

Design incorporated: IKEA as personal experience

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Providing deep and memorable experience to the consumers—in various manners and through all channels possible—is undoubtedly amongst the key factors for success in contemporary markets. Moreover, companies need to consider the trends of gamification, personalization, eco-living as well as the extremely short life-cycle of their products. In this context, design is getting more and more important in branding and consumer' perceptions about the quality and benefits of the product available. It serves as a tool of communication not only for what the product is, but how it works and how exactly it will become part of the everyday life of the consumers as well. As such, design, in branding perspectives, has an active role and engages consumers in new kind of relationships that go beyond pure aesthetics. This article is an effort for a socio-semiotic analysis of the set of practices that IKEA implements regarding the use of design as a main basis on which it tries to create, deliver and maintain value of its huge global audience. What makes the company unique is its multimodal approach in terms of design-based brand management, point-of-sale design, furniture design, entire home interior solutions, catalogue design, and last but not least, lifestyle design. We can easily point out that it has built its own brand meaning by forming a recognizable and self-centered semiosphere, that highly influences the whole category it operates in, and sets the rules in people's self-expression, on the one hand, and their attitude towards the notion of 'home', on the other—home as constantly moving 'immobility' similar to fashion trends and practices. IKEA is a very good example of design semiotics, applied in marketing activities and real life as successfully mixing its own production with customers' desire for designing their own unique world of objects.

KEYWORDS experience design, fast fashion, interactivity, multimodality

Introduction

The definition of 'brand and branding', according to the American Marketing Association's dictionary (AMA n.d.; emphasis added by the author) states that: 'A brand is a *customer experience* represented by a collection of images and ideas; often, it refers to a symbol such as a name, logo, slogan, and design scheme. Brand recognition and other reactions are created by the *accumulation of experiences* with the specific product or service, both directly relating to its use, and through the influence of advertising, design, and media commentary'. The 'design turn' permeating the conception of brand is undoubtedly crucial and should be underlined, even though 'design' is used twice with different meaning. The above definition offers the cornerstone for our understanding of what contemporary branding is about, since how brand identity elements look like and if the product shape/form is convenient with respect to its usage are not sufficient any more. Design became not only 'communicative' in terms of the higher level of richness of the brand message incorporated in it, but also highly 'interactive', which includes as much participation of the customer as possible by various acts and processes of interaction (Krampen 1989, Crawford-Browne 2016). 'Great design, *European Intellectual Property Organization* claims, focuses on the user, combines aesthetic, economic and practical values and is the way consumers identify innovative brilliance' (EUIPO 2018b), which, once again, highlights design as a product of human creativity, satisfying a wide range of people's needs.

Involving design

The focus of our article is on the combination of product design, value chain design and design of customer experience. The latter forms the leitmotif of the global marketing tendencies that includes manifestations such as creative industries, gamification, retail-tainment, and pro-sumeration (Troye & Supphellen 2012), all of which stress the consumer's active participation in the value chain (Troye & Supphellen 2012, Trendafilov 2016). Pine and Gilmore (1999) had made a significant contribution, in this regard, through their analysis of the industries and the market conditions in the 1990s –before, that is, the 'digital turn' in marketing that took place in the first decade of the 21st century. Their suggestion is that 'the consumer is the (new) product', because s/he is an actor of full value in contemporary economy, in which customer is a 'guest', his/her demand is a 'sensation', the company's offering is 'memorable', and the attributes of the product 'personalized'. They also refer to service design, i.e. the range of services set around the product in a way to add value to customers as much as possible (ibid.: 27 ff.). In this way, design has asquired a richer meaning and its functionality was extended towards organization, in-store environment and consumer relationship management. It has become a

key 'hidden' dimension of brand communication, affecting all senses and appealing to customers' emotions (Sundbo & Hagedorn-Rasmussen 2008, Watkinson 2013).

