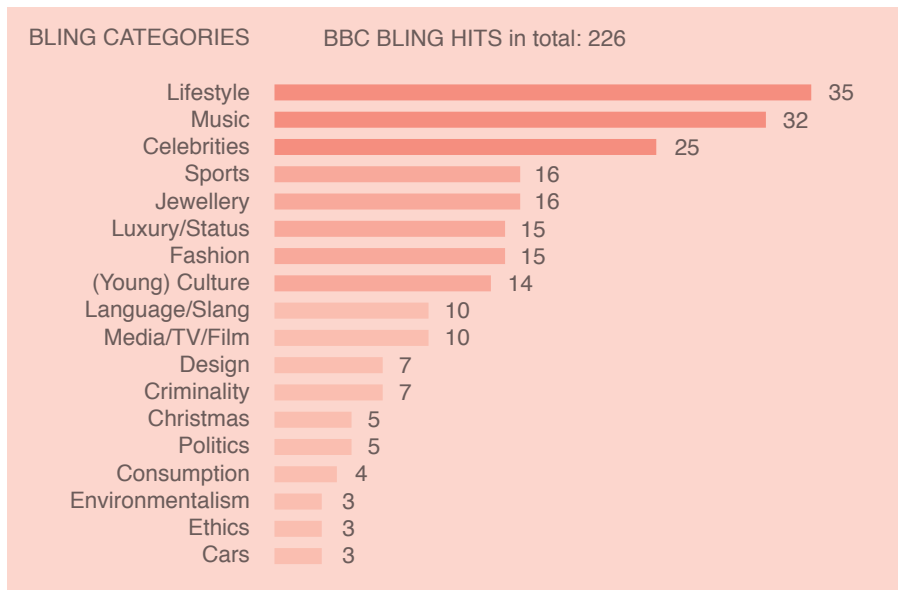


Figure 8. Categories for Bling established by a quantitative analysis of the BBC website: www.bbc.com (accessed in June 2008).

After classifying all 226 hits for Bling, the categories with the most hits were “Music” (32 hits) and “Lifestyle” (35 hits). While these findings were more or less expected, categories of a more unexpected nature emerged as well, e.g. “Christmas” (5 hits), “Politics” (5 hits), “Ethics” (3 hits), “Environmentalism” (3 hits) and “History” (1 hit). The fact that Bling occurred in contexts that normally are not associated with the phenomenon suggests that the meaning and use of the word was still dynamic and changing when the search was executed. Although there was a Bling trend in relation to consumer products at the time, it is interesting to note that the “Design” category contained fewer hits than e.g. “Fashion”, which indicates that Bling was still more frequent in “typical” Bling categories.

3.4.2 *Bling meanings: qualitative outcome of the BBC study*

While the quantitative study helped with the categorisation of Bling, it provided limited indications as to what characteristics constituted Bling and no information at all on nuances, i.e. whether the characteristics were perceived as e.g. friendly or hostile, etc. Although one

Table C. BBC blog statements in relation to typical and less expected Bling categories of varying sizes.

Top: Typical Bling categories.
Middle: Expected Bling categories.
Bottom: Less expected Bling categories.

BLING CATEGORIES	BLING COMMENTS
Lifestyle	<p><i>"It is just part of the process of ghetto culture becoming wealthy and indulging in whatever obvious and tasteless that puts their newfound wealth on display."</i></p> <p><i>"Cheap is nasty, whether it be fake Bling or a cheap suit."</i></p>
Music	<p><i>"... focused on rubbish that means nothing but costs far more than they can afford, aspiring to the superficial and looking for personal value in what they have rather than what they have the potential to be."</i></p> <p><i>"... his heavily jewelled body Prezzo, allegedly the wealthiest rapper..."</i></p> <p><i>"... but he chose the music and the sensible side. There will always be a fan base for these guys, but Eminem and 50 Cent tend to shadow them."</i></p> <p><i>"If Prezzo's past entrances are anything to go by, appearing on stage on a motorbike and arriving for the Kisima awards by helicopter, expect the unexpected!"</i></p>
Celebrity	<p><i>"... celebrity culture, and the public's hunger for a bit of the 'Bling' lifestyle lived by their idols, is seen as fuelling the move and 'revolutionizing' access to luxury brands."</i></p>
Sports	<p><i>"Famous footballers may wear a lot of the shiny stuff on the town these days but jewellery's not allowed on the pitch."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm Blinged out. I got Bling on my helmet, how cool is that? Formula 1 ace Lewis Hamilton on the diamond studded helmet he wore."</i></p>
Luxury	<p><i>"It is a set of values that encompasses playing hard, looking good and lapping up the finest – the sassy/gaudy style, the Bentley, the Jacuzzi, the Dom Perignon, the fur coat, the first class ticket, the Gucci, the Prada, the Rolex, and so on."</i></p> <p><i>"According to the lexicographers, 'Bling-Bling' means expensive, ostentatious jewelry or clothing, or the wearing of them."</i></p>
Politics	<p><i>"... this past week suggested a majority still disapproved of Mr Sarkozy's ('Bling-Bling president') personal style. Manual workers and elderly people in particular have swung against him."</i></p>
Christmas	<p><i>"Yet travel round the UK and you can see growing evidence of what has been dubbed 'house Bling' ... Christmas pastimes – lighting up the outside of your house with thousands of electric light bulbs in extravagant displays."</i></p>

could argue that blogs contain extreme opinions that are consciously designed to provoke, the BBC blogs commenting on Bling proved to be invaluable. As people's blog comments are voluntary, unedited, and anonymous, they provided a great opportunity to gather and read people's sincere opinions, without any interference. Characteristic and less characteristic statements relating to different categories of Bling, illustrating sincere interpretations of Bling, are presented above, in Table C. The selected statements originate from some of the typical and some of the new Bling categories that were identified with the help of the quantitative categorization study presented above.

The material falling under typical and less expected Bling categories of varying sizes both confirmed and elucidated the pre-understanding and prejudices surrounding Bling. Having obtained a level of understanding for the way in which Bling was used, the issue of what Bling actually does was yet to be resolved. Could Bling be something more than what it first appears to be? For example, it seems that a product automatically becomes Bling if it is covered with diamonds. Is this enough though? Which is the actual conveyor of the Bling quality: the product in itself or the act of wearing the Bling product? Bling is more than merely a hip-hop lifestyle. It reinforces personal identity and generates pride, although the aura of being superior to others often associated with the Bling theme may in some cases become a source of both envy and repudiation. Carrying one's head high and with a Bling attitude, but without the accessories, is that Bling as well? A multitude of colourful, sparkling and twinkling light bulbs can apparently also be considered Bling. Similarly, could anything, e.g. ecological products, rehabilitation technology products, etc., become Bling by overstating certain qualities, e.g. size?

3.5 Exploring Bling: an intentional clash

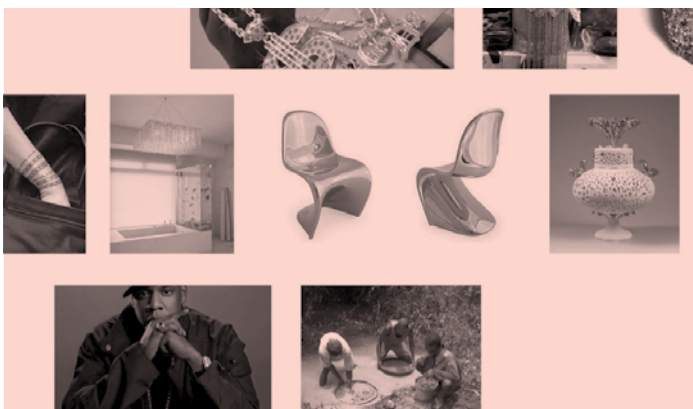


Figure 9. What Bling is: Student inspiration collage illustrating Bling stereotypes, Bling as part of interior decoration, but also the back side of Bling.

The overall aim during this stage was to retest the reactions toward Bling. During the initial Bling research seminar, the design researchers' negative reactions to the theme were quite a surprise as it was an unintentional effect. Was it a one off occurrence, even a coincidence, or were there deeper implications? In order to establish if design students would be as negative as the design researchers, they were also exposed to Bling. An additional intention of exposing the design students to Bling was to explore whether they would be able to work with the Bling theme in spite of inner obstacles. If so, how would they go about the task? Therefore, a Bling workshop was outlined, providing design students with an opportunity to reflect over, discuss and question their reactions and future professional roles.

In a way, it was hoped that the workshop would incite a charged emotional response from the design students in order to enquire whether and how far they would move beyond their own prejudices and subjective values. When the Bling theme was announced at the very beginning of the trend course, the design students reacted as intensely and negatively toward Bling as their design research colleagues did. A couple of students even dropped out of the course, which supported the notion that Bling possesses qualities that seem to provoke people belonging to the design community.

The design students were sceptical and reluctant at first and a majority of them expressed dislike over what Bling stands for, even admitting to feeling provoked by it. Most of the inspirational Bling material created by the students displayed mainly stereotypical pictures of hip-hop and diamonds, e.g. Figure 9. Some collages, however, were not altogether negative but contained a wider spectrum of aspects of Bling; there were even positive ones, as can be seen in Figure 10. Eventually, the students managed to expand their comfort zones and explore their own future Bling concepts with an open mindset. More importantly, they engaged in lively conversations regarding existing Bling stereotypes and reflected over their own reactions toward and relationship to the phenomenon.

Figure 10. What Bling *does*:
Details of students' inspiration
collages illustrating standing out in
a crowd, which can be facilitated
through Bling.



4 THE APPENDED PAPERS

In this section, the appended papers are presented briefly. The specific articles were appended because they build up the understanding of Bling and the outcomes of the project, see Table D.

Table D. Schematic overview of the way in which the Bling studies relate to the appended articles.

Year	Aim	Paper	2008 BBC study	2009 trend course
2008	Describe	Paper A: Bling and how its message captures our interest.	X	
2009	Understand/ Analyze	Paper B: To Bling or not to Bling?	X	X
2012a	Explore	Paper C: The love and hate of Bling products.		X
2012b	Explore	Paper D: Good taste vs. Good design.		X

4.1 Paper A: Bling and how its message captures our interest

Paper A (Christoforidou and Olander, 2008), deals with the definition of the Bling phenomenon. The intriguing subculture of Bling is an extravagant lifestyle that was born the United States during the late 1990s and has its roots in rap and hip-hop music. When Bling appears in the media, the main points of reference are diamonds and big gold jewellery, manifesting a newly won increase in financial status.

But what is Bling exactly? Who are the Bling users? What products are considered to be Bling? What are the product characteristics of Bling? The strong, mainly negative, emotional reactions by non-Bling users towards Bling gave rise to a great deal of curiosity and an urge to further investigate this flamboyant lifestyle.

4.2 Paper B: To Bling or not to Bling? Cultural transformations of consumer products

Paper B (Christoforidou and Olander, 2009), aims to come to terms with what constitutes a Bling-specific design element. Is it possible for these elements to be utilized in other, less glamorous product categories such as assistive technology, sustainable products, etc., and generate the same sense of pride as that radiated by Bling-users?

The subculture of Bling is associated with extravagant pieces of jewellery en masse, with over-consumption, and it is occasionally even used as an insulting term of abuse. Be it a Bling-friend or foe, it is difficult for anyone to pass by a Bling product without noticing it. One's eyes are drawn to a Bling product because it is so evident, over-explicit and visible.

Bling is straight to the point, easy to recognize, it announces its message in a loud and cocky manner: bigger is better, more is better, glitzier is better.

Bling provokes and makes people talk. This subculture leaves no one indifferent; everyone has a highly emotional opinion on Bling, regardless if it is positive or negative. As it turned out, people were more than willing to share their views, irrespective of whether they are provoked or feel attracted by Bling. Therefore, Bling could potentially be an important catalyst for designers in engaging with people. Thus, the idea was not to restrict the focus on superficial styling and production of luxury segments, but rather to use Bling as a tool to elicit people's opinions on product value, product experience, and product identity.

In order to investigate Bling from as many perspectives as possible, different approaches were used: database searches, surveys and interviews. The intention was to use Bling as a catalyst in engaging with users to obtain a deeper understanding of the subculture and the underlying factors that affect the way users select products to manifest their identity, status and other important social characteristics.

Bling is one cultural manifestation among many others, through which people may choose to communicate identity and affiliation. The Bling study will hopefully assist a better understanding of the mechanisms behind social trends, consumption patterns and human drivers to enrich, broaden and challenge the work of designers.

4.3 Paper C: The love and hate of Bling products: An industrial design student case

The focus of this paper (Olander et al., 2012) was to explore how industrial design students engaged with a product category with special product characteristics, namely Bling products. These products generate a lot of attention and emotional reactions, as people seem either to love or to hate them. In order to understand this love-hate relationship to Bling products and using provocation as a starting point, nine projects by industrial design student on the theme of “future Bling” were analysed. Self-reflective reports on the students' design projects were categorized with the help of the Perceptual Product Experience framework (PPE). Although the students were confronted with a product type they initially disliked, they managed to transform their perception of Bling both regarding pleasure aspects (e.g. how and why the product stimulates our senses) and meaning aspects (e.g. what the product represents or which value we ascribe to it) of perceptual experiences. Furthermore, according to the students' self-reflective reports, they felt enabled to use this transformation as a source of inspiration and a driving force in their design processes.

Many different factors influence our perceptions of products, e.g. personal factors, product related factors, and external factors. For designers to be able to address as many of them as possible when creating new products, it is important to deepen the understanding of the

totality of perceptual experiences from non-instrumental interaction with products. One way of achieving this is by stimulating the creative process by utilising provocation.

4.4 Paper D: Good taste vs. Good design: A tug of war in the light of Bling

Paper D (Christoforidou et al., 2012) aims to explore the tension between “good taste” and “good design” and, furthermore, it aims to investigate whether and how designers can benefit from this tension in the design process. Some products are considered “bad taste” and therefore of less value. This line of reasoning reflects the relationship between “good taste” and “good design”, terms which are sometimes confused and treated as synonyms. “Good taste” is rooted in a subjective context of inherent values, whereas “good design” arises from competence and is based on professional skill. However, if focus is placed on what a product *does* with and for its users, rather than on what a product *is*, superficial statements based on taste can be disregarded and a better understanding of “good design” can be reached instead.

