Switch the Channel: using cultural codes for designing and positioning sustainable products and services for mainstream audiences

Laura Santamaria, Carolina Escobar-Tello, Tracy Ross
Loughborough University, United Kingdom

An important step towards achieving sustainability is to encourage a wide uptake of more resource-efficient consumption patterns by the 'mainstream' sector of society. At present, one of the barriers for this uptake is that sustainable choices are often perceived as 'constraining and sacrificing' (losing out) rather than 'liberating and beneficial' (being better off). The initial theory of this research proposes challenging this perception. Design can contribute to encourage more people to adopt sustainable lifestyles by ensuring that the intrinsic values and benefits of sustainable lifestyles are communicated effectively using a culturally relevant discourse.

In this paper, we propose a theory and methodology for positioning of sustainable products, services, and systems as culturally aspirational choices that lead the user to improved well-being and happiness. It deals with the cultural perception of sustainable lifestyles and proposes the implementation of a framework to inform designers on 'aspirations' and 'relevance' factors at the early stages of the innovation process.

Semiotic and cultural analysis are central to this framework. Their methodologies can be valuable tools to help designers collect data on the aspirations of users and the active cultural codes within a particular context. This data is used by the design team in the early stages of the innovation process to develop sustainable products and services which are more in tune with the user, as they are perceived as culturally relevant, meaningful and thus more desirable choices.

Implementing deep rooted and contextualised cultural analysis at the innovation stage of sustainable PSS can contribute greatly not only to enhance their perceived value by making them more desirable, but also to extend their purpose into switching lifestyles from a culture of consumerism to a culture of sustainability.

Keywords: well-being, sustainable product service systems, cultural analysis, semiotics & aesthetics

*Presenting author