Cracking Open Co-Creation: Stories, Values, Categorizations

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Abstract: A recent obituary for the psychologist Jerome Bruner noted the importance of the concept of storytelling to his work: "He foregrounded narrative and storytelling as fundamental processes through which we engage with culture, providing 'recipes for structuring experience'. They are routes to critical thinking, often juxtaposing unusual ideas, values or outcomes that generate novel insights – and questions" (Haste 2016). The quote highlights the analytical power of stories in engaging with culture, but also their creative potential in generating insight. Both these things are evident in the DTRS11 dataset, with stories and storytelling much to the fore. Indeed one of the key deliverables for the project was to come up with a 'region relevant story'. In this paper we first show how a very particular story emerges and is reinforced during the co-creation process before then going on to consider both the categories of value and implicated actors that shape its development and the consequences that follow from its interpretation. We conclude that the interleaving of stories at many levels is characteristic of a commercial co-creation process, as well as a research process such as DTRS11, and that designers use stories as a way to negotiate what we term 'value tension', in this case balancing social responsibility with commercial success.

Keywords: Storytelling, Values, Discourse, Design Process

1. Introduction

The recent resurgence of interest in the concept of framing as a way of both analyzing and thinking about the design process has usefully focused our attention on structures that position the narrative flow of discourse in design processes (Paton & Dorst 2011, Umney, Lloyd & Potter 2014, Dorst 2015). Rather than looking in detail at specifically cognitive elements of understanding, as did the first DTRS common-data study (Cross, Dorst & Christiaans 1996) and many DTRS papers since, framing and associated social structures align much more readily with social and constructivist ways of looking at design behavior, and come closer to how design professionals conduct and describe their activity. The idea of storytelling (Lloyd 2000, McClosky 1996) is similar in many ways to that of framing, as recently defined, but in our view it is a more powerful analytical concept to work with as it implies a time-based operational logic; a sequence of actions by actors that make sense through a narrative arc being created or told. Our recent studies have looked at the interleaving of narrative in the presentation and performance of design (Lloyd and Oak 2016) and the DTRS11 dataset provides an opportunity to develop the concept both in methodological and design process terms. Storytelling and narratives are widely studied in relation to creative practice (Oak 2013b), with our approach being based around attention to ‘small stories’ (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008). A ‘small story’ approach avoids the analysis of, for example, interview-based life stories, and instead focuses on the brief narratives of conversational
storytelling (Goodwin 1984), and in particular on “how people actually use stories in everyday, mundane situations” (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008, 378).

Perhaps more than any other DTRS dataset, the DTRS11 data invites a critical reading; i.e. not only an interpretation of what is happening but also an assessment about the value of what is happening and the outcomes that are produced (see for example, Leggett 2014). This is perhaps partly due to the story-like, episodic way in which these data are presented to the researcher (our previous studies have looked at televisual representations of design process (Lloyd and Oak, 2016) which bear some resemblance to how the DTRS11 data is presented) but also in how a critical distance between the subjects under study, and the researchers considering their behaviours, is created. As researchers who were not involved in data collection we can be fully disinterested and hence independently critical. The DTRS11 data thus provides a unique window into the current corporate design world and the practices labeled as ‘design thinking’ and ‘co-creation’.

In this paper we first look at a number of ideas around the concept of story, storytelling, and narrative as they apply to the dataset (both in its content and in its form). We focus in detail on one particular ‘story’ that is created, before then going on to explore categorizations of the often contrasting values that underlie, and in some ways are resolved by, storytelling practices. We conclude that, in terms of design thinking expertise, stories help to negotiate what we term ‘value tension’, creating narratives that attempt to resolve opposing values. At the beginning of Session 1 of the DTRS11 data Ewan, the main protagonist in the dataset sets down the intention to: ‘basically crack open co-creation in general and then maybe calibrate our expectations’ (Line 5). Likewise this paper seeks to critically examine aspects of the co-creation process and, in so doing, provide opportunities for readers to adjust their understandings of the norms, values, and categorizations that underpin co-creation and design thinking more generally.

2. Approaches to Analysis

The DTRS11 data is framed for analysis in a way that is more organised and episodic than previous DTRS datasets. The data is generally chronologically presented in 20 sessions that could be interpreted almost as a kind of design-practice television or internet ‘reality’ mini-series, with some sessions ending explicitly with a set-up for the next. Rather than concentrating on specific sessions of DTRS11 data, the paper takes a number of seams through the dataset and draws on two analytic approaches that centre on the analysis of discourse and language. Goffman’s (1974) *Frame Analysis* describes how language is used to construct and ‘frame’ particular perceptions of reality and thus organize and structure experience. Membership Categorization Analysis (Sacks 1972; Housley and Fitzgerald 2002; Stokoe 2012) explores how participants in social interaction assign and use social categories within talk, as they account for actions, and assess persons, places, products and situations.