“Bad taste” is here exemplified by products associated with the lifestyle of rap artists and the subculture of Bling. In the context of a course described in paper C, industrial design students were given the task of exploring how Bling products are perceived in everyday life and reflect over their own relationship to Bling. Their views on Bling were compatible with how Bling is presented in the media, i.e. mainly negative. Furthermore, the students were asked to propose future Bling scenarios. Only when they managed to shift focus and began to consider what the product *does* rather than what it *is*, they were able to work with Bling and use it as a creative force in their design projects. In an educational setting, through provocation and critical reflection as well as encouragement, a turn away from negative attitudes toward Bling into a creative source of inspiration was achieved. Moreover, the Bling theme lead to vivid discussions regarding the roles of the designers, whether there is a risk design opportunities may be overlooked as products are disregarded for being “bad taste”, etc.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

On a macro level, this thesis is about norms and values in relation to product identity and social identity. However, the initial outset, exploring “eco-ness” in relation to values, provided limited empirical material. By way of serendipity, the project came to concern another product category with a specific product expression: Bling. In contrast to Eco, Bling stirred up a turmoil that brought underlying norms and values to the surface.

Thus, the answer to the question regarding what challenges designers face when creating strong, value-laden product expressions, as exemplified by Bling products, is that designers found the idea of “Blinging” up Eco quite problematic because of the taboo Bling represented to them – at least initially. Existing frameworks in the design field dealing with people’s emotional reactions and product expression do not highlight this shortcoming of designers’ perspectives. This reluctance seemed to be connected with the different roles designers undertake and their norms and values in relation to the artefacts they design, rather than the actual artefacts per se. Given the tumult Bling caused, it will be illustrated how it differs from Eco and why it may be challenging to balance personal preferences with the demands of one’s professional roles in design practice.

Designers are presented as addressing various problems by serving different functions and roles such as user experts, taste experts and conveyors of symbolic meaning, surrounded by an aura of creativity and relying on tacit knowledge. For designers to combine the above mentioned roles is not necessarily unproblematic. Although there are references in design literature discussing product experiences, how designers work with product form and communication of meaning, and how designer roles have developed over time, they do not highlight the norms and values of the designers themselves, i.e. how designers deal with their personal preferences and how these preferences influence their roles. Seeking to understand this challenge in the professional practice of the designer, it is relevant to take a closer look at the contradictions between Eco and Bling, and the contradictions surrounding the various roles of the designer.

5.1 Contrasting Eco and Bling

The Eco-theme approach made evident that accessing people’s ideas and values in relation to value-laden product expressions can be quite challenging. Therefore, the opposite end of the scale was tested as a contrast to Eco: Bling. Although Bling was dismissed at first, it provided rich empirical material. The various aspects of the Bling phenomenon are developed in the appended articles.*

As taste ideals, Eco and Bling represent diametrically opposing poles, both in terms of symbolism and manifestation. Eco represents a restrained attitude: material saving, sobriety,

* Paper D in particular discusses Bling from a taste perspective, see section 4.4.

understated form language and a natural colour range, e.g. Figure 1. Bling, on the other hand, stands for “more is more” in every possible way: it is big, ostentatious, loud, glitzy and glittering.

5.1.1 Taste and aesthetic preferences

Contrasting the characteristics of Eco against those of Bling, a division similar to the one describing the differences between Kantian and anti-Kantian aesthetics is formed; see Table F (adapted from Corrigan, 1997).

Kantian aesthetics (ECO?)	Anti-Kantian aesthetics (BLING?)
Higher cultural capital	Lower cultural capital
Elite culture	Popular culture
Cultivated, abstracted appropriation	Immediate pleasure
Mind-centred (understanding)	Body-centred (sensuality)
Subtle, detached, inconspicuous form of display readable only by those sufficiently cultivated or civilized	Overt display of wealth and consumption readable by anyone

Table F. Kantian and anti-Kantian aesthetics in relation to Eco and Bling (adapted from Corrigan, 1997:27).

According to Bourdieu (1984), taste is the expression of different social groups’ lifestyles. Taste reflects the collective’s position in the social field and displays its assets of various forms of symbolic capital.* Bourdieu (ibid) drew on Kant’s notion of aesthetics being synonymous with the taste of the dominant class (Julier, 2008). The process of distinguishing oneself successfully and achieving high status in a social field requires the right type of symbolic capital, e.g. the ability to distinguish between the cultivated (Kantian aesthetics) and the vulgar (anti-Kantian aesthetics).

5.1.2 Bourdieu’s “symbolic violence”

Bourdieu’s concept of *symbolic violence* may assist in understanding the provocation designers experienced in their encounter with Bling. There is a level of tension inherent in design as designers aspire towards professionalism while, at the same time, they seek to achieve individual differentiation. This tension points back to Bourdieu’s (1984) ideas on the struggles going on in social fields: in order for these manoeuvrings to be successful, i.e. beneficial towards the end of obtaining power in the social field, it is essential to exhibit the

* As discussed in the Introduction chapter, section 1.1, People and possessions.

right symbolic capital for the specific context by exercising symbolic violence towards the ones possessing less symbolic capital.

Asking designers to embrace Bling would be like asking them to commit symbolic violence on themselves, i.e. a voluntary act of symbolic violence that would potentially generate a degrading, primarily of the designers' own status in the eyes of their peers, but also of the status of the entire field of design. The designers' meeting with Bling and the breach it constituted for them revealed something that was not highlighted by the frameworks addressing experiences in design,* thus providing insights that working with Bling would not be an easy task: it may not be possible to Bling up Eco and vice versa. From the designers' perspective, Bling became a violation on the "eco-ness" of Eco and "eco-fying" Bling is contrary to the very essence of what Bling stands for.

5.1.3 *Taste and professional practice*

Bourdieu's thoughts on taste in relation to professional practice may also shed some light on the designers' negative reactions to Bling. Working with contradictions and opposites is not controversial in design, rather the contrary: it is supposed to promote creativity. There is a strong awareness of aesthetic preferences within the design field. However, in spite of designers' avant-garde and unconventional taste (Bourdieu, 1984), their encounter with Bling in combination with Eco was not as successful as others have been, e.g. between art and kitsch. One reason why Bling proved difficult to work with is that the preconceived idea of Bling being bad taste is so strongly rooted.**

According to Bourdieu (1984), designers belong to the social class he refers to as the "*new petite bourgeoisie*", which includes "*all the occupations involving presentation and representation*" (Bourdieu, 1984: 359), occupations which are involved in the "*symbolic work of producing needs*" (Bourdieu, 1984: 365). He also notes that as certain sectors of this new petite bourgeoisie, such as design, media, and advertising, work as "cultural intermediaries", they also become taste creators.

As the personal preferences of designers tend to be in marginal culture and the avant-garde, their role as "cultural intermediaries" are influenced and/or obstructed by their own taste preferences. While functioning as taste creators, designers must at the same time also take into account the preferences of the prospective users of their work. Balancing both can be challenging.

5.2 Contradictions and designers' roles

The designers' reactions to Bling can also be understood through the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism (SI). The founders of SI (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) assumed that self-image

* Presented in chapter 1, Introduction.

** See section 4.4, Paper D.

and identity arise in a constant process of interaction with the outside world. The approach highlights the social processes and stresses the importance of the social context. SI takes into account that the environment through its signals shapes a person's self-image and great emphasis is placed on the social meaning people associate with the surrounding world. In the following, four perspectives are presented, explaining aspects of the Bling contradiction in relation to designers' roles.

5.2.1 Garfinkel's "breaching experiments"

One SI scholar, Harold Garfinkel (1967) and particularly his use of *breaching experiments*, provided an inspiration and guideline of how to proceed with the Bling project methodologically. Garfinkel believed that people strive to make themselves and their context accountable, i.e. comprehensible, understandable. His *breaching experiments*, performed on people in their ordinary lives, aim to violate people's expectations by behaving inexplicably towards them, i.e. breaching through the mechanisms they use to achieve accountability, in the hope of exposing these mechanisms. The aim of conducting breaching experiments is to challenge commonly accepted social rules, values and norms and thereby provide an opportunity to study people's reactions to these violations – the more intense the reaction, the more deeply rooted the broken convention.

Borrowing Garfinkel's (1967) terminology, the case of Bling became a breach, i.e. a provocation. At first, Bling constituted an accidental provocation and was only implemented as an informed provocation at a later stage. Bling as an inspirational and/or provocative force in the context of a design education seemed a perfect setting in which to utilize an approach and a set up inspired by breaching experiments.

5.2.2 Mead's "I" and "me" and Cooley's "looking glass self"

Self-image is another central term in SI that can contribute to the understanding of how designers relate to themselves and their various roles. One concept that is central in Mead's (1934) ideas is the *self*, i.e. the part of an individual's personality composed of self-awareness and self-image. The self can only be developed through social interaction and exchange of symbols with others by trying to determine the meanings of others' actions and understanding their intentions. Understanding intention requires imagining a situation from the point of view of the other party. Mead (ibid) states that by taking the role of another, we become self-aware, and he divides the self into two parts: the *I* and the *me*. The *I* is the part of the self which is subjective, i.e. our self directed towards others, while the *me* part of the self is objective and represents how we view our own *self*, i.e. our self directed towards our own self by taking the role of those it is actually directed towards.

Cooley's (1981) argumentation on the self are built around the central concept of the *looking*

glass self, i.e. a self-image based on how we believe others see us. The basic idea is that those we interact with act as mirrors, reflecting our self back to us. How we believe that others see us affects the way in which we view ourselves. Cooley's (ibid) concept asserts that our self is how we appear to the world. The designers' reluctance to embrace Bling may be interpreted as a fear to make an unprofessional impression to others.

5.2.3 Goffman's "dramaturgical perspective"

Goffman shares the view on human interaction with the other SI scholars as he claims that identity develops by interacting with other people. Continuing with the SI perspective, designers' conflicting roles may be understood in the light of Goffman's (1951, 2009) *dramaturgical perspective*, a metaphor from the world of theatre which he utilized in order to explain interactions of everyday life. According to the dramaturgical perspective, we take on different roles that we perform on different stages for different audiences. An important success factor for a performance to be convincing is to have access to relevant properties for the occasion. A hip-hop artist embracing Bling, for instance, would be interpreted as communicating wealth, success, etc., because Bling is aligned with the status symbols of the specific subculture. For designers, however, the relationship to Bling may not be as straightforward.

Drawing parallels to the dramaturgical perspective, designers also play different roles on their professional stage and it can be challenging to combine their roles as user-centred problem solvers, taste experts and conveyors of symbolic meaning.* Especially one of the recurring roles designers take on, that of being a taste expert, was experienced to be entirely incompatible with Bling. In contrast to the hip-hop culture, Bling in a design context turned out to be a dubious, even stigmatizing, accessory as a status enhancing symbol. Consequently, designers in their roles as taste experts dismissed Bling due to its strong connotations of bad taste.

5.3 Reflections on methodology and trustworthiness

After completing this project, one may reflect on its scientific merits. *Validity* is a framework of criteria commonly used in quantitative research in order to examine the "truth" or "falsity" of a hypothesis or an observation. The equivalent framework in qualitative research is *trustworthiness*, see Table E. As the nature of this project has been qualitative, it is relevant to discuss the *trustworthiness* of the project.

The trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of a project is important for evaluating its value. In the following section, the four criteria of trustworthiness and what they involve are presented along with an account of how they were dealt with in this research project.

* As discussed in section 1.4 Designers' roles.

Traditional criteria for judging quantitative research	Alternative criteria for judging qualitative research
Internal validity	Credibility
External validity	Transferability
Reliability	Dependability
Objectivity	Confirmability

Table E. Criteria for judging quantitative vs. qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

5.3.1 Credibility: confidence in the “truth” of the findings

The purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participants’ perspective. Consequently, the only ones who can evaluate the credibility of the outcome are the participants. In order to secure the credibility criterion, two steps were taken. First of all, the workshops were rehearsed in small scale pilots in order for outline flaws to be detected and corrected prior to the real event. Secondly, the Bling workshops were concluded with a discussion session where the participants reflected over and commented on the workshops. The discussions were documented by video cameras, researchers’ notes and participants’ written reports. This material was integrated in the analysis.

5.3.2 Transferability: showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts

The issue of transferability has so far been addressed by describing the research context and the central assumptions of the research project as thoroughly as possible. Moreover, a great deal of self-criticism has been applied while analysing the findings in order to avoid being carried away or drawing too generalized conclusions.

5.3.3 Dependability: showing that the findings are consistent and that they could be repeated

The notion of dependability emphasizes the need to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs. In this regard and in combination with the steps taken in order to secure the project’s credibility,* it was important to be alert in identifying and documenting eventual changes. The two researchers being involved in the project took notes independently during the research phases. These were compared and discussed in order to identify significant changes and/or differences regarding the setting and/or their own approach and, most importantly, in order to do the material and the participants justice.

The traditional view of reliability is based on the assumption of repeatability, which essentially concerns whether or not the same results would be obtained if the same thing could be observed twice. Although this is not a quantitative project, this criterion has to some extent been dealt with by examining whether or not the designers’ initial negative reactions to

* See last point under section 5.3.1, Credibility.

Bling were coincidental. For this reason, a series of workshops were planned and carried out. In order to witness the immediate responses, the Bling theme was kept secret prior to the start of the event. As reactions to the Bling theme were almost exclusively negative every time, planning of the project could continue.

5.3.4 Confirmability: degree of neutrality

Undoubtedly, if other researchers were to conduct this research project, they would have made other findings and drawn other conclusions. This is the reason why the background of the researchers is accounted for in this context. There are a number of strategies for enhancing confirmability, i.e. the degree to which the outcomes could be confirmed by others. The procedures have been documented for checking and rechecking throughout the study. Furthermore and most importantly, the close collaboration with a research colleague allowed taking a “devil’s advocate” role at times with respect to the results. This process helped bring potential biases and contradictions to light and ensured a more nuanced analysis of the material.