Julier (2006) argues that it is about time to talk about 'design culture' as a scholarly discipline coming after the 'visual turn' (dealing with images) and the 'material turn' (dealing with the physical dimensions of culture). This has come about due to the increasing role of industrial design, and, according to the author, it represents a continuation of the problematics of cultural studies on the social role of design from the point where methods of visual research have stopped, due to their inherent limitations. The information process in design is no longer uni-directional but a multi-directional circulation system. Julier describes the key change in contemporary cultural relations as follows:

Culture is no longer one of pure representation or narrative, where visual culture conveys messages. Instead, culture formulates, formats, channels, circulates, contains, and retrieves information. Design, therefore, is more than just the creation of visual artifacts to be used or 'read'. It is also about the structuring of systems of encounter within the visual and material world. (Julier 2006: 67)

Norman (2004: 37 ff.) suggests a complex of three levels of design corresponding to different kinds of emotional activation: visceral, behavioral and reflective design. The first refers to the appearance of the product, the second to the pleasure and effectiveness of using it, and the third to the user's self-image, personal satisfaction and memories. 'The visceral and behavioral levels', explains the author, 'are about "now", your feelings and experiences while actually seeing or using the product. But the reflective level extends much longer—through reflection you remember the past and contemplate the future. Reflective design, therefore, is about long-term relations, about the feelings of satisfaction produced by owning, displaying, and using a product' (ibid.: 38).

Kazmierczak (2003) conceives design as being primarily about meaning-making. Distinguishing between intended, constructed and received or re-constructed meaning, she defines design as the activity that directs the process that enables the interconnection and correspondence between the three kinds of meaning. Interpretation as a semiotic process presumes cognitive work. Thus, the most significant shift in design is from a preoccupation with certain uses to focusing on the *perceptions and cognitive interfaces* that enable the re-construction of the intended meanings. Her approach focuses on the perceptual and cultural codes involved in communication, and according to her, it involves 'a paradigm shift from focusing on designing things to focusing on designing thoughts or inferences. Those thoughts are interpretive, and they result in subsequent behavior' (ibid.: 48).

In terms of its *product utility*, design has functional, aesthetic and symbolic levels (Markova 2003: 26). It has a lot of applications in the field of marketing, more than it seems at first glance. Design has an 'advertising' function in the first place (insofar as each product starts its contact with the customer from a store shelf) i.e. to distinguish the product from the compet-

itors in the point-of-sale, to attract attention for more than a few seconds, and to trigger the customer's desire to own the product. Providing 'information' is its second, more utilitarian function: how the attributes of given product should be put to a useful purpose or at least to suggest some, while its 'aesthetic' function refers to the standard of living, the lifestyle and the product's connection with the specific and significant brand design (ibid., Crawford-Browne 2016).

Close to the French structuralists' perspective on the design meta-function Busbea (2009) and Berger (2010: 177) assert that artifacts, things, objects, and, in general, everything we call material culture products, are quite complex and, as such, they reveal how advanced the society is, reflecting, at the same time, the aesthetic sensibilities of the age they were made in, by virtue of passing through the consciousness and intentions of their designers, as well as telling something about the mindset of their consumers. Additionally, each object reflects certain notions of what is considered to be tasteful, attractive, or functional, which means that they can tell a lot about aesthetics in given society and culture (ibid.).

Design is an *art* that is *beneficial*, hence, teleological and socially active, unlike 'classical' or 'high' art, which is self-sufficient and keeps its audience at a distance (Julier 2006). Its development as an art is quite significant in terms of socio-semiotics. From being something only to see and acceptable to few people in the past, it has become *interactive*, *more involving* and *adding value*, than being a purely intellectual feast. It is not accidental that we currently distinguish art from design, even though creativity and aesthetic delight remain their common ground. Taking a closer look at the definition of design, we see that it comprises notions like 'concept', 'purpose' and 'intention' (Oxford Dictionary 2018). In this perspective, design seems useful, but, at the same time, unlike art, somewhat limited and finite in its use, and in its durability, as well.