There is clearly a lot that happens outside of the filmed material presented, so the researcher has to be aware that editorial decisions have been made in presenting the data coherently and consistently and the kind of narrative that might result. This is particularly so for the two Co-Creation sessions which feature sub-divided labelled sections and time-lapse footage. The sense of an edited piece is enhanced by at least one section of this session appearing to be presented outside of chronological time. For example contrast the two screenshots from CC2.
in Figure 1. The left screenshot shows the full state of the right-hand ‘Post-it’ wall at time 4:40 in a video section titled ‘We Are THE COMPANY’, while the right screen shot shows the same wall, rather emptier, at time 5:10 in the ‘De-Brief’ video section. Although appearing later in the dataset, the right-hand image appears to show the state of the wall before the left-hand image. In a note from the DTRS11 team this was unintentional though Lloyd (2002) has shown how editors presenting design processes have done this intentionally to fit a ‘development’ narrative.

![Figure 1. Co-Creation Session 2 (above left) Post-it note wall, to right of picture, at time 4 minutes 40 seconds is more complete than the same wall at time 5 minutes 10 seconds (above right)](image)

The edited presentation of the data means that the researcher has to be alive to the multiple levels of potential narrative that are being offered, and also to the editorial decisions that have been made (for example, choosing to provide some sections shown in speeded-up time-lapse, rather than ‘real time’). While the data is undoubtedly showing ‘real’ design activities, it is nevertheless itself a complex text, framed through various presentation modes, featuring multiple narrations. Our approach to the data, then, was similar to previous work where we have looked at Television programmes of the design process (Lloyd and Oak 2016). In that work, and here, we initially sought points and structures in the data where we had a sense that specific regularities or discourses were being enacted; then we looked for further corroboration and evidence as we developed our understanding of what was being presented before then thinking through mechanisms to explain what we observed.

3. The Narrator and the Use of Stories

Ewan is the person who presents most prominently in all sessions of the DTRS11 dataset. He performs a number of functions but is essentially the person who controls the process as it unfolds and who comments most consistently on both how the process is going and the value of other’s contributions (e.g. in Session 9 he says to Kenny “you should write that down because that is a really good insight” while in Session 20 he says to Tiffany “I think what you're saying should be written down on a post-it, because that is the value that this project will bring. Right there you kind of embodied it”). Ewan’s role as the narrator and assessor is enhanced, certainly for the viewer/researcher, by him being the only person featured in the background and follow-up interviews, where he is able to describe, in a kind of ‘once upon a time – happy ever after’ temporal structure, the context and outcomes of the project. Ewan is thus placed in a position of authority by the Editors of the DTRS11 dataset (when compared to other project stakeholders such as Hans or Tiffany) since he is given the opportunity to
narrate the story from his point of view. Ewan himself is clearly aware of the importance of creating and narrating ‘stories’, as he explicitly references ‘stories’ and ‘storytelling’ throughout the dataset. The various roles that Ewan plays means that he is both part of the story and the narrator of it: in this sense he somewhat resembles the TV presenter Kevin McCloud who in the popular series Grand Designs can be seen to arguably reinforce an heroic and male-centred version of the design process (Lloyd and Oak, 2016).

In the background interview Ewan summarises ‘Phase 1’ of the project which has led to a number of ‘opportunity areas’ and a set of ‘linked deliveries’, described in the Technical Report (page 14). One of these deliveries is to produce a ‘region-relevant story’ (Line 43: i.e. a story that has resonance with the Chinese market) that can ‘wrap in’ the prototype accessories that are the reason for the project. While Ewan recognizes the importance of a consumer-oriented story that relates to specific products, he clearly has wider ambitions: “the [co-creation] process itself is an important part of the our delivery” he states, in the Background Interview (Line 95). As well as articulating the need to create stories, Ewan is himself someone who self-consciously uses stories in combination with analogies and metaphors in communicating his thoughts to others. For example, in the Background Interview he uses the metaphor of dancing to describe the difference between working with the accessories division of THE COMPANY and the car division (“kinda heavy to dance with” Line 31). Additionally, in Session 20 he uses a boomerang analogy to illustrate the idea that consumers have to sacrifice something in order to get something back (“you throw a boomerang out, which is your values, other people attach recognition to that, and the boomerang comes back to you and lifts you up” Line 12). In the Follow-up Interview, reflecting on the value of what Phase 2 of the project has achieved and how to keep it current within organisational discourse, Ewan develops the analogy of keeping a fish fresh (“you need to work with it, we prepped it for continuation, we knew we needed to prep it for the deep freezer as well” Line 31).