Studying a context that is partially one’s own can be quite problematic. This challenge was addressed by trying to be as unbiased, open, reflective, critical and flexible as possible and also by ensuring that several theoretical perspectives were involved. Moreover, some project phases were conducted in co-operation with several research students. Thus, the strategy employed granted that the project could make sense to others as well.

The clash between Bling and Design was relevant for several reasons. The general dislike displayed by the designers against Bling gave rise to so many questions that it was impossible to go on without investigating them further. Furthermore, it proved to be a content rich platform for discussing the role design can play in dealing with complex, “wicked” problems, e.g. sustainability.

6 FINAL REFLECTIONS

“Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones. ... The engineer, and more generally the designer, is concerned with how things ought to be - how they ought to be in order to attain goals, and to function.” (Simon, 1969).

Such positive visions regarding the future and how design ought to contribute to that future may prove to have a narrow outlook due to the existence of underlying norms and values that may contradict one another. Conflicts that designers face regarding objectives, requirements and roles have been illuminated and brought to the surface through the implementation of a breach, i.e. Bling. One may, however, question whether and how this line of thinking is relevant for design. What can design benefit by Bling?

The provocation Bling instigated served as a content rich platform for designers to confront some of the challenges they encounter in their professional practice, enabling them to reflect over and question their comfort zone and step outside its borders. By adopting a critical and empathic perspective, designers can be empowered to be proactive to changes and thus contribute even more to an open society. Evolving this skill is not a way of claiming the design profession to be a universal solution to all problems. Rather, it indicates a creative way to reflect on and process cultural stereotypes and subjective prejudices, not only in design but in other contexts as well.

6.1 Implications and future research

This project highlighted that existing design research frameworks, more often than not, fail to include designers and their challenging roles into their models and it also described contradictions in the expectations designers are likely to face in their different roles.

Empathy has often been claimed to be an important characteristic for any professional practice, which is true also for designers: to achieve empathy, one must determine for whom to design in order to establish how to design. This could be achieved by encouraging designers to become more open and receptive to contexts that they would not choose to work with themselves. The process can be summarized as is illustrated in Figure 11:

Figure 11. Reflecting over a perceived provocation caused by an intended or unintended breach may help transform the understanding of the underlying reasons behind the provocation and thus facilitate multiple perspectives.



Is it then possible to Bling up Eco? Providing that some degree of openness and understanding towards unfamiliar, uncomfortable cultural contexts is reached through which a setting aside of subjective values occurs: yes, it is.

In spite of the difficulties first encountered, it was surprising to witness the process in which the design students' initially negative opinions were re-negotiated and turned into something unconventional, creative and visionary. This shift towards more positive attitudes in relation to Bling became explicit when the students managed to move their focus from what Bling *is*, i.e. an exaggerated, loud, extravagant, in-your-face attitude, to instead focus on the benefits when considering what Bling *does* for its users. Although it is important to understand what Bling *is* in order to embrace it as a source of inspiration, the what-Bling-*does* aspect proved to be particularly beneficial with design practice and creativity in mind.

The Bling project illustrates that designers' roles sometimes stand in contrast and even conflict to each other, which in turn may hamper the design process and the quality of the outcome. In this case, the balance between designers as individuals on the one hand and their roles as user representatives, taste experts, and creators of meaning on the other, seemed to be both delicate and unstable.

So far, the main focus of the research project has largely concerned examining whether or not it is self-evident for designers to combine their different roles in a natural and unproblematic manner. Henceforth, the emphasis will mainly lie on exploring how to raise the awareness of existing biases and how to address them. Future studies will focus on enabling designers to reflect over and improve their professional practice by raising awareness regarding the norms and values involved and facilitating an active use of them.* More specifically, the studies will involve:

- Identifying potential breaches with themes as provoking as Bling, e.g. xenophobia, fundamentalism, themes on social class/"white trash", etc. Furthermore, these themes will be explored by developing and implementing breaching workshops in a design education context. Thus, issues of representation, norms, values etc., will be addressed and questioned and the students will be given the opportunity to reflect over their roles as designers: taste experts, user representatives, form creators, etc.
- Deepening the understanding of the material by theoretical studies, e.g. symbolic interactionism, post-colonialism, gender studies, queer theory, taste theory, semiotics, etc.

Personal preconceptions are something everyone suffers from, not only designers. Becoming aware of them and being able to transform them into conscious breaches through informed

* E.g. by implementing the model of double loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1974).

provocation, can serve as an entry point for creative design practice, which may perhaps prove to be as powerful and useful as any other source of inspiration for designers in their work. This approach may increase the possibilities to identify opportunities in terms of new, controversial, unpredictable, creative, etc., ideas, better products and even professional roles, opportunities that would otherwise have been missed.

6.2 Concluding remarks

Bling is cocky. For designers to feel provoked by Bling is a natural reaction because, like everyone else, they are also surrounded and influenced by various cultural contexts and sets of norms and values. Nonetheless, a strong sense of consensus regarding e.g. aesthetic values may hamper opportunities for individual expression and creativity and may also lower the innovative height of the professional practice of designers.

This work is a step towards actively questioning existing consensus and bursting “subjective bubbles” along with the limitations attached to them. In spite of their initially negative reactions, the design students within the framework of this project managed to leave the safe path behind and venture beyond their comfort zones, thus taking the chance to surprise themselves and exceed their own expectations.

There is no shortage of opinionated voices stating how the design profession or design education should be practiced. Hopefully, Bling will be seen for what it is: a chance to stir up lively discussions around stereotypes, roles, norms and values and less of a critique of designers or design educations. The underlying wish has always been to contribute to an open climate, critical reflection, moral intelligence and courage to meet future challenges proactively (Eckhardt, 2007),* challenges that will require an ability to handle and interpret complex cultural contexts and values with an open mind.

Stumbling across Bling was a lucky coincidence that could not be overlooked. It was not simply an impulse; it felt like an obligation to explore and understand the reactions Bling stirred up and why. It was fascinating to witness how colleagues, students, and friends became engaged in animated Bling conversations and generously shared Bling experiences and material.

* Link, accessed 17th January 2012:
http://issuu.com/undstekniskahogskola/docs/just_five_years?mode=embed&viewMode=presentation&layout=http%3A%2F%2Fskin.issuu.com%2Fv%2Fcolor%2Flayout.xml&backgroundColor=FFFFFF

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APPENDIX

Bling and How its Message Captures Our Interest

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Abstract

Diamonds and big gold jewellery, manifesting newly won financial status, are the main points of reference when bling appears in the media today. But what is bling exactly? Who are the bling users? What products are considered as bling? What are the product characteristics of bling? This article is a first attempt to shed some light to the above questions. The answers give raise to curiosity and strong emotional reactions, mainly negative ones. What the underlying reasons to these reactions are and how the clear semantic message of bling products can be transformed into other types of products will be investigated in future studies.

Conference theme: Lust and Desire or Values and Culture

Keywords: bling, identity, lifestyle

What is bling?

“In 1999, a 17-year-old rapper from New Orleans called BG (Baby Gangsta) wrote the lyric, ‘Can see my earrings from a mile, blingbling’. BG didn’t know it at that time, but he had just coined a term that would cross over from the ghetto into mainstream culture. ‘I just wish that I’d trademarked it’ Mr Gangsta said later, ‘so I’d never have to work again’ “(Hauser and Lownes, 2005).”

Bling is a slang word from Jamaica, an *ideophone* (a sound intended to evoke an idea) for the light reflected by diamonds (Wikipedia Eng, 2008, Wiktionary Eng, 2008). The word has been adopted by American rappers and is used when referring to shiny jewelry that displays wealth, such as a diamond ring or a golden necklace or bracelet (figure 1). Bling also exists in the context of conspicuous consumption and materialism: expensive cars and a lifestyle where it is important to expose one’s wealth in a simple, direct and obvious manner through expensive consumption habits. In the hip-hop culture bling represents cash flow and status. Diamonds are not a discrete investment; they are a lifestyle representing the ultimate prize, the high-water mark of success, the glimmering finale (Duffy, 2003).



Figure 1: Bling is associated with expensive and bombastic jewellery and watches (The Bling King, 2008).

During the 70s the word bling was used in TV-commercials to describe the sound of light being reflected, for example advertisements for chewing gum that guaranteed white teeth with a “bling” (Duffy 2003). In the 80s bling occurred in tooth paste advertisements. The meaning of bling and how it is used today has very little to do with shiny white teeth (Duffy 2003). It was

the American rapper B.G. in 1999 who in the lyrics of one of his songs was the first to use bling in the way we are accustomed to (Hauser and Lownes, 2005). The last decade the term has been adopted by a wider public. In 2002 bling made it into the Oxford English Dictionary and in 2006 in Merriam Webster (Wikipedia, 2008).

The definition of bling in the Oxford English Dictionary is: Ostentatious, flashy; designating flamboyant jewellery or dress. Also: that glorifies conspicuous consumption; materialistic. Duffy (2003) defines bling in a wider perspective. Bling stands for values associated with toughness, violence (e.g. professional boxing) or even criminality but also with exclusive brands like Bentley, Dom Perignon, Gucci, Rolex, Prada, etc., that are connected to economic status and luxury. There are big companies who use the word in their advertising campaigns. In France the term “nouveau riche” and bling are used interchangeably as synonyms, a fact which further stresses the conception of who uses bling as means to manifest status (Wikipedia, 2008).

Bling does not necessarily have to be associated with products. The French president Nicholas Sarkozy (figure 2, right top) is sometimes mentioned as “president Bling” by the media (Crumley, 2007 and Samuel, 2008). Is it due to his exclusive lifestyle, thanks to his wife Carla Bruni and her star status or because he is nouveau riche? Even though it was the rap artists and the subcultures around them who were the ones to popularise bling by the end of the 90s, there are today other strong subcultures that have a great influence on the bling market. The common denominator for these groups is “new” money. One typical such group are the professional football players who earn millions or even more so, footballers’ wives (figure 2, left top) who spend their days by spending their husbands’ money (Inside Out, 2003). These economically independent groups are imitated by “wannabees” who spend their limited assets on extravagant consumption in order to seem bling. There are of course bling “groups” to be found among music (figure 2, bottom) and movie stars.



Figure 2: Left top: Victoria Beckham is a glamorous footballer's wife but very few lower division soccer wives live in luxury (Inside Out, 2003).

Right top: Nicolas Sarkozy and Carla Bruni stroll by the pyramids during their New Year break in Egypt (Samuel, 2008).

Bottom: Hip-Hop culture (Wikipedia, 2008).

What products are associated with bling?

Due to the origins of bling in the rap culture, the term is primarily associated to the very visible, obvious, glittering and glitzy jewelry rap artists wear in order to draw attention to their person. Large pieces of golden jewelry covered with diamonds. Bling can also be other types of luxurious accessories like watches or cell phones made of gold. The exclusive materials may also be found in clothing and other objects like golden car wheel rims that can easily cost more than an average car. It is impossible to pass by a bling product without noticing it. The eyes are drawn to it because they are so evident, over-explicit and visible (figure 3).



Figure 3: Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt gave their little Shiloh a pacifier with true diamonds. This is the imitation "Bling Pacifier Diamond Crystals" available for 55 \$ (Allt om barn, 2008).

What are the typical characteristics for bling?

Bling is straight to the point, easy to recognize, it announces its message in a loud manner: Bigger is better, more is better, glitzier is better. Bling products and their style are very easy to distinguish and also to recognize their high price level. Explicit exposure of brands and logos is another characteristic for bling products (figure 4). The main target group for bling is the nouveaux riches. They can afford bling and are eager to demonstrate their wealth in contrast to “old money” people who can be more discrete and where the codes are accessible only within their own group and to initiated few. This contrast has often been characterized as vulgarity vs. sophistication.

What is so vulgar and tasteless about bling and why is it dismissed by the arbitrariness of taste, e.g. the design community? Bling conveys an honest and direct message that should be desirable to aim at in other contexts. In marketing for instance, it should be a dream situation to launch a new product to the market with these characteristics.



Figure 4: A poster advertising a queer event (Queercity, 2008).

Tasteless/tacky or brilliant?

Products that possess bling qualities manifest status in an explicit manner (figure 5), a status based on money, power, women, criminality, etc. The bling qualities are quantitative and the product expression is like mentioned before “more is better” and “bigger is better”. This is in contrast to the existing aesthetic norms in the western world that are very much influenced by

minimalism and functionalism. Bling is culturally mediated: some cultures are more bling than others and what is considered to be bling differs from one culture to another. For instance, golden cell phones are immensely more popular in the Middle East than in Europe, many wives manifest wealth in some Arabic countries, and in India, as many golden bracelets as possible indicate the size of the dowry.



Figure 5: “I love the word 'bling.' It can be loud, proud and sparkly as well as cheap and tacky. But if you want to pull out all the stops to sparkle at your wedding, then shake your bridal bling. Go for a silver, show stopper of a dress with a sparkling waist corset. Beautiful dresses should be complemented with great jewellery” (Chafer, 2006).

Bling is neither subtle nor sophisticated. There is no secret code needed or belonging to an initiated group in order to decode a bling product. Its message is honest and obvious, it is about status. Could this be the reason why the arbitraries of taste dismiss bling as tasteless? The message can easily be understood by all, both the members of the specific sub-group and the outside spectators. In this respect there is a difference: groups with traditional financial independence are not willing to let “unauthorized” people in. In order to have access to the keys to the code and be able to distinguish right from wrong, one must be part of this world and be familiar with the norms and values of sophisticated taste.

To make something accessible and explicit so its message may be understood by everyone is demystifying and is therefore instead considered vulgar. Bling is considered to be vulgar and bad taste by many, especially so in the design community. It is status for the nouveau riche consumer to buy bling. But what about the designer, is it as high a status to design bling products? Do designers show off their bling products in the same way the market or the consumer does?

What would happen if the positive bling characteristics such as honest and to the point communication were transferred to other product categories?

Maybe the design critics have dismissed bling as tasteless and uninteresting due to the fact that it is acting on a different level. The stamp of vulgarity hinders the positive, honest characteristics to be adopted by other product categories that might benefit by a more obvious and clear message and thereby become more accessible and desirable.