My home, my stage

Why IKEA? The short answer would be 'because it is globally recognizable retail phenomenon' or 'the most reputable brand in Europe after Lego' (Keller et al. 2012: 801 ff.). A more fully developed answer is that the company is not just a furniture retailer and cult brand, but that it has actually changed the rules of the game in this industry by introducing the 'fast fashion' mechanism into it. Its historical roots are in a long gone, product-centered economic stage, but now the company production fits the market conditions to the highest degree (ibid.: 447). IKEA has extended the impact of the 20th-century Scandinavian Modernism and transformed it into a hugely widespread domestic lifestyle (Fig. 1). Its design approach originates in Swedish culture and Scandinavian identity (McDermott 2007: 205-206) and is manifested in the natural wood the company uses, the high technology production processes, the vivid

and varied colors of the furniture, and the minimalist shapes. The company supports design education in its home country and promotes prominent designers, but it also overtly copies high-profile, successful design work from outside world (ibid.). In accordance with its brand image, its global mission - 'Making everyday life better' (IKEA, 2018) - and design core values, IKEA offers standardized products in all markets it operates in.



Figure 1. Simplicity, variety and personal style in IKEA design (CW, 2010)

IKEA embodies the evolution of the notion of 'convenience', adapted in the context of the sector it has been operating in, and, eventually, leading (INGKA Holding 2017). First, it was convenience of *assembling* yourself your new sofa or wardrobe at home, instead of struggling to move heavy, ready-made furniture. Then it came convenience of *distribution* (by expanding into a long list of markets) of the points-of-sale (Keller et al. 2012: 113). The third wave was in providing convenience of *buying all* what customer needs for his/her home under one roof, where you are free to try, chose and combine; the fourth wave has been a convenience of *changing your domestic environment* according to your taste, mood and fashion trend you follow (Dahlvig et al. 2003, Hambrick et al. 2005). Technologization, dynamics and a concept of home as a place for experimentation is what has been dominating the brand discourse in recent years (Ledin & Machin, 2018). Generally speaking, accessible (convenient) pricing has been the only element of the mix that IKEA always had as a strict policy, but it is in a 'natural' relation to the latter wave described (Hambrick et al. 2005: 58). As Leslie and Reimer (2003: 435) put it, 'there is widespread agreement that IKEA has played a central role in shifting *the temporality and longevity* of furniture across all market segment' (italic's mine – D.T.).



Figure 2. The 'democratic design' pentagon (IKEA, 2018)

The so called 'democratic' design philosophy of IKEA (fig.2) is more exact as it combines three principles (successful business model, natural environment preservation and higher quality of life) in five closely interwoven dimensions: everyone has the right to a better everyday life in accessible price (client/community side), finding better balance between the points that IKEA considers important in what it does (production side), and sustainable design in terms of materials and production processes (environmental side) (INGKA Holding 2017). The IKEA Concept (2018) was born with 'the idea of providing a range of home furnishing products that are affordable to the many, not just the few. It is achieved by combining function, quality, design and value - always with sustainability in mind'. For the purpose of materializing as well as of ritualizing this model, the company organizes 'Democratic design days' where the news, emerging collaborations and products are presented in order to verify the systematic approach that the model puts in motion (Åkesson 2018).

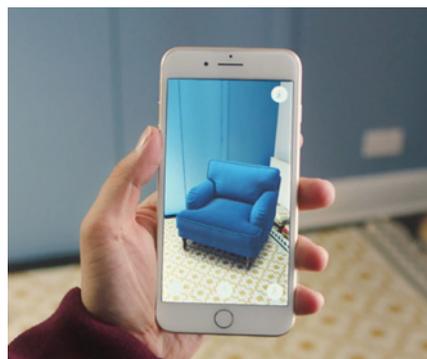


Figure 3. Pre-buying ('Try before you buy') initiative by IKEA including augmented reality app, providing more fun and less frustration in the process of choice and decision-making (image source: IKEA 2018)