The metaphors and analogies that Ewan uses effectively connect him with the people he is communicating with and in most cases they appear as off-the-cuff extemporisations. Stories play a central role in Ewan’s talk and in Session 9 a story he tells takes on a moral disposition in a wider-ranging discussion about the idea of ‘commitment’ which has come up in the first Co-Creation Session (CC1). Commitment is not something that can be purchased by consumers, Ewan suggests with his story, but something that needs an opportunity to develop. The story Ewan tells derives from a parable from the Bible about courage1:

I'm not a religious man, but there's an amazing quote from the bible, which is this guy who asks for courage. He prays to God "can I get courage?" and he never gets the courage, he never gets courage at all. And then [he speaks to] a wise man [who says:] "what do you think? do you think God would just give you courage, or do you think he will give you the opportunity to be courageous?" I think that's what we need to do here, the opportunity to take commitment, instead of just giving them the free stuff. They need an opportunity to be courageous so they can shine through that in a way.

(Line 18)

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1 In all quotation and excerpts that follow some words have been excised for brevity and ease of reading. We are assuming that other DTRS researchers, with access to the data, can corroborate or question inappropriate editing and have given session number and line references in all cases.
4. Story Finding and Construction

A particularly salient story that the group both search for and create is what is referred to as a ‘region-relevant story’, i.e. a narrative that will underpin the design-related interpretations and decisions of both the designers and the potential users of the accessories. The explicit topic of the ‘region-relevant story’ continues through the 20 Sessions of the DTRS11 data. Figure 2 shows a graph of the occurrences of words ‘story’ and ‘storytelling’ for each session, including the two interviews with Ewan. In total there are 176 mentions of the two words although most mentions (105) occur subsequent to the second Co-Creation Session (CC2) which might suggest that this was a search that became more focused towards the end of Phase 2. Notable, however, is Session 9, with 17 mentions, and that appears to be the point at which the team develops consensus around the importance of having a ‘story’, perhaps at Ewan’s direction, who mentions the word ‘story’ 12 times (70% of all mentions). To explore how the need for a ‘region-relevant story’ begins to be shaped by participants, Session 9 provides an example of a concept that emerges as an underpinning and recurring reference: ‘sexy commitment’.

Figure 2. Number of occurrences of words related to ‘story’ in the DTRS11 dataset.

The phrase ‘sexy commitment’ is coined on Line 116 of Session 9, as the group seek out and begin to create a story that will combine both the idea of something that is seen as difficult but good (commitment) with the idea of something that is more indulgent (what they term ‘me-time’, and that becomes summarized by the word, ‘sexy’). In the following excerpt Ewan begins by outlining the need for a story that can be summarized by this hybrid term:

110 E It is a more complex thing, it is an eco-system of story, but we need a base story. It’s just, I think just having this as one part of the story and having kind of the ‘car-take responsibility of me’ story, those need to go together […] the whole thing around the me-time and stuff is an important part, but we just, as Kenny is saying, it is almost exhausted.
Yeah, but I also agree that it might be really interesting for accessories,

Exactly, because it's exhausted within the rest of the company. Or, not exhausted because it's going on right now so it is super relevant.

Yeah, but I also think it's not necessarily, at least for me it's not super sexy. I think it's very easy, it goes in the practical way, that it's gonna solve some very-

Yeah yeah, calendars, and alarm clocks and like, whatever.

And maybe that's alright, but then we need to maybe spice it with the sexy commitment *(laughs)*

Yeah.

No not sexy commitment, but with the global awareness responsibility.

And the story around that ‘okay, THE COMPANY actually takes care of you, now you have taken care of everyone else, now it's time for you to be pampered a little bit. This is your time’.

Yeah.

So I think maybe this is more about how we tell the story.

Exactly. And then the products could absolutely live within there.

It is Kenny who introduces the idea, on Line 116, of making what Ewan refers to as ‘the base story’ – commitment to global sustainability – more palatable by ‘spicing it up’ and thus compensating for it not being ‘super sexy’. Once coined however, the group begins to identify what might be associated with the term. In the following excerpt, which appears slightly later in Session 9, Kenny and Ewan discuss whether ideas relating to ‘human stability’ would fit:

I like this human stability. I'm not sure that's the right way to say it, but I think it's more about that, because that includes both the environmental issue and how we solve that, but also for example wars, political situations, refugees, things like that.

And even telling the story that the accessory you buy or the car you buy is sourced from material from conflict-free areas for example.

That's kinda sexy.

Kenny contrasts, on Line 293, the idea of ‘human stability’ to something that is more politically charged – the idea of war and the upset that war causes. Ewan suggests that car-drivers might like to know that the material that their car accessory is made of comes from countries that are ‘conflict free’ and Kenny evaluates that as ‘kinda sexy’, shifting or deepening the meaning of the ‘sexy commitment’ term without apparent absurdity.
Figure 3. The origin and usage of the phrase ‘sexy commitment’ in the DTRS11 dataset.

Figure 3 shows that the phrase ‘sexy commitment’ appears over the course of the dataset a total of 30 times. The pattern of its appearance is also interesting as it appears to disappear as an idea or structuring story shortly after CC2 only to again take off again in the final 3 Sessions of the dataset (and also in the follow-up interview). The term comes about more by word association than by reference to common experience, but it provides a way for the group to engage with apparently contrasting ideas, as they begin to shape an appropriate, region-relevant story that also has meaning for them, as designers.