Future Research

This presentation of the concept of bling is mainly based on internet searches and is made as an initial phase of our research project in order to understand how bling is described and used by the media. The continuation of the project will focus on deepening the understanding of the definition of bling and its use. The work will be carried out as an ethnographic study and investigate how bling is described by a certain medium (in this case www.BBC.com) over a given period of time in order to achieve a refined definition. Furthermore, the definition will be evaluated and verified through interviews and observations of fans and opponents of bling. Thus it will become more evident why bling evokes such strong emotional reactions, either positive or negative. Finally and in co-operation with design offices and industry, the bling components will be used and transformed into other product categories.

What makes bling particularly interesting, is that it "makes people talk". This pre-study has been presented at some seminars to an audience of mainly design researchers. Each occasion gave rise to vivid discussions regarding the bling phenomenon. Everyone seemed to have a strong opinion and an urge to express it. Opinions revealed strong emotional responses, sometimes positive but mainly negative. Bling generates contradicting feelings and does not seem to have a grey zone, people either love it or hate it. For this reason, we intend to conduct a meta-study of bling where the audience's reactions to bling would be the object of study. The fact that design researchers have strong opinions regarding bling is interesting *per se*. However, in order to comprehend the reasons why bling upsets people to such an extent, we must first understand the motives behind the choice of bling. What is so attractive with bling? Why do people choose to manifest status in such an upsetting way? What are the emotional decisions behind these choices? When we understand the underlying reasons for choosing bling to express identity and lifestyle, we can go one step further and transform and use bling characteristics in product areas that lack the qualities bling possesses, e.g. a wheelchair that can generate a strong sense of pride and manifest status.

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Nordes09 Exploratory paper

Theme: Consumption

TO BLING OR NOT TO BLING?

CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF CONSUMER PRODUCTS

It is impossible to pass by a bling product without noticing it. The eyes are drawn to a bling product because it is so evident, over-explicit and visible. Bling is straight to the point, easy to recognize, it announces its message in a loud manner: Bigger is better, more is better, glitzier is better.

Bling is a lifestyle that was born by rap musicians in the United States in the late 90s. Furthermore, bling is associated with over-consumption and is occasionally even used as an invective. Why is the phenomenon of bling interesting for design research? Simply and very importantly because, in our experience, bling makes people talk. Every one has a highly emotional opinion on bling regardless if it is positive or negative. By being a strong catalyst, bling can be used to elicit users' opinions on product value, product experience and product identity. We intend to use bling as a catalyst in meeting with users, and thus obtain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and the underlying factors that affect the way users select products to manifest their identity, status and other important social characteristics. In order to cover as wide ground of the phenomenon as possible, different approaches will be used; database searches, surveys and interviews. Whether and how bling entails inherent possibilities to be transformed into

other product areas will be explored in a future investigation, i.e. using bling in the design process as a metaphor, as a provocation, and as a “Trojan” for creativity.

INTRODUCTION

“Bling is a concept, a sound effect, a light refraction, a lifestyle. Bling is status. Bling is loud. There is nothing as intoxicating as walking into a nightclub blinged with your best on your wrist, chest, ears, all eyes on you, captivated by your glow as you silently acknowledge your props... Bling is anything and everything today in pop culture that expresses wealth to the highest degree. And bling is here to stay.” (Ossé and Tolliver, 2006).

Bling originates from the rap culture and the term is primarily associated to large pieces of golden jewelry covered with diamonds. Some rap artists wear these very visible, obvious, glittering and glitzy pieces of jewelry in order to draw attention to their persons. Duffy (2003) defines bling in a wider perspective. According to Duffy bling stands for values associated with toughness, violence (e.g. professional boxing) and criminality.

The authors (200X) provide an outline of what bling is, what products are associated to bling, who the bling users are and how the arbitraries of taste relate to bling. The main target group for bling is the nouveaux riches. They can afford bling and are eager to demonstrate their wealth. “Old money” people on the other hand, are more discrete about signaling their status as the codes within this culture are accessible, even though they are subtle, within their own group and to the initiated few. This contrast can be

characterized as vulgarity vs. sophistication (Author Y and Author Z, 200X). Bling is neither subtle nor sophisticated. There is no secret code needed or belonging to an initiated group in order to decode a bling product. Its message is honest and obvious and it is all about status. Could this be the reason why the arbitrariness of taste dismiss bling as tasteless?

Bourdieu describes the link between culture and identity. He believes that the personal taste plays a distinctive role in that it distinguishes and classifies members of different groups in hierarchical systems. Through the use of taste, one classifies other persons while one at the same time is classified as a member of a group with a specific position in a social hierarchy (Broadly and Palme, 1984).

One question that comes to mind is why it is so important among sub-cultures such as hip hop to display success and wealth so “blingingly”? A blogger comments; “... It is just part of the process of ghetto culture becoming wealthy and indulging in whatever obvious and tasteless that puts their newfound wealth on display...” (BBC radio “A gentleman’s club, 2008).

However, there are darker sides of the shiny, glitzy bling. For one, it provides strong signals to next generations of how to be successful focusing on what to have rather than what they have the potential to be. Not all bling wearers have the financial freedom to support this excessive lifestyle. Young celebrity wannabes copy their idols with borrowed money, or even through criminality. Basic needs such as living and eating are minimized in the advantage of the bling affiliation. As other bloggers put it, living in a car is not a problem as long as the looks are in order and blinging enough (BBC radio “A gentleman’s club, 2008).

Another drawback is the so called bling category: the fake accessories copying the loud stylistic expressions. Producers of the faux bling are riding on the existing bling trend in order to earn money. Even though this cannot be regarded as real bling in our opinion, its main contribution is to introduce the lifestyle to new subscribers and get them hooked/addicted to a life based on conspicuous consumption.

Authenticity, vulgarity, individuality and their opposites are important dualities through which people construct distinctions between themselves and others through the expressions of tastes (Ulver-Engaging Artifacts 2009 Oslo www.nordes.org

Sneistrup, 2008).

The precious gems used to create the bling image can sometimes have quite problematic origins. One such example is the “conflict diamonds”. Since 1999, it became gradually known that many of the precious stones carried the blood of innocent victims, killed or mutilated by rebel groups in Africa who used the profits of diamond sales to continue their brutal and inhuman campaigns (Campbell, 2004). The increasing awareness regarding the “blood” diamonds has generated a growing demand for “conflict free diamonds” (Ossé and Tolliver, 2006).

The aim of this paper is to introduce how the phenomenon of bling can be studied within the context of design research and discuss its relevance for design research and practice. In a following phase we intend to explore the potential of bling by applying it into the design process in practice work. The experience gained through the bling phenomenon will on a general level provide a better understanding on how to study similar social and cultural expressions. More specifically, provide experience of how to use bling and/or similar expressions as a source of inspiration and creativity in the design process and a metaphor or provocation in product transformations.

OUTLINE AND METHOD

The reason why bling is particularly interesting for design research is simply that it “makes people talk”. Everyone exposed to bling seems to have a strong, emotionally charged opinion regarding the phenomenon and its manifestations, and an urge to express it. Bling generates contradicting feelings and does not seem to have a grey zone, people either love it or hate it (Author Y and Author Z, 200X)*.

In order to comprehend the reasons why bling excites people to such an extent, it is important to understand the motives behind the choice of bling. What is so attractive with bling? Why do people choose to manifest status in such an obvious and upfront way? What characterizes the decisions behind these choices? Are they deliberate or subconscious, emotional or rational, are they introvert or extrovertly directed? Furthermore, when the underlying reasons for choosing bling to express identity and lifestyle are understood, further steps can be taken, for example, to transform the bling characteristic into other product areas.

In order to handle bling as a provocation in the consumption debate and use as a metaphor in the

* (Author Y and Author Z, 200X), should be: (Christoforidou and Olander, 2008).

design process, we must begin by illuminating the phenomenon from as many angles as possible and thus reach a high level of understanding of what we are dealing with. We should bare in mind that bling represents only one social phenomenon among many others where products and thereby design are important manifestations. There are maybe hundreds of others e.g. glamour, grunche, posh, emo, punk, chav, etc. which also have strong social/subcultural connotations. We see bling as part of a larger phenomenon which has distinct limitations to surrounding areas and is thereby easier to isolate and study.

As we have mentioned before, one of bling's strengths is that it makes people talk. Therefore, methods that involve peoples expressed opinions are of value for conducting research on bling. As a first attempt to grasp the bling phenomenon, the following research approaches are proposed: to begin the study with a database search so to attain an initial understanding, continuing with questionnaires and interviews to deepen our understanding, and last to experiment with the phenomenon as a provocation in the design process.

Why database search? In order to make sure we leave our own preconceived ideas about bling behind, and to reach an understanding of the context and how bling appears in the media, we have decided to conduct a database search. Our choice of database will be guided by different criteria: it should be international, and cover several parts of the world; it should accommodate different types of media and address different types of audience segments. One candidate we consider is www.BBC.com. BBC's site contains culture, news, documentaries, blogs, etc., and covers TV, Internet and magazines. By searching on the word bling through the entire database, we should get many hits in the BBC forums, which in turn should provide the desired spread of the phenomenon's occurrence. All bling hits will be categorized which should give us a wider perspective of the phenomenon. The analysis of the categories would serve two goals, one being quantitative, were we would only account for the number of hits in the different bling categories and thus provide an understanding of the different aspects of bling. The other level of the analysis could be qualitative where we use a content analysis of the actual words used in the different hits (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The second part would give a more detailed understanding which could be used to describe the bling context and its use.

Why questionnaires and/or interviews? The database search is likely to raise questions in a number of areas that need to be addressed further, and most important the database search does provide any control over the

different sources for the analysed statements.

Therefore, rather than focusing on what is already out there, a different approach will also be adopted in the way that we would like to have some control over which areas people's views and comments regard. We want to achieve a directed/targeted communication on the phenomenon's parts that we feel are missing, or need to be confirmed or challenged. By using questionnaires or interviews we can have control of who express different opinion. Furthermore we get the possibility to receive feedback on the parts of the phenomenon that need clarification. One suggestion for this part of the study is to use questionnaires over the Internet and/or various already established blogs. There should be a large spread of different types of blogs that are different in nature so that we do not only reach the bling fans, such as Blondinbella (<http://blondinbella.se/>) or Manolo (<http://manolo.se/>) to capture different opinions. The same questions can appear in several different blogs to reach a width of views. One problem might be that we will still not have any control over who is responding, but over the topics. To overcome the lack of control of who is responding, we would like to complement the questionnaires with interviews. These might be with different personas that we know are into the bling world but also some persons that are of the opposite opinion, to get the contradictions.

Why experiment? When we have reached a deeper understanding and a good picture of the definition, we aim to apply the phenomenon into the design practice. We intend to begin to experiment by transforming bling's message into products: to use bling as a provocation or perhaps even a metaphor in the design process by transforming the semantic code of bling into other product areas. Since bling is a cocky culture where status is manifested with all clarity one could wish for, we would like to try to figure out ways to canalize this power bling holds. If we can master, use and transform the positive bling properties -e.g. the sense of pride bling conveys to its wearers- into other much-needed contexts such as assistive technology, ageing, sustainability, etc., bling can prove to be not only interesting but highly valuable as well. The definition of bling as a Trojan for creativity in the design process will make people talk. By performing a design workshop with design students we will explore how the characteristics of bling can be transformed and used in product areas that lack the very qualities bling possesses; e.g. a wheelchair that can generate a strong sense of pride and manifest status.

To summarize, our study should consist of both a descriptive part, to understand what bling is and how it manifests itself; and a normative part, to identify the characteristics of bling in order to support design

practice. The aim of the latter part would be to use the positive force of bling and by semantic transformations of certain types of products e.g. for marginalized users such as disabled, elderly etc., to give raise to new product values and product identities who provide a pleasurable experience when interacting with these new products.

DISCUSSION

How can bling be studied?

In this paper we present an outline of how a phenomenon such as bling can be studied within the context of design research. We will begin with a descriptive part in order to understand the phenomenon itself, and continue with a normative part where we will experiment during the design process by applying bling as a provocation and / or inspiration with the aim to question, change and enrich both the design process and the final outcome. There are certainly other approaches to tackle the phenomenon and set up the study. Our intent is to work with bling on as many levels as possible and thus avoid being trapped in our own and others' prejudices regarding bling, or in superficial stylistic expressions. In our opinion, a wheelchair does not become blingish just by applying diamonds on it. There are deeper qualities that bling possesses that are connected to the semantic interpretations. We are trying to grasp these qualities by working both descriptive and experimental.

Why should bling be studied through design research?

In research related activities it is often quite difficult to initiate and engage people in interesting discussions. Bling has proven to be very rewarding in this respect and could therefore possibly enrich any research context where dialogues concerning human values, thoughts, feelings, etc., are central e.g. within social and behavioral sciences, consumer studies, etc. More specifically, we consider bling to be an especially interesting topic for design research because of the semantic challenges it enriches the design process with.

What relevance does bling have to the design practice?

Firstly, by being a catalyst that bridges the gap between designer and user, and secondly, bling can enforce the creative mindset in the design process due to its provocative / extreme nature. The final result may be given added values that can help deepen users' relationship to the products and make the overall product experience more pleasurable. Eventually this and may even contribute to changing negative consumption patterns.

Today bling is closely linked to the hip-hop culture.

However, Ossé and Tolliver (2006) remind that bling has always existed. From the very early days of mankind, stringing together gold nuggets, feathers and bone to today's exclusive golden and diamond jewelry, are an expression of stylistic and financial freedom. This gives raise to several questions that we would like to investigate in a coming phase: How has bling evolved over time? Does bling exist outside the hip-hop culture? If so, can it still be referred to as bling? Which characteristics are constant and which are changing from culture to culture?

Bling is a great topic to study that will probably take us to paths we could not imagine on beforehand. We are constantly intrigued by the phenomenon, its manifestations and the discussions it generates. It is like a single snowball starting an avalanche. For this reason it would be very interesting to conduct a meta-study of bling where the audience's reactions to bling would be the object of study. The fact that design researchers have strong opinions regarding bling is interesting *per se*. However, there are some ethical dilemmas that need to be considered before setting out studying audiences "under cover" regarding authorization, etc.

CONCLUSION

We are interested in product experiences, how people relate to and what they wish to signal through products.