IKEA is not only a furniture producer, since it works with subcontractors, neither a pure retailer. It is a *service-delivery agency*, producing a wide range of opportunities for customers to choose, act, change, combine, rearrange, etc. (even in the virtual world, Fig. 3 and 4, Franke et al. 2010). Design has a major role all this and the evidence is, first and foremost, its famous catalogue, which serves a window for what IKEA currently offers (Hambrick et al. 2005). Design is implemented in all products and, last but not least, in the in-store environment, that aims to display every available home concept to the visitors. Another evidence lies in the intellectual property management. Currently, IKEA has 126 registrations and pending requests for design innovations in Europe not only for furniture, but also for cooking appliances, textile products, curtains, carpets, lamps, storage furniture and ventilations (EUIPO 2018a).

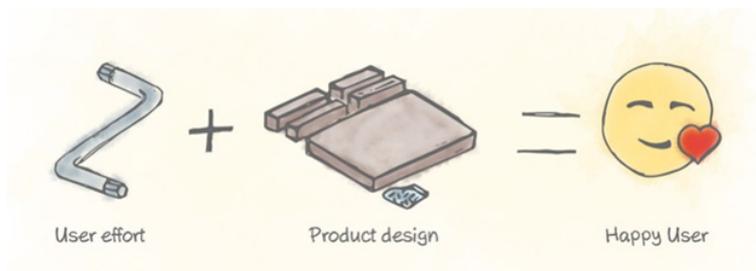


Figure 4. Simple model of IKEA's perceived value chain, driving 'experiential' resonance (Nikolov 2017)

'Sustainability' is amongst the original corporate culture values of IKEA, but nowadays it is a production principle and a 'new' social message in its design policy. For instance, the 'value, no waste' mindset corresponds to the way raw materials, design creation processes and brand image work together for the further development of the company (IKEA 2018). 'But to help our customers create a better life at home, in a world where resources are scarce, we have to up our game': this statement reveals the deep meaning of new edge/stage of value chain. The latter starts with the natural environment as a big home the customers live in and finishes in their own domestic space, design being the appropriate 'language' for its implementation. The closer connection of the company with people (INGKA Holding 2017) is demonstrated in the solar-powered 'Better Shelter' project, that is, a temporary shelter made of recyclable plastic for five people, that can be assembled in just four hours. Several refugee families gave feedback for design improvement during the product's prototype period (Tumbertini 2018).

Design as a holistic approach

From a semiotic perspective, 21st century marketing is more human-based and social-active, after being factory-centered and boardroom-dominated for decades. General audience is allowed to observe, follow, comment and even participate in the various creative and production processes and stages. Thanks to the new interactive media, it has become a key channel for maintaining dialogue with the customers and for offering specialized information (e.g. how [which raw materials and natural sources are used, what processes are involved] the products are built and where they go after consumption in terms of waste and recycling) as a part of value proposition (Kim and Mauborgne 2004). It is precisely, the principle of 'transparency' that has demystified and democratized contemporary marketing, changing in the process the value chain as a whole and broadening the social basis of brand signification (Franke et al. 2010). Margolin and Margolin (2002) claim that, from a marketing perspective, design theory and practice is extremely developed now and exploits the ideas and research results coming from management studies and marketing semiotics. However, this kind of understanding about design is too narrow, not least because it shows only the commercial side of it. Design should be reconsidered or redirected towards specific social needs and services - like meeting the needs of the marginalized populations and bettering their life space, health, education, even crime behavior.