The term ‘sexy commitment’ encapsulates for the group an ethical idea about what the project initially defined as ‘the good life’: “the different elements the Active Urbanite needs in his life to be able to have a good life” (Technical Report, p.19, note the male-gendered definition). We have seen above how quite complex social ideas – politics, war, refugees – have been used to develop the meaning of ‘sexy commitment’, but the good life, and especially the idea of ‘being good’ adds an explicitly moral tone. In the following excerpt, which comes from Session 11, Amanda and Ewan discuss the idea that acting for the common good is not something that can easily be talked or ‘bragged’ about in terms of the self, but can be rewarded in more subtle ways (and it is the idea that ‘good’ acts deserve reward that they think of as ‘sexy’). In the excerpt Amanda begins by talking about the potential COMPANY car accessory user before Ewan tells a story about the ‘good’ act of a friend of his:

430 AM It's about giving back, right? And that's what we want them to brag about.
431 E Yeah. They're giving back to get something back. Hopefully. But it's the ultimate sacrifice. You give something without asking anything in return. But if you get something in return, it's really good.
432 AM So I'm just thinking about the story where they show the location,
Ewan further illustrates the concept of ‘sexy commitment’ with a story, on Line 435, about a ‘good friend’ of his who ‘quit her job’ to go to Greece and help refugees arriving. Describing this as ‘a good thing’ he then goes on to question her motivation for doing this because of the images she posted to social media with her ‘holding babies, saving babies’ (Line 45). He raises the possibility that his friend might have done this as an act of self-promotion rather (or perhaps additional to) a more straightforward self-less act of aid. Amanda understands that Ewan is sketching a polarity between the self that seeks reward, on the one hand, and the self-less, that seeks only to do good, on the other: she sums up his story by saying that ‘sexy commitment’, and the products that follow from it, are about finding the ‘connection point’ between the two poles (Line 436).

The example above is interesting not only for the explicit moral framing of the discussion – we are, after all, talking about a car-accessory – but also the way that Ewan draws in people outside of the project as a means to develop and justify the idea of ‘sexy commitment’. The ‘good friend’ in the excerpt, as well as the refugees she helps, become, in effect, agents in the discussion by being what is termed ‘implicated actors’ (Latour 1992, 2005). The fact that Ewan has cast doubt on his friend’s motivation for acting in a morally good way, indeed has potentially shamed her as a person through doubting her altruism, without any possibility of her defending herself, could however be taken as itself a morally questionable (and in the context of a car accessory, again a slightly absurd) thing to do. It does, however, add another layer of meaning to what ‘sexy commitment’ is coming to symbolise for the group about ‘the good life’; the idea that being good is both about doing good, but also being seen and recognised as doing good.

The phrase thus emerges and acts as an embodiment of a shared meaning for the group, becoming part of their vocabulary for talking about the psychological and cultural landscape where a future product might find purchase. However, in the three Sessions following CC2 (where it only appears on a Post-it note) it disappears altogether. It is only in Session 19 that it reappears, with the shared meaning evident when Ewan explains a tension as “a sexy commitment lives a little bit here” (Line 3). The phrase begins to reappear again for the group in the final three sessions of the dataset. In Session 20, the final Session of the trip to China, Ewan summarises what the group have done for Tiffany and Hans and sexy commitment is one of the themes he talks about, in effect telling a story about a story:

And then this one, which is called "sexy commitment", and we have had this from the very first week, actually, where "sexy" is kind of what you get back, and "commitment" is what you sacrifice.
(12)

Neither Tiffany nor Hans ever use the term ‘sexy commitment’, perhaps because they have a more product-focussed role in the corporation and perhaps also because they were not present when the concept emerged as meaningful within the group’s own narrative of practice. Indeed
it is a phrase that perhaps represents the distance between Ewan’s more conceptual ‘co-creative’ approach and the more conventional product development approach of Tiffany and Hans (see later discussion), a distance that is further reinforced by their late arrival in China. In Session 20 it is only Ewan and Kenny that use the phrase.

In the final session (21) of the dataset the designers are back in Scandinavia after their work in China. Working together with a number of product designers they generate a number of concepts for ‘real’ products from the outcomes of the co-creation sessions. In this session the phrase ‘sexy commitment’ has evolved into ‘conscious commitment’ and in the following excerpt, Abby, Kenny, and Ewan explain the meaning of this reformulation to the product designers:

080  A  So it is not just because you have a really big heart
081  E  The tree hugger type of approach
082  A  Exactly, it is because you know that this is actually something that you can use to brand yourself on afterwards
083  K  So this is an evolving status symbol?
084  A  Yeah
085  E  it's definitely an evolving status symbol and it's used to differentiate themselves from their parents and from their other peers, you know if you wear a Rolex, you can wear gold and diamonds and have a fantastic amazing car, but now everyone can have that almost. how do you then differentiate yourself? you need to come up to a much more sophisticated level of what value is and suddenly value becomes something that is about giving back to society and making sure that everyone in the value chain is treated fairly and so on. A very sophisticated way of thinking
086  K  that requires more than just money, it requires knowledge, awareness, time, investment, a lot of things, so it becomes a much more complicated thing
087  A  it's very very subtle, and you can't mention it yourself, so it's something that you
088  E  the second you mention it, it collapses
089  A  Exactly
090  E  so your motivation truly has to be that you really want to do this because you believe in it, but you are a conscious enough to know that if I play my cards right and really believe in it and I really sincerely do it, I will reel the benefits of what that means. So that's why it's called 'conscious commitment'.