We have begun to examine the phenomenon of bling, an extravagant style that has its roots in hip-hop culture. There are many reasons why we are fascinated by bling. This phenomenon leaves no one indifferent and we have learned that people are more than willing to share their views, irrespective of whether they are provoked or feel attracted. Bling can be an important catalyst in engaging with people as designers. By analysing bling, we try to understand the phenomenon and its components. What are the bling-specific design elements? Can you these be put into other product categories such as tools, sustainable products, etc., and generate the same sense of pride that bling-users radiate?

The idea is not to restrict the work to the superficial styling and production of luxury segments, but rather use bling as a Trojan for greater creativity in design work and a metaphor in product development. Bling is a cultural manifestation, among many others to communicate identity and affiliation through. By exploring bling we hope to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms behind social

trends, consumption patterns and human drivers to enrich, broaden and challenge the design work.

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THE LOVE AND HATE OF BLING PRODUCTS AN INDUSTRIAL DESIGN STUDENT CASE

For blind review do not fill in your name(s) here,
For blind review do not fill in your affiliation(s) here.
For blind review do not fill in your e-mail address(es) here

ABSTRACT

There are many different factors that influence our perception of products i.e. personal, product related and external factors. For designers to be able to address them all when creating new products we need to deepen our understanding of the totality of perceptual experiences from non-instrumental interaction with products. We have explored how design students engaged with a product category with special product characteristics that generate a lot of attention and emotional reactions, namely Bling products, who people seem to either love or hate. In order to explore this love-hate relationship to Bling products, we analysed nine industrial design student projects on the topic 'the future bling'. Self-reflective reports on the students' design projects were categorized with the help of the Perceptual Product Experience framework (PPE). Even though the students were confronted with a product type they initially disliked, we found that they transformed their perception of Bling both regarding pleasure and meaning aspects of perceptual experiences.

Keywords: product identity, product experiences, Bling, design student cases.

INTRODUCTION

Whatever we perceive (i.e. take in to our sensory system through external stimuli) and experience (responses which arise as a result of perceived stimuli), can either be characterised as being primarily related to sensory input, processing and making sense of such input, or as emotional and value based response to input. For example, we may regard ecologically grown tomatoes to be smaller in size but tastier compared to conventionally cultivated

alternatives. As they require a long distance transport from their source however, the good feeling of having done an environmentally conscious choice is somewhat challenged in the process, and we may be unsure what the most sustainable alternative really is. In a situation like this, we experience what we perceive from two points of view, the presentational and the representational.

The presentational aspect is pleasure-dominated; the experience is primarily dependent on compositional and morphological criteria such as how and why they stimulate our senses and catch our attention, as well as the emotional response such as the valence dimension displeasure-pleasure, or arousal dimension deactivated-activated (Russell, 1980, 2003). For example, the organic tomato might not look as good as the conventionally grown alternative and the initial emotional response may be of the rejecting kind, further augmented by the higher price.

The representational aspect on the other hand, is meaning-dominated; the experience is caused by processes of recognising, remembering, and attributing value to perceptions. Here, narratives, storytelling and cultural aspects come into play in shaping our perceptions and determining the experience. Thus, the ecological message of the organic tomato and the ethical and environmental values it stands for, will influence our decision contributing to a more sustainable world, rather than choosing the greenhouse-cultivated option. Consequently, when we interact with products there is a variety of factors that influence our experience. As a designer you need to address them all.

OUT OF CONTROL

In this paper we explore the love and hate relationship to products exemplified by a product category which is characterized by an extreme product identity, Bling products, and thereby triggers people's subconscious values on good and bad taste. Philosophically and theoretically, a Bling product constitutes a threat to designers' opinions on good taste (Christoforidou et al, 2011). Therefore, as a starting point for our exploration, we have analysed design projects carried out by industrial design students on the topic of future Bling products. To be able to elucidate how designers could work with extremes such as "love" and "hate" and influence the creation of strong bonds to products, we mapped the students' self-reflective reports on their design process with the help of a categorization model, the Perceptual Product Experience framework (PPE). Thereby, we can take into account how they perceived product experiences from two different perspectives: the presentational and the representational.

THE PRESENTATIONAL ASPECTS OF PRODUCT EXPERIENCE

People strive to achieve "good taste", and see beauty as something elevated and divine (Christoforidou et al, 2011). Since the days of Plato, people have been influenced by the argument that true beauty resides in the *idea* of beauty. Even if the arguments nowadays are expressed slightly different compared to Plato's ambition to explain the perception of things around us, people still adopt values indicating that ideas are more valuable and beautiful than actions. For instance, Norman (2004) claims that products' beauty emanates from the user's *conscious reflection* and experience influenced by knowledge, learning, and culture. When it comes to the designed product, it is often pointed out that a product must have a content, not just appearance (Vihma, 2007). The product should be well worked-out from a holistic perspective, i.e., thoughts about the product are more crucial than its creation (Ask, 2004). Merely imitating something that already exists, contributes with less value to a product compared with a product's innovative aspects that reflect the designer's underlying intention (Vihma, 2007; Crilly, 2005). Furthermore, objects are considered to have status and value when identified as being 'designed'. In this way design is, according to Crozier (1994), given meaning as a lifestyle,

something aesthetically pleasing or fashionable. However, in 'being' designed lies also an opportunity for designers to play with infusing products with status as a result of being an expression for beauty and consequently good taste. Hence, in that way designers may influence the prerequisites for creating love and hate relationships to products.

The beautiful can be equated with the true and proper. Sandqvist (1998) however, defends ugliness by arguing for the idea that what is ugly is alive. People are attracted to ugliness because it is alive and filled with delight. Ugliness escapes the demand for credibility, and is allowed to express itself and play. Bad taste is more tolerant, 'mischievous', and provides more joy than good taste, which labours under the demands of maintaining the true, the divine (Ivanov, 2004). Sandqvist (1998) describes ugliness as the reason for beauty, not its antithesis or negation. Consequently, for designers' designing products with the connotation to ugliness and bad taste can be seen as an opportunity to initiate discussions that trigger our subconscious values (cf. Ahl and Olsson, 2002).

The word 'Bling' is used to represent a lifestyle where it is important to signal wealth in a straight-forward manner through ostentatious consumption (Ossé and Tolliver, 2006). Originally, 'Bling' is an onomatopoeic slang term from Jamaica that imitates the imaginary 'sound' of light when hitting and being reflected by a diamond (Wikipedia, 2008). The term has been adopted by American rap artists and is usually employed to describe glittering jewellery that indicates wealth: showy diamond rings, large golden necklaces and accessories. The diamonds represent the ultimate prize, the height of success, the glittering finale (Duffy, 2003). To summarize; Bling products shout out their message: bigger is better, more is better, glitzier is better (Christoforidou and Olander, 2009). Consequently, Bling products can be interpreted only by a superficial exposure of status linked to appearance without any connection to Plato's world of ideas and thereby the truly beautiful (Christoforidou et al, 2011). Hence, Bling represents products where the appearance and not the products' content is in focus. Bling is therefore perceived as a direct opposite to products representing good taste.

THE REPRESENTATIONAL ASPECTS OF PRODUCT EXPERIENCE

Some products are easier accepted and better appreciated by the user than others. We forge relationships to products around us all the time and some of these relationships are stronger than others, generating strong emotions such as love and hate. Schifferstein et al. (2004) define the strength of such a relationship as the user having an emotional bond to specific products, the user feels attached to the product. One way for designers to create product attachment when designing new products according to Mugge (2007), is to let the individual invest some of him or herself into the product by personalization. According to Ahuvia (2005), many precious objects result in a crisis identity for their users. Such objects are linked to the self – both as expressions of the current self and simultaneously as contributors to the alteration of the self into a more desired form. However, what one prefers or not, is related to one's person. Hence, taste is associated with a person's experience of the self in the way that taste reflects that person's innermost self. Therefore, by extension, taste reveals the person to others (Crozier, 1994).

Brunius (1961) arguments on aesthetic taste could provide one explanation as to why people in design circles are provoked by the Bling phenomenon (Christoforidou and Olander, 2009). One strong characteristic of Bling is the quantitative aspect, i.e. more is better. One single diamond is not Bling, an excessive number of diamonds in infinite repetition however, is (Christoforidou et al, 2011). Brunius (1961) argues that boredom caused by repetition can be the enemy of beauty. Discussions on Bling raise questions and elicit discomfort (Christoforidou et al, 2011); they lead to debate and defence of the participants' own lifestyles (Abelsson, 1986). Individuals feel ill at ease when being in environments and contexts where their own values and lifestyles are questioned (Giddens, 1997). Consequently, Bling products might be considered as a threat to good taste (Christoforidou et al, 2011).

THE PERCEPTUAL PRODUCT EXPERIENCE FRAMEWORK (PPE)

During the latest decennium, design research has focused a great deal on product experience. There are many different frameworks for explaining product experience: e.g. Jordan (2000) describes product experiences in relation to pleasure whereas Desmet (2002) proceed from emotions in relation to product experiences. Furthermore, by mapping consumers' responses and designers' intentions, Crilly (2005) describes how we can understand and interpret products. Common ground for these frameworks explaining product experience, is that they all focus on one dimension of product experience: Jordan (2000) and Desmet (2002) on the affective level, whereas Crilly's (2005) main focus lies on the cognitive level.

The perceptual product experience (PPE) framework structures experiences as being brought about through processes of sensory, cognitive, or affective stimuli and response (Warell, 2008). Experiences are considered subjective and specific to each perceiver, and depend on personal factors (experiences, background, cultural values and motives), product related factors (type of product, properties and characteristics, brand), and external factors (environmental, social and economic context). The PPE framework regards perceptual product experience as composed of three core modes; the sensorial, the cognitive, and the affective modes of experience (see figure 1). The three core modalities recognise all possible types of perceptual experience of products and other phenomena including: (1) initial impression and recognition of product existence and specific perceptual characteristics, (2) making sense of the product, its manifestation, structure, use, origin and purpose, and (3) the affective response, attribution of value to, and judgment of the product.

Within these dimensions and the core modes, the framework distinguishes between six experiential modes.

OUT OF CONTROL



Figure 1. Framework of perceptual product experience (PPE), with core modes (centre) and the two dimensions of presentation (left) and representation (right) with sub modes.

Impression is the essential and first part of the experience, which in turn can lead to any, or all, of the other experiences. In the PPE framework, impression is the purely sensorial experience of becoming aware of a product as a result of it being sufficiently 'different' to stand out, be noticed and attended to, referred to as 'active selectivity' by Arnheim (1970).

Appreciation is about "recognition of aesthetic values" (Merriam-Webster, 2008). In the PPE framework, appreciation engages cognitive processing of what we perceive through our senses. Arnheim (1970) argues that the cognitive operations are "essential ingredients of perception itself".

Emotion is the affective response evoked by the combination of product stimuli, subjective concerns and an appraisal (Desmet, 2002). Furthermore emotions are a result of our assessment or appraisal of the product in light of our experience and concerns related to it (Desmet, 2002). According to Visser (2006), emotions are involved in the control of activity and influence thus decision making (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981).

The three modes of the representation dimension are related to the three types of semiotic signs: icon, index and symbol (Peirce, 1966). There is however no absolute mapping between the type of sign and the form of representation (Warell et al. 2006).

Recognition is based on direct, instantaneous processing of perceived stimuli – perception and recognition are inseparably intertwined (Arnheim, 1970). Recognition is based on familiarity, resemblance or similarity, and requires previous precedents to compare with. Thus, it is dependent on the existence of pre-established references stored in long term memory (Simon, 1992; Solso, 1999).

Comprehension is about making 'sense of things', i.e. that products are "understandable to their users" (Krippendorff, 2006). Comprehension is the message about the product itself, includes how the product describes its purpose and use, and expresses its properties and performance.

Association is about communication of, e.g., values, origin and heritage, and works solely through the creation and interpretation of symbolic signs. As such, this sub mode is dependent on subjective and socio-culturally conditioned processes of coding, which determine how we associate references with meaning through symbolic signs within target market groups with similar values and aspirations; interpretative communities (Chandler, 2006). In association, meaning is created (encoded) and interpreted (decoded) from two perspectives: from the point of view of the manufacturer, who uses the product to convey strategic brand messages and build brand values (Aaker, 1996); and from the point of view of the customer or user, who communicates personal values and preferences through ownership or use of the product.

METHOD

In order to explore the love-hate relationship people seem to have with Bling products, we studied how design students engaged in a design project with a Bling theme. Due to the fact that Bling is perceived as a threat to good taste in a design context (Christoforidou et al, 2011), we expected that the Bling topic for a design task would work as a provocation; that it would challenge and thereby trigger the students' subconscious values and prejudices.

Therefore, in a context of a trend course for industrial design students, we focused on the transformation of the design student's descriptions of their own pre-understanding and interpretations of the cultural phenomenon of Bling. In total, nine master students attended the course, which was a voluntary course outside the frame of the mandatory course curriculum. The students were an international group mainly from Europe. The course's design brief was to design a future Bling concept. In addition, the students were given inspirational input in the form of lectures on different topics related to trends, e.g. status, taste, forecasting, product identity and product experience. In order to help them move forward with their design process, we gave them two additional assignments. Firstly, they were tasked to research Bling historically and visualize what Bling meant to them by using mood boards as a medium. Secondly, they were assigned to visualize Bling in mass media today. Here, they studied how Bling is presented and represented by the media by collecting 10 up-to-date examples of Bling, annotated with their own reflections.

As a part of their participation in the trend course, the students were asked to document their reflections in various ways, both regarding Bling as concept, as well as their design process. By the end of the future Bling projects, the students were asked to write a self-reflective essay on the topic 'my Bling journey'. Since we had a premonition that the topic would be provocative for them to work with, we documented their immediate Bling associations before and after their work with the future Bling project.

POST-IT NOTE EXERCISE

Before the students received any information on their upcoming design project and lectures, we started out with a quick assignment in order to gather their very first reactions to Bling. Their reactions were elicited through two post-it-note exercises, one pre-project and another one post-project.

We distributed and collected post-it notes stating the very first thing that came into the students' to their minds when the following questions were posed: When I say "Bling"...

- ... which is the first word you associate to?
- ... which is your first feeling?
- ... which is the first person you think of?
- ... which is the first situation or event that comes into mind?
- ... which is the first product you associate the word to?