Multimodality is the closest semiotic concept to consumer experience delivery mentioned above (Trendafilov 2016). It deals with the range of 'modes' that a sender, in the communication process, uses to transmit a message: visual, verbal, tactile, aural as well as olfactory. These modes collaborate with each other and jointly complete the intended message (Kress 2010: 30–33). Kress defines multimodality as *socially built semiotic resources for meaning-making* (ibid.: 79). Furthermore, it refers to *the multi-channel performance* happening even during a casual everyday conversation (Kress & Leeuwen 2006: 154 ff.). In branding practice, the widespread term 'integrated marketing communications' (Oswald 2015) has been adopted by managers with the same purpose – avoidance of uni-dimensionality and one-way transmission of the brand message and increased communication efficiency (Schmitt 2009). As Page points it out (2010: 4), multimodality requires the multiple integration of meaning-making resources in all communicative acts and events. Considering IKEA's catalogue, for instance, Ledin and Machin (2017, 2018) made a research on kitchen design, showing how a change in multimodality can transfer kitchen to 'prestige domestic space' (2018: 6), related to the ideology of neoliberalism 'with its need for the self-managing, market-oriented individual consumer-citizen' (2018: 2). They discern four historical periods of kitchen development - everyday 'type' in 1975, ordered in 1985, lifestyle since the late 1990s (e.g. space of interaction and joy), and creative in 2016. The latter, the authors conclude, communicates higher status, presented in hyperreal vision ('symbolic naturalism'). Suddenly, kitchen took over from the living room

and become the most important space at home dedicated to creativity and social interactions (ibid.: 16). They point out also, that they found increased levels of affect in modern kitchen, 'made lively and engaging through uses of graphics, colour and design, etc. This serves to bind us to this functionality' (ibid.: 20).

The actual strength of IKEA is in using visual and tactile modes, but we should not underestimate the verbal channel, because its catalogues and web-site/s are not just selling platforms, but rather powerful storytelling platforms, as we indicated. Particularly design is narrated from a first-person perspective, just described or emotionally decorated. The stories narrated increase the value of the products by presenting the designers working for the company (as real craftsmen), the concepts behind each collection, single item or module, while, at the same time, they set a context that makes each product to seem special, hand-made and, eventually, humanized.

All of the above demonstrate that IKEA has worked methodically to enhance the multimodal function of its designs, which has a direct impact on its production and branding activities, as well as on the image of its management as devoted in bettering the quality of life worldwide. The powerful brands of today are not just excellent in what they produce, nor simply over-communicative in terms of heavy advertising and strong messages. They are rather meaning-makers who attract and retain customers by giving them reasons to buy that go beyond the logic of a bargain or the short-lived pleasure of physical consumption (Keller 1998, Deamer 2005, Batey 2008, Sinek 2009, Holt & Cameron 2010). The brand creates and develops its own cultural system (incl. codes, rituals, rules, community and common sense) that influences, overtly or not, both consumers' mindset and behavior as well as competitors' strategies and behavior; it is a trendsetter instead of a trend-follower; it stays as a reference point in its category and is part of a particular lifestyle followed by the consumers worldwide (Vincent 2002, Trendafilov 2015).

IKEA bases its entire marketing mix on design-based thinking (see Fig. 5). This is what drives its corporate culture, its profits (luxury-like products in low prices) and its narrative (minimalistic, practical design for ordinary people). 'Organic growth' is about IKEA's retailing and supply-chain system in markets where it is possible for them to develop without compromises. Each of the four pillars, corresponding to the classical marketing mix elements, has a lot of channels for manifestation. Therefore, design as a corporate philosophy, a positive and distinctive brand association and a genuine customer experience can be communicated in many ways, even in the prices, the great variety of the assortments or the Swedish cuisine in the restaurants.