It is clear how cogent and compelling the definition of ‘sexy commitment’, in the guise of ‘conscious commitment’, has now become for the group with a clear articulation of its attributes. It is now an ‘evolving status symbol’ (Line 83) that embodies ‘a very sophisticated way of thinking’ (Line 85), something that is ‘very very subtle’ (Line 87) and requiring ‘more than just money’ (Line 86) but ‘knowledge, awareness, time, investment’ (Line 86). In the evolution of ‘sexy commitment’ from its initial construction in Session 9 to its explanation as conscious commitment in Session 21 we can see how meaning is layered into the phrase both creatively, in the form of associating and connecting ideas to it, but also analytically, in recognising and appropriating information that can contribute to its development. In the telling and retelling of ‘sexy commitment’ the idea is lodged and maintained in the group consciousness and a story about potential users formed with character, motivation, and plot that effectively creates a context into which a car accessory can become an active agent, chiming with the values and aspirations of the protagonists. The phrase clearly works for Ewan, the main protagonist in the DTRS11 data story, although he is disappointed that the phrase has been neutered somewhat in its evolution to ‘conscious commitment’. In the
Follow-up Interview, speaking as narrator on behalf of the team, he describes ‘sexy commitment’ as ‘the insight we most appreciated’.

5. Considering and Categorizing the Participants

The previous section described the construction and use of a significant narrative by the design team, a story that was summed up for them by the phrase ‘sexy commitment’. The selection of what the group decide are salient features of a larger discussion foreshadows what we as researchers are doing with the dataset. In the same way that the episodes of the DTRS11 dataset present fragments of a ‘real’ story, our analysis uses selective samples to construct a narrative around story emergence aiming to theorise some of that reality. Although appearing to emerge by chance, the phrase ‘sexy commitment’ is a result of sessions that are influenced by many different experiences and voices – supporting the idea of design being a multi-vocal practice (Bakhtin 1981, Oak 2013a, 2013b). In the following section we look at how, in selecting the participants for the Co-Creation workshops, the users and audience for THE COMPANY’s car accessories become actors in the construction of the stories that emerge.

The design team’s attention to the potential users, and their recognition that the participants in the workshops must be thoughtfully selected and managed makes up a considerable portion of the interaction that is recorded within the early phases of the DTRS11 data. For example, as the design team discuss their individual perceptions and background experiences of previous co-design activities in Session 3, they also relate various perceptions of how they will approach the participants. In the illustrative comments below, Kenny, Nina, Abby and Ewan (along with the DTRS11 representative, David) work together to plan the co-creation workshops:

14  K    I think we're gonna do some really good preparations here, but in the end, when we're sitting there with the people, then we really need to calibrate it against them
32  N    (We need tools to use) with the people, so we can get the information we need, but not in the direct way, like we cannot be asking them, like what do you want and stuff like that, we need to really make them play the role
45  E    We're setting the scene, it's very artificial, super artificial … but, then again, I think that is my analogy very often, to say "okay, imagine these people are your friends, and you're doing something awesome together".
56: A    The communication is going to be really really interesting to see what kind of input we get, what stories will actually impact them and kind of set their emotions on fire.

Throughout Session 3 the team recognize their agency in setting the scene in which strangers will interact and they discuss in some detail the possible use of prompts and tools. The team’s sensitivity to the local social organization, that they will plan and help to enact through the workshop, is further indicated by their in-depth discussions of how to manage the workshop participants’ self-and-other perceptions so that successful interaction can occur. The issue of how the workshop participants might view themselves and each other, in ways that could impact the communicative competencies of individuals and thereby impact upon the success of the workshop arises at the beginning of Session 3. Here, the team discuss a large number of ‘screening’ factors but concentrate particularly on how to create balanced and egalitarian conditions that de-emphasize notions of social hierarchy and encourage communication. In effect, by aiming to have particular participants involved, the design team are helping to shape the future narrative that may unfold from the meeting. The design team talk about seeking
people who are “not too high up the societal ranks in terms of hierarchy” (Line 24), “average people, no one too high up in the society” (Line 81). Ewan suggests that the users “need to be premium car users”, but that they should also “be at the same level” (Line 82) with “some kind of alignment or common ground” (Kenny, Line 120) so that they are able to communicate effectively. The design team talks about how best to create this cohesion by, for instance, limiting the age range of participants, and/or including family members to increase the likelihood that participants will be comfortable speaking. The team then discusses whether they should be concerned to balance participant characteristics such as introversion and extroversion, levels of creativity, senses of humour, degrees of independence, and desire to actively participate in the workshop. Additionally, the design team consider requiring a dress code, Abby notes: “we could also kind of say to them ‘okay, everyone needs to wear black’ or white or something so that they don’t differentiate themselves too much with fashion” (Line 228).