As the students were not given the opportunity to prepare themselves through discussions or Internet researching etc., we received a spontaneous response, followed by two minutes for reflection. This exercise was repeated by the end of the course, before the plenary presentations of their future Bling proposals. We listed their answers in relation to the five different categories, i.e. word, feeling, person, situation and product, and summarized their responses into mind-maps.

SELF-REFLECTIVE ESSAYS

In between the two post-it note exercises, the students worked on an individual design project with the brief to create a design concept that would bring Bling into the future. They were expected to visualize their final Bling proposals with free-hand or computer aided sketches. As a last assignment the students were asked to write an essay 'Your Bling journey' (3-5 A4 pages) where they summarized their process along with their personal reflections. They were to reflect over whether and how their understanding, expansion and transformation of their Bling concept had evolved and developed during the design process and how this development had affected their project.

OUT OF CONTROL

The essays were to be handed in together with the final presentation of their future Bling proposals.

ANALYSIS

After the completion of the course, we analysed the students' work, processes and end-results using a content analysis inspired approach and categorised our data with the help of the PPE framework with the primary objective of shedding light on possible transformations the students went through during their design processes. We reviewed three types of output from the students; words collected using the post-it note exercises before and after their design work, presentations material used during the final project presentation, and the self-reflective essays in which the students were asked to describe and reflect over their understanding of Bling in relation to their work process. The PPE framework allowed us to structure the students' perceptions and identify patterns with respect to how Bling affected students and why.

The presentations and the self-reflective essays provided a rich source of insights into students' views, ideas, and transformations while working with their future Bling projects. The post it-note exercises differ from the self-reflective essays, both in character and depth, being just immediate words without any explanation so as to why. The structure, i.e. the five different categories in which the words are presented were defined by us in advance based on our pre-understanding of what Bling usually is associated to or how it is explained (Christoforidou and Olander 2008, 2010).

RESULT

Regarding the post-it note exercises, it is interesting to mention that the most dramatic shift occurred with respect to feelings expressed by the students. In spite of the group being international, the initial pre-project reaction among the group was highly consistent and homogenous, exhibiting emotive reactions such as "disgust", "vulgar", "indifference", "shallow", "aversion" and "irks!". A collation of the words used by the students during the initial exercise is presented in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Initial post-it note exercise: First Bling impressions in five categories.

This initial reaction was contrasted by the post-project interpretations of Bling, see figure 3, where words such as "laugh", "proud" and "striving" were brought up. Subsequently, this attitude shift was reflected in the students' project outcomes presented directly following the final post-it note exercise.



Figure 3. Final post-it note exercise: Developed Bling impression.

At the below figure 4, a student's pre-project Bling references are illustrated directly on the modes of the PPE framework.

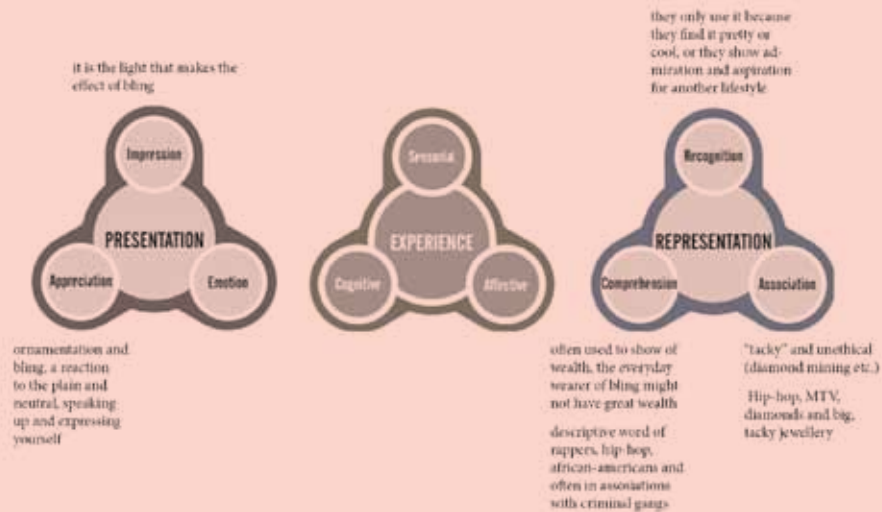


Figure 4. Pre-project Bling references experienced by a student (nr. 4) displayed on the modes of the PPE framework.

Student 1 transformed Bling from being about “taste problems” and creating ego-centric attention, to subtle Bling which is about the person, hiding the real self, to the merging of technology and jewellery in an electronic smart device providing hidden services that are useful in everyday life. These include key access, library card, lightings switch for the home, bus transit fee card, USB memory stick, and personal medical journal. For this student, it was important to transform Bling into something useful.

Student 2 transformed the essence of Bling from being about something quite useless, impractical and of show-off character to a symbolic statement, in suggesting a giant sized water tap for use in the bathroom (figure 5). The idea was based on the preciousness of access to clean water, and this was emphasized in a way which is consistent with the character of typical Bling objects being “talking pieces”.



Figure 5. The Bling water tap: an example of a future Bling concept.

Student 3 suggested that as natural resources become more scarce, washing will not be as common in the future. Consequently, people would not keep their hair, and would instead use a piece of “skull jewellery” (figure 6) which would substitute the decorative effect of hair and convey values of sustainability and wealth.

OUT OF CONTROL



Figure 6. Another example of a future Bling concept: Skull jewellery.

Student 4 started out from the onomatopoeic origin of the word Bling, i.e. the imaginary sound of light reflected by diamonds. Light itself can thus be regarded as a carrier of the Bling essence, resulting in a lamp which in a rather excessive way generates “useless” light by spreading it indiscriminately in all directions. As such, it reflects the superfluous aspect of Bling, including “hints of old Hollywood dressing-room mirrors, the reflector refers to disco balls, cut precious stones and crystals” (see figure 7).



Figure 7. Final Bling concept by student 4: Future Bling Lamp



Figure 8. Final Bling concept by student 5: A fur footed side table

Student 5 created a side table which, in a future where everything will have to be sensible, practical and logical, can lighten up the mood by infusing a bit of “Bling”, see figure 8. The table has a slender and shiny chrome leg with a foot covered with fake fur, the bear foot being “a humorous take on the classical gilded lion’s feet, regarded as a stamp of luxury”. As it cannot carry much, is made out of chrome which as material stains easily, and has a fake fur covered “bear foot” which is very difficult to clean, the table is highly impractical and “overtly useless”. According to the student it is thus bad taste and ironic, “taking trashy hip-hop Bling to a new level and making it coded”.

Another student entered the Bling project from yet a different angle: eastern rock and punk references and the lifestyle they represent. He singled out the underground quality of Bling to be inspired by and transformed his references into a personal future Bling concept: tattooed leather chairs, see figure 9.



Figure 9. Bling concept in the form of tattooed leather chairs.

Examples of students' references to experiences of Bling as expressed and articulated pre-project and post-project are summarized below in table 1. The nodes of the PPE framework are converted into a tabular format.

DISCUSSION

In order to reach a deeper level of understanding on the totality of perceptual experiences arising from non-instrumental interaction with products, in this paper we have explored the love and hate relationship Bling products seem to cause. How people relate to, and what they wish to signal, through products varies between cultures (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). However, as a subculture, Bling employs extreme and provoking manifestations of identity, self-expression and status. The distinct, extreme character of Bling and its provoking aspects are interesting from a pedagogical perspective as a way to canalize the creative driving force in a design education context, but also challenge the normative and break subjective boundaries. In our experience, Bling seems to make people talk! When Bling related

	Presentational aspects						Representational aspects					
	Impression		Appreciation		Emotion		Recognition		Comprehension		Association	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Stud 1			Flashy colours	Sober			Style, gold, different	Don't care		Attention, Service, guidance	Hip hop, bike, taste problem	Useful, high tech, money
Stud 2			Diamonds, shiny things, leather, pearls	Diamond, caravella gold			Different from the rest	Original, talking piece		Integration between technology and nature	Stones, glamour, expensive taste, bad taste, 'look at me'	London scene, individuality, authenticity, inequality, inequality
Stud 3	Bling culture	To be seen, attention is	Jewellery, shoes, expensive, unflagrant, smart, natural materials	simplicity			Don't be different		unfunctional	functional	Shiny, flashy, conspicuous, royalty + power: The more you have the more you are worth. Provocation, status	Revolution, ideology, aspirations, success, expensive, desirable
Stud 4	It is the light that makes the effect of bling	Other ways and objects that create the effect of bling	Ornamentation and bling, a reaction to the plain and normal, speaking up and expressing yourself	Simple decoration on, individual, sparkle, success, surveys on, bling, crystal prints			They only use it because they find it pretty or cool, or they show awareness and aspiration for another lifestyle	Appearing to be something else, bling as disguise	Often used to show wealth, the everyday want of bling might not have great wealth		'Tacky' and material (diamond among etc)	Cultural branding, less need to be obvious, postmodernity, hybridity, transnationality, mobility, displacement, individuality
Stud 5	Classy and upscale if		Diamonds, gold, jewellery, 'bling'/'bling' regular products				Luxury, indulgent		Flashing wealth, or trying to flash wealth, unexpected, it has no purpose beyond being decorative		Working and lower middle classes or newly wealthy, false, it's not about what it costs, but how you do it	

Table 1. PPE framework in tabular form: Student's pre- and post-project Bling experiences.

OUT OF CONTROL

products or the issue of Bling itself is brought up, the communication becomes personal and sincere. People engage in honest discussions, coloured by their subjective values and beliefs, rather than ruling conventions. This can be exemplified by the fact that all our students recognized Bling products as being something 'different' and they found them to be un-functional with no other purpose than being decorative.

Although the size of the group of students taking part in the Trends course was too small to serve as a basis to draw general conclusions, it was quite interesting to note the different entries and orders in their approaches and understanding. The Bling features the students chose to be guided by in their creative process towards unconventional future Bling concepts were among others: the sense of humour that characterizes some Bling expressions, the bombastic and pompous form language, the rarity and exclusivity of the materials involved, the un-necessity of it and the rebellious aspects. The students that were positive towards functionalism and minimalism seemed less prone to kitsch and Bling; they engaged the Bling project with a more mental, intellectual approach. Although they were open to question themselves and their initial reactions towards Bling on an intellectual level, in practice they preferred being inspired by and work with the immaterial qualities of Bling. They chose to emphasize on the humoristic twist that Bling products often communicate and the sparkling, twinkling play of light that Bling jewellery reflect. While some students were more careful in adopting bombastic Bling features, others seemed less restrained by the fear of being tacky or proposing tasteless concepts. They worked on a more intuitive and associative level during the initial phases. Perhaps they had access to cultural references including extrovert form language to be inspired and guided by in their work.

HOW BLING IS PRESENTED

After categorizing our data by using the pleasure-dominate presentational aspects (*impression, appreciation and emotion*), we could notice that the students' perceptions of Bling products shifted. The majority of the students' initial opinions regarded Bling as something quite far from their own taste references

and preferences. This became evident through the spontaneous post-it elicitation exercise as well.

To exemplify and clarify the reason for this emotional/attitude shift, we have highlighted some of their arguments from their project documentation and the self-reflective essays. Rather dominant shifts in perception were evident in the PPE framework's experience mode of Appreciation, were in the beginning of the course for instance, the students used words such as: flashy colours, diamonds, shiny things, pearls, jewellery, expensive, ornamentation, speaking up, expressing your-self, gold to describe bling. Whereas by the end of the course, they used words describing Bling as: sober, discrete, camouflaged, simple and decorative. This indicates that they changed the way of how they recognize the aesthetic value of Bling.

HOW BLING IS REPRESENTED

However we could also notice a shift in the students' perception of Bling after categorizing our data using the meaning-dominate representational aspects (*recognition, comprehension and association*) of product experiences. For these aspects we could only use the students' self-reflective reports. Here, the most dramatic shift occurred in the PPE framework's experience mode of Association. In the beginning of the project, the students used words like: fake, taste problems, bad taste, 'look at me', flashy, provocation, power, 'tacky' and unethical. Whereas by the end of the course, they used words like: useful, high-tech, individual, authentic, original, revolutionary, natural, durable, culture branding and simple instead. This illustrates that the students changed their view on what Bling communicate as a symbolic sign. There was a shift regarding the modes of Recognition and Comprehension as well, it was however not as prominent as for the mode Association.

THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER

Design is highlighted as the tool for creating competitive advantages, creating things differently, and changing things for the better (Forty, 1986; Simon, 1997). In their professional capacity, designers are supposed to relate to people's lives and situations in an empathic manner and find inspiration beyond the limits of their own contexts.

The values the students shared within the context of the common culture of the design community proved to be stronger than their respective backgrounds, thus leading to more homogenous values and reactions towards the controversial theme of Bling then we initially expected to find. The negative connotations of Bling expressed initially during the course however, did not seem to have a negative effect on their devotion to the project. Instead, the challenge provided through the task of understanding Bling in design terms eventually turned to a rich source of inspiration and creativity.

In the creation and maintenance of cultural phenomena, products and physical attributes are often employed to communicate values and identity. We believe that the understanding of such manifestations can be useful for design practice and may even contribute to change the role of the designer from a reactive to a proactive agent of change. In order to become empowered to take part in that change, and through designing appropriate associations and meanings, designers could prepare actively and consciously through establishing a deep understanding of relevant cultural characteristics. This can be a challenge for design students, who are simultaneously engaging in the process of being immersed in and establishing their own identity through the creation of normative codes within the design community.

Designers' various roles are sometimes surrounded by sets of values that can be elitist and myopic rather than open and inclusive. It is therefore important to try to break down any reigning consensus of monoculture that may exist within the design community. If we are to assume that design to some extent is a monoculture with a strong sense of consensus, regarding aesthetic values not to say the least, it is important not to neglect to cease every possible opportunity to rearrange and refurbish the foundations that constitute any inherent "Designology". By adopting a critical and empathic perspective through proactively working with the idea of informed provocation, designers are enabled to reflect over their role and to hopefully contribute to a more open society rather than merely being reactive to changes.

As we have seen, in the case of the future Bling projects, the students managed to transform how they perceived Bling but also how they viewed their own roles as designers.