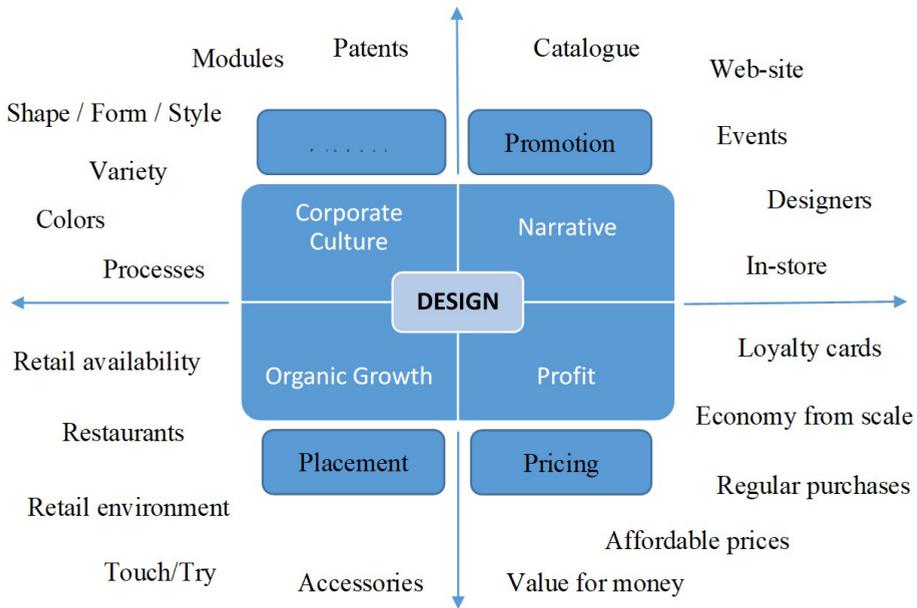


Figure 5. A diagram combining marketing and semiotic aspects of IKEA's design management (author D.T.)

From a semiotic point of view, as a brand with its own distinctive ‘Semiosphere’ (i.e. abstract model of cultural environment where communication could be generated), IKEA has its own, well-defined boundaries and core (where a particular grammar/structure dominates) (Lotman 1992). They comprise a *democratic*, instead of a strictly commercial, design principle that classifies the rivals as ‘authoritarian’ or ‘exclusive’ furniture-makers, i.e. a philosophy of *total design* that *materializes a lifestyle*. Building and developing its own semiosphere speaks a lot for a given brand. First, it indicates its maturity in terms of brand identity and knowledge (Keller et al. 2012), and, second, the semiotic system allows the management to control the dialogue with the customers, to the extent that its structure and recognizable language together ‘load’ people with specific cultural codes (i.e. modernism, simplicity, sustainability, etc.), and, eventually, make them more persuadable by the brand messages. It is a very effective tool for competitive re-positioning, because IKEA communicates to audiences by means of various channels synergetically and in an almost impossible to copy multimodal system of quality perception and experience stimuli, that ensures the customers’ active involvement. ‘Active’ here means a ‘playful’ and ‘cooperative’ way to arrange and rearrange your home as self-expression (Nikolov 2017).

The key of IKEA's success is the translation of sustainability and mass-customization (a kind of non-semiotic texts for the business in the past) into a unique business model via telling its own story as well as introducing a wide variety of design innovations and practical decisions.

The brand reconciles art and functionality, fashion and furniture, and, last but not last, environmental care and shortened lifecycle of domestic products in the contemporary markets.

Conclusion

Design is a form of aesthetization of the objects, used in everyday life, known for centuries. Mass production, however, has made design more practical and more interactive. Its roots in art have been developed to assume certain new functions – utility and brand communication. Moreover, it has become active by involving customers into a multi-sensory and memorable experience. IKEA presents an excellent example of how brands can *be actual experience*. It designs and manages its distinctive experience by means of various channels – shapes and materials, integral home modules, retail points containing various in-store experiences, augmented reality app, and its famous catalogues – but, eventually, it is oriented towards one universally significant platform, *home*, both as the stage of everyday activities and as playground. Using semiotic lenses for scanning what IKEA has been dealing with, marketers can see clearly and assess highly the holistic approach of the company in a socio-semiotic perspective. The company's design-centrism is everywhere and offers tactile and cognitive stimulation that entice customers' emotional response and loyalty. IKEA deliberately combines cleverly organized mass production with aesthetic taste education of the customers, offers home decisions and stimulates creativity, variety and entertainment, as well as sustainable life. Setting and developing its own semiosphere, is a mark for successful brands as cultural leaders and managers of a considerable value chain that consists not only of effective and profitable physical production processes, but also of a human element, both in the context of corporate culture and the consumer's prosumeration role (Dahlvig et al. 2003, Holt & Cameron 2010).

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