In their concern for managing the social categories associated with the future participants, and the experiences that the participants will have during the meeting, the design team are carefully shaping the workshop: managing its social organization and the potential psychological and emotional effects it will have. They are thus setting a scene and choosing the actors who will perform for them. For example, in Session 4 the designers recognize that, upon meeting at the workshop, participants may automatically place themselves into orderly social hierarchies, e.g. through naming their occupations (e.g. CEO, housewife), or by attending to how people are attired. To disrupt such category-based affiliations and assumptions, and to create an alternative order, the team discuss having the workshop begin with participants each choosing two animals as avatars. These animals will then be joined together and each participant will explain to the others how the hybrid creature represents them and the particular values they wish to be aligned with. By choosing, combining, and then presenting animals (rather than forms of employment) as classifications of identity, the design team intends for the workshop members to have a particular experience of group order and cohesiveness: one that mimics the design team’s (purportedly) ‘flat hierarchy’ (Background Interview, Line 11), as it builds on social equality and informality, rather than on income difference and public decorum.

The story of ‘sexy commitment’, then, arises out of a very deliberate and rather exclusive set of social conditions. The selection or ‘screener’ (Session 1, Line 24) for participants taking part carries with it a set of underlying values that the designers of the sessions wish to represent in the co-creation workshops, indeed values that arguably do not reflect Chinese culture more generally but are deliberately reflective of their own. In ‘cracking open co-creation’, early in Session 1, Ewan asks the group “maybe we can go one by one and just spend half a minute to talk about what we think it should be” (Line 5) which provides an opportunity for the designers to use their past experiences in creating a session that works on their cultural terms. Creating egalitarian conditions under which the workshop participants will be comfortable enough to share their experiences is clearly an important aim of the designers and can be seen as an expression of co-design’s collaborative, participatory, user-centred approaches. Although the role of power within apparently collaborative processes has been questioned (Oak and Lloyd 2016), the explicit aims of many co-designers are to encourage and empower consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004; Sanders & Stappers 2008). The collaborative nature of co-creative practice also accords with Scandinavian design’s underlying expectation that its designers and products should ‘care’ for their users in ways that align with, if only unevenly, political and cultural values of social responsibility” (Murphy 2015). In the context of the DTRS11 data, the social and cultural values of ‘care’ and equality form part of the everyday norms of social life or ‘norms-in-action’ (Housley and
Fitzgerald 2009) that can be seen as performed by the design team as they work to choose participants (who represent the wider context of Chinese consumers) and create the workshop activities.

6. THE COMPANY Story

While the designers plan a workshop that will be friendly and fun for the participants, the aim of the workshop is not actually participant enjoyment, it is to accomplish particular tasks that are set within the context of THE COMPANY. The social and cultural values of care and equality may fit well within the designers’ education and expectations of themselves as people who seek stories and help to shape narratives through co-operative, socially-engaged methodologies; nevertheless the design team are also required to assist company profitability through developing new products that will engage consumers and maintain brand success. In the Background Interview Ewan tells the story of how the project came about through a ‘random’ meeting between two directors who pithily concluded: “we have low take rates in China, we need to do something about it” (Line 65). Therefore, throughout their activities and interactions, the designers must represent and so express both the ‘norms-in-action’ associated with the category ‘being corporate’ as well as those associated with the category of ‘egalitarian sociability’, a tension that is notably similar to the one they attempt to encompass with the term ‘sexy commitment’ and to which we will return to later.

In the following excerpts of talk we see how the designers enact their affiliations with the more corporate, competitive environment that underpins and supports their activities. It is perhaps no surprise that the team’s performance of these more explicitly competitive corporate values – expressed through phrases such as ‘take rates’, ‘alignment’, and ‘sales peak’ – occurs in settings where the group is talking with stakeholders from THE COMPANY (such as in Session 20). What is interesting in Session 20 is that a co-construction of meaning occurs where the socially responsible values that the design team have carefully constructed meet the values of the business environment they are operating in. This co-construction of social meaning shapes what happens within the locally-assembled group, and so has consequence for the collaboratively-constructed stories that are told and the nature of the emerging conception of what should result from the co-design process.

For instance, in the following sequences of talk from Session 20, below, Ewan first begins to outline the general areas that the design team have explored within the workshops, with some discussion of what the resulting, conceptual (not product-related) outcomes might be – for example, outcomes such as an allegiance to the ‘sexy commitment’ idea/story. A company stakeholder, Tiffany, is blunt in her response to Ewan, in which she questions (and implies a critique of) the design team’s process in relation to THE COMPANY’s financial interests (i.e. ‘risks’ and ‘benefits’). Ewan’s response is itself a question that challenges her budget-centred focus.