CONCLUSION

In the described study, design students were challenged to confront and work with a subculture which to a high degree utilizes designed artefacts to communicate very specific messages and create a strong identity. Rather than adopting an alienating position, they were enabled and motivated to single out and understand relevant stimuli and messages in order to create, manage, transform and situate these references into positive and meaningful contexts and human habitats – as empathic interpreters and transformational agents, a critical skill for designers. This increased sensibility helps furnish our lives with less predictable, less conventional, highly personal and surprising objects/artefacts.

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Good Taste vs. Good Design: A Tug of War in the Light of Bling

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ABSTRACT Some products are considered to be 'bad taste' and therefore of less value. However, if we focus on what a product does to and for its users, rather than on what a product is, we can disregard superficial statements based on taste, and instead reach a better understanding of design. This reasoning is based on the relationship between 'good taste' and 'good design', terms which are sometimes confused and treated as synonyms. In this paper we explore the tension between 'good taste' and 'good design', and how designers can use that tension in the design process. We consider 'good taste' to be rooted in a subjective context of

Despina Christoforidou, Elin Olander, Anders Warell and Lisbeth Svengren Holm

inherent values, whereas ‘good design’ arises from competence and is based on professional skill. ‘Bad taste’ is here exemplified by products associated with the lifestyles of rap artists and the subculture of bling. Inspired by de Bono’s PO (1972, 1973) we created a thought-provoking brief for a design workshop for students. In the context of a course on trends, industrial design students were given the task of exploring how bling products are perceived in everyday life and proposing future bling scenarios. Their views on bling were compatible with how bling is presented in the media. However, when the students began to consider what the product *does* rather than what it *is*, they were able to use bling as a source of creativity for their own bling projects. What other design opportunities are overlooked by regarding products as being ‘bad taste’?

KEYWORDS: product design, taste, value, provocation, bling

Prologue: Why Bling?

I love the word ‘bling’. It can be loud, proud and sparkly, as well as cheap and tacky. (Bridalwave, 2008)



The quotation above originates from a blog about weddings, and describes a wedding dress and its intended accessories that will make the bride feel like a diamond in a piece of jewellery. We believe that this statement summarizes what characterizes bling exceptionally well. Most people regard bling products as conspicuous and therefore bling becomes impossible to ignore. Bling products divide public opinion into two camps, either you like them or you do not. Bling products seem to generate strong feelings and opinions, something we experienced very vividly the first time we presented our thoughts on bling during a design research seminar some years ago (Christoforidou and Olander, 2008a). The discussion that followed was explosive to say the least. It felt like all the participants wanted to comment on it, and many seemed to have a deep urge to clearly and distinctly accentuate their distaste for, and repudiation of, bling. For a moment, the audience forgot about the political correctness that usually surrounds an academic context. Instead they voiced comments in which prejudice and personal subjective values were obvious. For example, bling users were claimed to be vulgar, uneducated, stupid and unintelligent, representatives only of material and monetary values unconnected to what in general is considered to be good and morally correct.

Good Taste vs. Good Design: A Tug of War in the Light of Bling

During the rest of the seminar, the word ‘bling’ spread among the participants like wildfire. ‘Bling’ could be heard both during coffee-break discussions and popping up in presentations of other participants. We were not prepared at all for these strong reactions but we were quick to realize that we should investigate the curious relation between bling and design more closely. Why is bling so emotionally charged for designers and design researchers? The dramatic reactions during this design research seminar have functioned as our motivation for investigating further what actually happened. Why is bling considered to be bad design among designers? It also led to an investigation and analysis of theories of taste and its relation to design practice. The purpose of our theoretical and philosophical analysis of the relationship between bling, good design, and good taste in this paper, is to illustrate how products that represent an extreme taste stance can give insight into how people always react emotionally to design, and that this reaction is based on normative social values. Hence, can we learn something about design through bling? One thing we can certainly state: bling makes people talk!

The Struggle between Good Taste and Good Design

‘Good’ taste

In order to understand the struggle that takes place between bling as design expression and good/bad design, we want to begin by identifying what is meant by ‘good taste’. Even if it could be argued that what is considered beautiful has been demonstrated as a universal perception, we must remember that what is considered good taste is socially constructed. Furthermore, if something is socially constructed, it means that there is a process or system of people creating the criteria for determining what is to be considered as good taste.

In his book about aesthetics, Brunius (1961) claims that a person is regarded as exhibiting good taste if he or she is refined in his or her dealings with other people, choice of clothes, choice of home environment, opinions about art and so forth. In other words, when a statement is expressed on aesthetics and good taste, it is per definition a judgement. A person can state that something is good or bad, agreeable or disagreeable. However, it is only if a person who in addition to his or her statement of judgement expresses significant experience as the reason for the opinions, that this person is a competent judge of taste (Brunius, 1961). Consequently, it is not appropriate to simply express a taste-related opinion; one must also show that the thoughts behind that opinion are adequate to count as an expression of taste. It requires a legitimization to be judged as a competent arbiter.

The construction of good taste has some similarities with the construction of fashion, which is an institutionalized process and a rather closed system of actors that belongs to different organizations

Despina Christoforidou, Elin Olander, Anders Warell and Lisbeth Svengren Holm

and institutions (Kawamura, 2005). Kawamura refers to this not only as a process that is socially constructed but more of a symbolic construction – in contrast to the physical construction of the clothes – or in our context product design; two different but interdependent processes.

What is considered good taste in relation to product design is not decided upon in a closed system as shown for fashion (Kawamura, 2005), but there are still certain institutions and actors who have a great impact upon what is considered good design. Among these are, for instance, those jurors who act as arbiters and grant design awards, as well as certain design-leading companies and product designers who in collaboration with journalists have a great influence on what is considered good taste and what is not. Björkman (1998) refers to this collaboration as an 'aura production' – the journalists contribute to produce a certain 'aura' around specific products, and the designers in the same way as journalists are part of creating what is considered fashion.

Underlying this reasoning is Plato's thesis about the world of ideas: that thought is what really counts and what preserves beauty, refinement, tastefulness. Referring to Plato, Brunius (1961) states that beauty in objects implies partaking of the truly beautiful, that is, the form or the idea of beauty. Consequently, what is supremely beautiful is also what is supremely good. In order to reach involvement with true beauty, the individual must be refined through the love called Eros, which is striving for beauty. One can achieve this contact with beauty only through an inspiring ecstasy, a spiritual mode that can be described as a divine madness. Plato was critical of art, writes Brunius (1961), both ancient and contemporary, because it seldom rises above the mimetic or reproductive level. It merely depicts the world in a poor imitation (of the senses), which in its turn is a reflection of a purer world (of ideas). For Plato, this art was poor not only in terms of knowledge; it was also characterized by poor morale. Many centuries later we are still trapped in Plato's argument about beauty. People yearn for good taste, and see beauty as something elevated and divine. Though expressed differently today, people still adopt values indicating that ideas are more beautiful than actions. For instance, Norman (2004) claims that products' beauty emanates from the user's *conscious reflection* and experience influenced by knowledge, learning and culture. When it comes to design, it is often pointed out that a product must have content, not just appearance (Vihma, 2007). The product should be well worked-out from a holistic perspective, that is, thoughts about the product are more crucial than its creation (Ask, 2004). There is also, however, an idea of the originality. Merely imitating something that already exists gives the product less value than innovative aspects that demand reflection (Vihma, 2007). This criterion is also something that requires knowledge of what already exists and this role is conducted by the experts, for instance design critics, journalists and design jurors.

Good Taste vs. Good Design: A Tug of War in the Light of Bling

This is perhaps one reason why design critics have been negative towards IKEA's products in the past. IKEA's designers were thought to mimic other designers instead of creating their own design expressions (Bjarnestam, 2009).

Brunius (1961) also refers to Kant, who indicates that people experience beauty by way of their imaginations, for example, free play. Kant differentiates between different kinds of beauty. Pure beauty, which is considered non-useful, can be found in ornaments and decorations, that is, in the beauty of free play. Another kind of beauty is that which has a purpose, such as architecture. A third kind of beauty exists in the ideally beautiful, morality for instance. The beautiful can be equated with the true and proper. This can be compared to how Sandqvist (1998) defends ugliness by arguing for the idea that what is ugly is alive. People are attracted to ugliness because it is filled with delight. Ugliness escapes the demand for credibility and truth (cf. preserved knowledge; Sandqvist, 1998), and is allowed to express itself in a playful manner. Consequently, bad taste can be considered to be more tolerant, 'mischievous', and thereby provides more joy than good taste, which labours under the demands of maintaining the true, the divine (Ivanov, 2004). Sandqvist (1998) describes ugliness as the reason for beauty, not its antithesis or negation.

Another philosopher that Brunius (1961) refers to is Hume, who was of the opinion that taste can only be justified through joyful experiences, emotions and desires. A product generates meaning for its user, irrespective of whether that meaning is intended by the designer or arises anyway (Crilly, 2005). It contributes to delight and thus to beauty, regardless of whether the arbiters of taste have branded the product as an example of good taste or not. Hence, meaning can be present in products that are either ugly or beautiful depending on what emotions the owner of the product associates with that product (Crozier, 1994). What is considered good taste does change over time as the system of institutions and arbiters requires news to maintain its position.

Elaborating on what is regarded as good Swedish taste, Ahl and Olsson (2002) claim that the arbiters of taste utilize guilt and shame; 'If you don't have enough cultural capital to know what is right, you still know that you don't know, and that you don't have this ability and should therefore be ashamed'. Furthermore, they believe that good taste is considered to be equated with being a good person with a strong sense of morality and good behaviour. Such a person purchases products that have clean lines (with respect to form) and are environmentally friendly; he or she is not likely to lounge on a leather couch with a rustling bag of crisps watching the latest reality show on TV.

The sinful is ugly. According to Eco (2007), the introduction of ugliness and suffering contributed to paying homage to the divine (for example, the death of Jesus on the cross, who is illustrated as

Despina Christoforidou, Elin Olander, Anders Warell and Lisbeth Svengren Holm

tormented and deformed), and also encouraged other kinds of ugliness as long as they were exaggerated for moral purposes alone, in order to strengthen piety. People flee their own mortality by shutting their eyes to what is sinful and ugly (Sandqvist, 1998). Perhaps this is the reason why good judgement has been accorded such a prominent place in our culture, and contributes to making people hold on to what is good as they approach the tasteful or tasteless. The core values for taste have been passed down through so many generations that people view them as autonomous and react emotionally without the least reflection (Crozier, 1994).

Bourdieu *et al* (1993) discuss the link between culture and identity. By using taste a person can, according to Bourdieu, confer different class allocations on people in his or her surroundings and thus, at the same time, communicate affiliation with a group. When people wish to point out differences between 'us' and 'them' by expressing their taste, they use dualities such as authenticity, simplicity, individuality and their opposites (Ulver-Sneistrup, 2008). Differentiating between 'us' and 'them' sometimes appears to be of decisive importance to people: dividing those who belong from those who do not (cf. Duedahl, 2005). Our entire society is based on rivalries between us and them. Cornell (1997) and Richins (1994) describe consumption as an activity by which people use products as a way of relating to one another, of defining but also differentiating oneself from others. In this way people bestow a social identity on themselves through conscious choices of products (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992), contrary to Bourdieu's argument about people being born into and fostered to their habitus.

'Good' design

Does 'good' design exist? Objects are considered to have status and value when identified as being 'designed'. In this way design is, according to Crozier (1994), given meaning as a lifestyle, something aesthetically pleasing or fashionable. In Sweden, the Swedish Society for Industrial Design and Gregor Paulsson (Paulsson, 1995) struck a blow for more attractive everyday goods during the first half of the previous century. This happened at the same time as a transformation of the core values in society. Rampell (2002) shocked the Swedish design collective in 2002 with her hard criticism of good Scandinavian design. She was especially critical of design awards, in this case exemplified by *Excellent Swedish Design*.

Rampell as well as Ask (2004) are of the opinion that it is the modernist values that form the basis for what is considered to be good design. Rampell (2002) primarily objects to Swedish design closing the door to postmodernism, mainly where product design and furniture design are concerned; in architecture there are different rules. According to Rampell, postmodernism is often portrayed as hilarious, extravagant examples of 'something different' but at the

Good Taste vs. Good Design: A Tug of War in the Light of Bling

same time that same ‘something different’ threatens the ones who define good taste. Furthermore, she argues that postmodern design is still judged on the basis of the modernist rules for good taste.

According to Ahl and Olsson (2002), discussions of taste are elegantly avoided in design circles. Instead, designers pretend that the taste issue regards quality, that through evaluation some things become better than others for people. Furthermore, they suggest that taste encompasses gender, power and ethnicity. In spite of this, designers choose to call taste ‘form’ rather than ‘taste’. As a result, good taste becomes synonymous with good form language (Ahl and Olsson, 2002). An understanding of good form is based on subjective values such as balance and symmetry (Crozier, 1994). Brunius (1961) refers to Hume who believes that in an aesthetic context people often reach agreement on general issues, such as the value of elegance, vividness and simplicity. On the other hand, people find it difficult to agree on details, for instance the exact point in time when the quality of elegance comes into existence. The core values used for grading and evaluation are therefore often used with different meanings, due to different demands, between the different arbiters.

In the world of aesthetic taste, a number of variations and mutually contradictory taste preferences prevail, for example, between creative artists and practising art critics (Brunius, 1961). Because of this, we feel that the issue of good design becomes a non-issue. Good design is not only supported by an institutionalized system but also promoted by design theorists and design historians as something necessary to consolidate the ideas expressed about design. Thus Plato’s thoughts about the world of ideas being more beautiful than the world of the senses return once more. For the practitioner who creates design, the idea of good design is meaningless; good design can, according to Pye (1995), only be measured in relation to the intentions of the designer. Consequently, a bad product is, according to Pye, one that does not correspond to what the designer intended. Based on this argument we claim that good design is so thoroughly merged with professional proficiency and the skills that are necessary for creating something that, if the practitioner were to assess something as being a good design or not, he or she would simultaneously assess him- or herself as being competent or not for the task at hand. For instance, Norman (2004) writes that simply creating something pretty, cute, or fun is not accepted among designers, who want to be acknowledged by their colleagues as being creative, imaginative, skilful and having a certain depth in their thoughts and intentions. The criteria upheld by an arbiter of taste in order to determine what good design is are obvious and self-evident elements of professional skill, and as such, superfluous to the practitioner.

Despina Christoforidou, Elin Olander, Anders Warell and Lisbeth Svengren Holm

Bling as a Concept and How Design Students Feel about It

What is bling?

The seventeen-year-old rap artist B.G. (Baby Gangsta), from New Orleans, released in 1999 the rap song 'Can see my earrings from a mile, bling bling'. In the lyrics B.G. describes how he uses the appearance of expensive products with distinguishing qualities to mark his presence in his surroundings. At the time, B.G. did not know he had just coined a term that would spread from the ghetto to the mainstream. 'I just wish that I'd trademarked it', B.G. is supposed to have said at a later date, 'so I'd never have to work again' (Hauser and Lownes, 2005). Today we can see large companies use the word bling in their advertisements. As an example, Electrolux has developed a model of a handheld vacuum cleaner, the Ergorapido, in a limited edition designed by Łukasz Jemioł, whose external shape is the same as the original but it is encrusted with approximately 4,000 Swarovski crystals (Design You Trust, 2011). Similar phenomena exist in many other companies that manufacture products for a mainstream audience; hence there is often a limited edition of a well-known product in their product range available to those who would consider spending a lot of money.

Originally, 'bling' was an onomatopoeic slang term from Jamaica that imitates the imaginary sound of light hitting and being reflected by a diamond (Wikipedia Contributors, 2008; Wiktionary, 2008). The term has been adopted by American rap artists and is usually used regarding glittering jewellery that indicates wealth: showy diamond rings, large golden necklaces and accessories (Figure 1). 'Bling' is also used to denote a lifestyle where it is important to signal wealth in a straightforward manner through ostentatious consumption (Ossé and Tolliver, 2006). Only the most exclusive events or brands, such as Bentley, Dom Perignon, Gucci, Rolex, Prada and so forth, that are associated with high economic status and luxury are accepted; the diamonds hence represent the ultimate prize, the height of success, the glittering finale (Duffy, 2003).

In 2002 'bling' was included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with the following definition: 'Ostentatious, flashy; designating flamboyant jewellery or dress. Also: that glorifies conspicuous consumption; materialistic' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2002). 'Bling' is both a noun and an adjective and is thus not only associated with objects but also with their use. According to Duffy (2003), 'bling' also represents values that allude to criminality, hardness, or violence. Apart from the American rap artists that popularized the term in the late 1990s, there are other influential subgroups that today lay claim to the term 'bling'. What these groups have in common is fast, 'new' money. One of these subgroups consists of wives of football professionals (*Inside Out*, 2003), another is Hollywood stars. They are economically independent and surrounded by wannabes who, in their turn,

Good Taste vs. Good Design: A Tug of War in the Light of Bling

**Figure 1**

'Bling' is associated with, among other things, expensive and bombastic jewellery and watches. Source: webbing/dreamstime.com (2008).

spend large sums of money in order to appear bling, despite limited economic opportunities. For example, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt gave their baby daughter Shiloh a pacifier encrusted with real diamonds designed by Mathis Riiber. A considerably less expensive copy, the 'Bling Pacifier Diamond Crystals', was released on the market quite soon after in order to meet the needs of those parents who want to emulate their celebrity idols.

How do design students view bling?

The above descriptions of what bling is represent how bling is presented in the media, perhaps especially via the Internet (Christoforidou and Olander, 2008a, 2008b). But how is bling experienced and defined in general, by ordinary people? And how does their image of bling correspond with how bling is presented in the media? In one study (Christoforidou and Olander, 2010), design students discussed bling in relation to design and how different trends arise. Design students are, by nature, interested in the aesthetic appearance of objects, and consequently also in aspects of what constitute good design and good taste. Therefore, they can be regarded as representatives of what the design collective at large may believe

Despina Christoforidou, Elin Olander, Anders Warell and Lisbeth Svengren Holm



Figure 2

In this mood board, a student expresses his feelings toward bling in a quite oblivious way. Source: Florian Roualin (2009).

about bling. In the study it transpired that the students' spontaneous interpretations of bling corresponded with how the media presents bling (Christoforidou and Olander, 2010). The students described bling using words like 'earrings', 'dollar signs', 'glitter', 'diamonds', 'jewellery', 'Pimp my Ride', 'hip-hop', 'rap', 'necklace', 'Versace', 'USA', 'rims'.

People they associated with bling were, among others, rap artists like Snoop Dog, P. Diddy, Jay-Z, Daddy Yankee and Milad. However, they also mentioned people like J.Lo, Paris Hilton and French President Sarkozy. Bling was referred to in situations like the film festival in Cannes, the Oscar's gala, the MTV Awards, VIP rooms and also Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations. In the students' discussions it became clear that they agreed that bling as a phenomenon is firmly rooted in an aesthetic culture that is distant from their own preferences, and thus hardly something they were inspired by as a design expression. In addition, it was evident that they dissociated themselves from the design expression of bling. Different opinions were passionately defended; some students claimed that one product was bling while others considered the same product to be an example of luxury, glamour, or kitsch (Figure 2). In the end, the students expressed a common insight: bling was a challenge for them to handle due to the inherent emotional resistance they felt (Christoforidou and Olander, 2010).

What Does Bling Do?

Bling is obvious, straight to the point, and easy to recognize. A bling product shouts out its message: bigger is better, more is better, glitzier is better (Christoforidou and Olander, 2009). Bling products

Good Taste vs. Good Design: A Tug of War in the Light of Bling

have a style that communicates their cost or social position in a clear and obvious way, for example, by an overly explicit exposure of trademarks or logotypes, but bling also reinforces prejudice. The following blog post is an example of this: ‘It is just part of the process of ghetto culture, becoming wealthy and indulging in whatever obvious and tasteless that puts their new-found wealth on display’ (*BBC Radio 1Xtra*, 2008).

Not until the design students began discussing what bling does with and to its users (for instance by representing pride), rather than what bling is (glitter and money), could they accept bling as a source of inspiration (Christoforidou and Olander, 2010). We believe that what bling does occurs on two different levels, an individual and a social one. To the individual user, the contribution of bling is increased pride; it enhances the user’s personal identity but also his or her group affiliation. A bling product becomes thus a status symbol – an attribute with which to signal the achieved level of success. Bling creates emotional reactions in the observer, who repudiates and dismisses it as superficial and tasteless, or the opposite occurs, and bling creates admiration and envy. On the social level bling represents the user’s climb up the social ladder, from ghettos and poverty to wealth and success. Bling signals revolt, the breaking of social codes, and an active choice of placing oneself outside of convention and tradition. To the observer, however, bling confirms existing prejudices, consolidates power structures that segregate social groups, and reinforces the associations between ‘black’ rap culture on the one hand and violence and crime on the other. Bling challenges normative values that are deeply rooted in society, for example, good judgement and the prevailing view of good taste.

Like so many other things people choose to consume, bling sends out signals that manifest lifestyle and group affiliation (Ossé and Tolliver, 2006; Christoforidou and Olander, 2009). Bling signals that the user has succeeded in achieving high economic status, and thus has climbed the social ladder (Ossé and Tolliver, 2006). At the same time however, from the perspective of Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu *et al*, 1993) ideas about class affiliation, bling communicates low cultural capital. Although somewhat contradictory, we do not believe that bling users experience an inferiority complex because according to Bourdieu, they do not possess high cultural capital. Instead, such complexes are assumed to exist by the others, those who claim to possess ‘good’ taste, those who know ‘better’, and thereby dismiss bling and its users as tasteless. Bling is neither subtle nor sophisticated; consequently a high degree of cultural refinement is not required in order to decipher a bling product. According to Ossé and Tolliver (2006), bling is honest and overly explicit in its message: to convey high levels of status. For this reason, we argue that the designed ‘message’ can be understood by everybody, both initiates and outside observers. In this ‘easy to decipher quality’ lays the difference regarding owning low and high cultural capital. Those of

Despina Christoforidou, Elin Olander, Anders Warell and Lisbeth Svengren Holm

independent economic means and high cultural capital are traditionally unwilling to let in outsiders. In order to decipher the relevant codes (tiny logotypes in places where they are hardly noticed, or subtle differences in the choice of materials), and to know what is right or wrong (cf. Ahl and Olsson, 2002), it is necessary to be a member of the group. Making (designing) the codes available and overly explicit so that everyone can understand them is not as mystifying, exclusive and excluding, and becomes thus vulgar instead.

Bling Reflected in the Contradiction between 'Good' Taste and 'Good' Design

Brunius's text on aesthetic taste (1961) contributes to clarifying one possible reason as to why people in a design context get upset by the bling phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, bling has a quantitative aspect: more is better. One diamond, regardless of how big, is not bling. An excessive number of diamonds in infinite repetition on a ring, however, is. Brunius (1961) writes that the enemy of beauty is the boredom caused by repetition. Does the multitude of diamonds neutralize the experience of the diamonds' inherent beauty? Both Ask (2004) and Rampell (2002) believe that the prevailing view of what is regarded as good design is based on modernist criteria when evaluating products attributed to postmodernism. For this reason, such products appear to threaten good design. On the basis of this assumption we find it reasonable to consider bling as perfectly fitted into a postmodern design tradition and, by being judged from a modernist perspective, a threat to good taste. Perhaps that is why bling upsets so many designers to such extent.

One additional demand that Hume (Brunius, 1961) places on an arbiter of taste is freedom from prejudice. By showing good judgement and morality it is possible to avoid prejudice. Having good judgement is an important prerequisite for having good taste. This requirement is extremely interesting when viewed in relation to bling products due to the strong and simultaneous connection between people's opinion of bling on the one hand, and African-American culture on the other, especially in the USA. Are the arbiters of taste capable of seeing beyond the prejudices associated with bling, seeing bling for what it is, and also seeing through what is visible at first: a black rap artist from the ghetto who believes he is someone, a person who, without arguing for his own opinion or indicating some underlying conscious thought, shows himself off instead of being discreet and refined? The fact that bling is so provocative to the aesthetic elite of the Western world is probably due to the lack of an expectation of finding refined thought behind it, that it is a superficial exposure of status linked to appearance without any connection to Plato's world of ideas.

According to ethnologist Eva Londos, it is interesting to study aesthetic taste because people, by simultaneously exposing and expressing it, often subconsciously express their ideologies, values,

Good Taste vs. Good Design: A Tug of War in the Light of Bling

status, and social and cultural identities (Ahl and Olsson, 2002). Bling appears to be manifestations in contrast to the Western world's principal upbringing in taste. For instance, within Scandinavian design minimalism and functionalism are emphasized as ideals. As mentioned earlier, a 'good' person with 'high' morale does not lounge on the couch with a bag of crisps (Ahl and Olsson, 2002). Can bling be interpreted as a conscious and active choice of refraining from being a good person and thus placing oneself outside prevailing normative values by bragging about oneself, and so on? If so, perhaps this can contribute to explaining why bling provokes people?

What Can We as Designers Learn from the Tension That Bling Creates?

According to Sandqvist (1998), things that liberate us and set us free are beautiful. Bling liberates us from conventions and opens us up for creativity and a zest for life. Bling appeals to our emotions to a greater extent than does our reason. Bling has shown that good taste and good design are not synonymous. Good taste is premised on a subjective evaluation that is deeply rooted in inherited core values. Good design on the other hand, is a result of competence and professional skill. The way in which people measure or determine what is good design is only important to the design critic, not to the design practitioner. According to Swann (2002), designers have always traditionally intended for their design solutions to contribute to what is positive and good for society. Not until the advent of postmodern philosophy did designers permit themselves to challenge what was considered good for the user (Swann, 2002). Despite the fact that we today live in a postmodern society, the core values for good taste and good design lag behind and stubbornly keep us confined in the norms of modernism. Bling as a phenomenon seen from a design perspective fits better into the postmodern paradigm. Perhaps that is why the arbiters of taste and the design collective dislike bling so much. Whatever the case may be, bling serves as a mirror with which we can reflect our subjective values, bias and prejudices and thereby make discrepancies and blind spots in our own aesthetic behaviour visible.

Our experiences in discussing bling in a design research context confirm ethnologist Eva Londos's claim (Ahl and Olsson, 2002) that discussions of taste often trigger subconscious values. Design researchers with whom we discussed this issue, for instance at the research seminar where it all began, brought our attention to the strength with which the norms and values of the arbiters of taste influence our emotional reactions to products. After all, political correctness was forgotten for a moment. Discussions on bling raise questions and elicit discomfort; they lead to debate and defence of the participants' own lifestyles (Abelsson, 1986). Individuals feel ill at ease when they are in environments and contexts where their own values and lifestyles are questioned (Giddens, 1997).

Despina Christoforidou, Elin Olander, Anders Warell and Lisbeth Svengren Holm

Taste is dangerous because it is a matter of morality, write Ahl and Olsson (2002); it challenges the notion of who is a good or a bad person, who is educated or uneducated, how a person should or should not be. Our experiences from the bling discussions with both students and design researchers confirm Ahl's and Olsson's argument regarding morality, or rather a moment of lost morality. Designers could become better at utilizing people's aesthetic morality for something creative, regardless of whether the issue is bling or other design phenomena that fall outside the scope of conventions of taste.

Perhaps the design process can be used for testing ideas or design concepts in contrast to the cultures of taste that prevail in an ongoing design assignment? This could be done in order to understand how trends are created or to provide provocation in opposition to prevailing trends and values. Furthermore, on the level of design practice it is important to be able to see beyond what bling *is*, and to instead look at what a bling product *does* with and for its users. In such circumstances, bling may very well be an example of good design. Perhaps this is valid also for other product areas that feel aesthetically distant to the designer. If the designer refrains from looking at what the intended product is, and instead looks at what the product does, his or her creativity can be stimulated. Regardless, there is a multitude of products and situations that would make their users feel better were those products and situations capable of doing for them what bling does for its users, that is, increase pride and coolness, enhance self-image, group affiliation and so forth. Whether bling can ever be considered as being good taste however, is another issue.

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Despina Christoforidou, Elin Olander, Anders Warell and Lisbeth Svengren Holm

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