9 E What’s the risks of doing this? What are the benefits and so on?
10 T And do we have the budget for it?
11 E Yeah [laughter] or can we afford not to have the budget for it?

Soon after this exchange, however, Ewan’s talk (Line 21 below) indicates his awareness of THE COMPANY’s product-focused bottom line, as he references the creation of ‘hero-products’ that help to ‘conquer’ a market to ensure the COMPANY’s growth. A recognition
of the COMPANY’s needs is further taken up as Ewan reiterates the need to ‘conquest with an accessory’ (Line 29, below). It is significant for our analysis that Ewan tells a story of how such a conquest might happen, with someone who might typically be categorized as a ‘Mercedes guy’ showing off his air purifier, a product not from Mercedes but from the COMPANY. The point of Ewan’s brief narrative – a story told in the voice of the friend who is supposedly talking to the ‘Mercedes guy’ - is that this ‘Mercedes guy’ has associated himself with the ‘good’ qualities of the COMPANY (i.e. ‘committed to the right quality’) to the point that he has recategorized himself, i.e. branded himself, through the use of the COMPANY’s products.

21  E  This is why we should have one or two hero-products that appeal to these people […] how can we focus here to conquer these people? […] We want to be in conquest, we want to grow.

29  E  And one of the things that we talked about is a scenario […] was a conquest, a conquest with an accessory. There’s a Mercedes guy, who has a friend over in his car, and he has a COMPANY approved air purifier. And the friend kind of asks ‘wow I thought you were like a Mercedes guy’ […] and then the guy says ‘yes I am a Mercedes guy, but above that I am a person that is committed to the right quality […] and this air purifier […] is really, really good’ So they are then using THE COMPANY as a way to brand themselves’.

It is interesting here to consider the function of the story that Ewan tells in this excerpt (as well as the function of other stories we have identified in this paper). While recognizing that a business has to ‘conquest’ a market if it is to succeed, the telling of the story illustrates, in an imagined particular, the mechanism of success - how buying an accessory “makes people able to sample the THE COMPANY values, without making the full commitment of having a car” (Line 29). The story serves to negotiate and nuance the ‘take rate’ values of the business with the social responsibility values of the designers, decreasing what we might term value tension. Both the stakeholders and the designers can interpret the story within the dominant value system they relate to.

We can see how the story concerning the nature of the consumers’ character shifts its value focus towards a business orientation in Session 21. Here, in the final sessions of the DTRS data, the designers talk with colleagues to help them come up with ideas for ‘real’ products. In the following extract from that meeting, Abby outlines for the colleagues what the workshop participants, as potential product users, value the most in their lives. Abby’s comments transform the participants’ multifaceted ruminations on ‘the good life’ and ‘health’ into a brief depiction that emphasizes individualism and acquisitiveness:

49  A  They are super opportunistic, so [they want to] break free of their parents’ way of living. They really go for every opportunity to earn extra money, to be able to differentiate themselves or build up their living standards.

Later, in the same brainstorming session, Kenny reiterates the importance of THE COMPANY’s product to the consumer’s perceived and performed social status (line 99). In Kenny’s description, the product acts to identify knowledgeable and sophisticated consumers to each other, and so the product becomes more than an individual’s fulfilled desire, it also becomes an agent of social capital.
I think also the recognition that you get is also a confirmation that you are climbing up the social ladder because in order for them to recognize you they must have the same level of sophistication and intellect to understand the values that you have, so when they recognize you it is a confirmation that you are actually climbing up the social ladder at the same time.

These brief descriptions of consumer behaviour widen the COMPANY’s association with an underpinning narrative: not only are the potential consumer’s choices associated with the product’s demonstration of ‘sexy commitment’, they are also about the more overt performance of ‘climbing up the social ladder’. The construction of the ‘sexy commitment’ story has not only served to manage and nuance value tension for the consumer (between ‘sexiness’ and ‘commitment’) but also for the designers in presenting a more acceptable business-focussed logic to people whose task it is to come up with specific products.

The co-design process poses the implicit question ‘is it possible to transpose knowledge gained of users through ethnographic and participatory experiences into viable products that will satisfy a company’s needs?’ Certainly the design team studied for DTRS11 are hopeful that they can succeed, but a range of actors (e.g. Tiffany and Hans) beyond the design team and the potential product users impact on the realization of the team’s original aims – which were both to create concepts (if not actual products) and also to ‘showcase’ how co-creation’s ‘user involvement’ approach could “work as change agents for the organization” (Background interview, Line 95). In the DTRS11 data, the design team first aim to locate themselves and the co-design process in a central role within the organization, then to involve other actors (workshop participants and company stakeholders) whose ‘wants’ they seek to balance with their own, and who they aim to enroll and mobilize as allies to move their work forward in ‘keeping the fish fresh’ in Ewan’s terms. In this sense Ewan is telling (or maybe selling) a story of organizational change; of how a well-executed example of co-creation for a car accessory product can begin to influence the design process of the cars themselves. This shift in design thinking – from the shaping of products to the shaping of stories is what drives him, and the mechanism of storytelling and the value tension that it manages, is what he hopes will achieve this.

7. Summary and Conclusions

In this paper we’ve shown in detail how a very particular story, embodied by the phrase ‘sexy commitment’, emerges from the two co-creation sessions as a means of expressing contrasting values: commitment and duty on the one hand, and indulgence and selfishness on the other. We showed how the phrase is taken up and used by the designers through subsequent sessions in the dataset as a means to classify and evaluate activity and ideas. Sexy commitment is not the only story that emerges by any means (‘pockets of enjoyment’ is another we could have looked at) but its ‘chance’ emergence, from an apparently blank sheet of paper, and consistent development marks it out as a significant contribution to the co-creation process of the DTRS11 dataset. The story that sexy commitment represents goes some way to meet the requirement for a ‘region relevant story’ in the project brief but in subsequent sections of the paper we showed how the story arises out of a very controlled set of conditions; i.e. the co-creation workshops themselves. By carefully setting the criteria for the workshop participants (e.g. according to certain personality characteristics and professional roles) then prescribing the activities of the workshops to achieve particular social ends (a flat hierarchy in which everyone is equal) we have seen how the sexy commitment story emerges over a more fundamental transmission of cultural values and is in a sense an expression of the value tension that results from the difference (crudely put) between the more
egalitarian values of Scandinavian design and the more hierarchical values of Chinese culture. The sexy commitment story, as other effective stories do, allow both value conditions to exist.

A further dimension of value is represented by the business and commercial aspects of THE COMPANY and this sets up another value tension, in this case between the ‘socially responsible’ team of designers involved in the co-creation process and THE COMPANY stakeholders, who are used to a more conventional product development and business environment focused on ‘conquest’, budgets, production plans, and dealerships. We showed how a story (‘Mercedes guy’) again allows both value conditions to exist and helps to preserve the implicit aim of Ewan in particular (and perhaps also the other designers) of changing the THE COMPANY’s organizational culture around designing. Throughout the DTRS11 data, each designer indicates an ongoing awareness of the cultural and personal characteristics of the workshop participants. This seems particularly to be the case for Ewan (see for example his extensive discussion of the conflicts between the collective and the individual in Chinese society in Session 21, line 2). However, as we also see above, all members of the design team adeptly translate this complex social information into simple phrases (e.g. ‘sexy commitment’, ‘Mercedes guy’) that are relevant to their corporate colleagues (particularly within the specific, local contexts of business meetings COMPANY representatives). The designers are able to skillfully notice, create, and tell contrasting stories that are underpinned by contrasting norms and categories of value.

We have described the function of stories within this co-creation process as managing value tension and the uniqueness and richness of the cross-cultural DTRS11 data has allowed us to develop this idea in detail. What stories seem particularly good at doing in a designing context is encapsulating difference in a way that presents a trade-off experientially. The stories we have identified, and we think also others in these data, have a bipolar structure that maintains a level of trade-off complexity but packages it in a simple and understandable way that others can easily relate to. Sometimes these stories come directly from someone’s experience – Ewan’s bible story, for example – but the most effective stories like that represented by the phrase ‘sexy commitment’ are flexible enough to bridge ‘past particulars’ – experiences and behaviours that the co-creation process reveals – with ‘imagined particulars’ – stories that place specific actors, objects and relations into an imagined context. A story in this sense provides a dynamic structure through which to identify and categorize value and ultimately provides a way of presenting an argument.

The design process, in the way that it bridges past and future, is a fertile ground for storytelling but the co-creation process that the DTRS11 data represents is particularly rich in the interleaving of stories in many forms. The expertise of the participants is notable here and contrasts with other accounts of design thinking expertise that focus around the activity of prototyping (for example in the DTRS7 data). It is particularly striking that this co-creation process is almost entirely text based with the Post-it note, and the structures of categorization and organization that it affords, central to the production of text. This kind of design thinking appears less about the shaping of form through the construction of prototypes and more about the shaping of story through the selection of text and may point the way to future analyses, and indeed future practices of design thinking, particular in the wider contexts in which design is now being discussed.

We noted at the beginning of our paper other layers of narrative construction going on in DTRS11, for example the story we ourselves tell in this paper through the selection of specific examples and also the way the dataset itself is framed and presented in the samples of ‘reality’ that the filmed sessions represent. These of course bring certain limitations but also usefully highlights the way in which the research process can be seen as a design process –
i.e. a way of telling certain types of story – and is revealing of the inter-relationships between the two types of activity. Cracking open co-creation, then, can provide insight not only into new modes of design thinking but also new modes of research thinking.

References


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