

Transcendental innovation as a motivator for design

Understanding authentic expression for well-being

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ABSTRACT

Insights from psychological, sociological and ecological perspectives can give new value dimension to a product or service. This paper attempts to present a holistic view of what is important for well-being, with particular focus on identity creation and authentic expression of adolescents. It is meant as a basic research approach towards product and service design. The results obtained from the insights are that authentic expression is not a hidden property that needs to be found and developed, but inherent in every individual person. The paper concludes that products and services for children and adolescents need to provide a focus on good values, in order to create an understanding of who they want to be.

KEYWORDS : value creation, authenticity, adolescents, design, transcendental innovation, well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

“The only question that really matters,” declared Carl Rogers (quoted in Myers, 2000, p. 62), “is; am I living in a way that is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me?”

For a designer it is crucial to understand people; what is important to them and what they need in order to find ways to create products of value. For instance, understanding why the personal quest for the definition of ones own identity is so important. “The crucial challenge is to find your inner voice, and inspire others to find theirs” as bestselling author Stephen Covey phrases it (quoted by Den Ouden, 2012, p. 50). Whether or not this is a beneficial way of thinking will be discussed in this article. However, it can be shown that this is typically important to people in the Western world, which can to a greater extent rely

on that their lower needs in Maslow’s hierarchy are being met (see figure 1)(Wikipedia a).



Figure 1: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Wikipedia a).

These people can spend more time exploring their higher order needs, and in this context we look at the part of self-actualization that explores

the authenticity of people, how to become aware of our inner selves (Simons, 1987). Thus, the search for true self-expression is a serious topic for a large amount of people, starting when you are an adolescent, and continuing, when you become an adult. Although this journey of finding ones authentic self is not confined to the period of your life as an adolescent, this article will focus on this period of our lives in particular.

This article will explore the concept of what being true to one self means and what authentic expression really is, and discuss whether this search is, in fact, important to human happiness. The article will then focus on how the insights from the results can help one create innovations that provide value to the user, where one is not focusing on a purely economic level, but also on psychological and sociological levels.

The information for this article has been collected from different fields of interest: innovation in design, psychology, with an emphasis on positive psychology and sociology. The focus has been on finding a way to explain authenticity, understanding adolescents and how they think and getting an understanding of what is generally important for well-being and happiness in life, and looking at this in the context of value creation in innovation. The article is based on information mostly from articles and books.

1.1 Definitions

The following concepts will be used frequently, therefore it is necessary to understand the author’s definitions of them.

True self-behavior, authentic expression and true identity

A major part of this article is dedicated to illuminate what the words true self-behavior and authentic expression mean. The term ‘authentic expression’ will be understood as true self-behavior, and false self-behavior as ‘unauthentic expression’ and these terms will be used interchangeably. ‘True identity’ is understood as the set of personal characteristics a person recognizes

as true for him/herself, as the opposite of false.

Well-being

Subjective well-being concerns the assessment of peoples evaluative reaction to their lives and societies (Den Ouden, 2012), and is understood as a good or satisfactory condition of existence.

2. CONCEPTS

This paper argues that a perspective on psychological and sociological issues is important for creating innovations of value, and will in the following present an overview of a “value framework” as seen in figure 2. In addition, positive psychology will be discussed, on how one can create products that have a positive impact. For this reason, the concept of positive psychology will be explained.

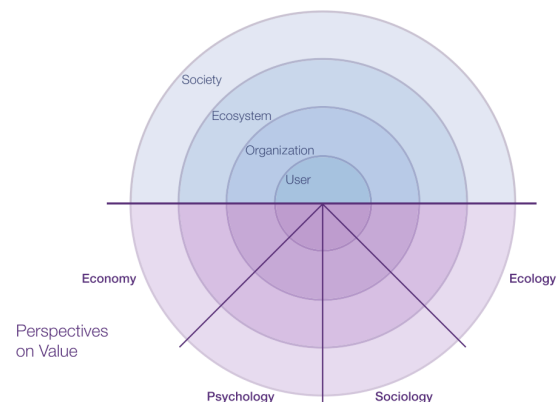


Figure 2: Integrating views on value from social sciences (Den Ouden, 2012).

2.1 Different perspectives on value

One cannot measure the value of a product or a service directly, like measuring properties such as weight and volume. And, in the context of innovation, one must consider both the objective and subjective value that products and services have, as they may influence the decisions people take and how they act (Den Ouden, 2012). “Value re-

fers to the value of something, whereas “value” refers to what is important in life. The latter is therefore a more comprehensive, holistic view. In the context of innovation the aim to provide value through transformations, both notions are important” (Den Ouden, 2012, p.21).

One can look at value from different perspectives: economic, psychological, sociological and ecological. The different perspectives build on each other, where the economic perspective is the foundation. While Aristotle said, “the art of living and living well” originally defined economy; in the past decades the focus has been reduced to “the art of money making” (Cruz et al., 2009). The economic view assumes that the user is rational, and therefore will strive to achieve maximum exchange and use value for the money. Considering this reduced explanation of human behavior in economy, it seems reasonable for authors such as e.g. Ouden to supplement it with psychology, sociology and ecology. Psychology aims to explain the drivers of behavior at an individual level, and understands value as a desirable trans-situational goal, serving as a guiding principle in people’s lives (Den Ouden, 2012). According to Den Ouden sociologists and anthropologists often have an entirely different understanding of value than economists and psychologists have. They speak of social cultural values, and the focus is on groups of people and relationships. Anthropology deals with the way the individual personality and social relations are mediated by culture (Den Ouden, 2012) Value in the ecological perspective, stems from the basis of considering earth as a whole, man being just a part of the ecosystem. The ecological perspective is not in the scope of this paper, and will thus not be elaborated further.

2.2 Positive psychology

The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future) and happiness and well-being (in the present) (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It started out as

a reaction to the almost exclusive focus on repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning. “This almost exclusive attention to pathology neglects the fulfilled individual and the thriving community” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.5). The aim of positive psychology is to contribute with the focus of also building positive qualities in life, in addition to repairing the worst. Positive psychology can inspire meaningful innovations that support people in achieving higher levels of well-being (Den Ouden, 2012).

4. UNDERSTANDING AUTHENTICITY

“The psychopath is sometimes presented as the only authentic being, the only person faithful to his instincts. On the other hand, he is also described as the model of inauthenticity” (Havens, 1985).

What does it mean to be authentic? Does it mean to just follow every instinct? Havens (1985) claims that we are not authentic before we acknowledge and own our impulses and prohibitions. A false self will deny either impulse or prohibition. Further Havens claims that “an individual can “lose” himself if he lacks sufficient courage to stand by his values. He then “sells out”... second, an adult can lose himself if he is too rigid to reflect upon himself”. He argues that a person needs to have the capacity to be both subject and object, to be truly authentic.

3.1 Authenticity and different interpersonal relationships

Thus, what part of us is connected to authenticity, is it our emotions and our opinions? Are we authentic if we act consistent in all situations? Theorist claim that we do not act the same way in all situations and if we look at the self as a system, there has been a shift from earlier theorists looking at the self as global representation to the prevailing zeitgeist: a multidimensional framework (Harter et al., 1997). Which means that, rather than thinking of the self as a unity with a consistent global self-esteem, we see that we

have multiple selves that vary across different interpersonal contexts and also rest on social comparison (Harter et al., 1997: interprets Gergen, 1977).

As Gergen points out, “in the presence of the devout, we may discover that we are ideologically shallow; in the midst of the dedicated hedonists, we may gain awareness of our ideological depths” (1997, p. 154). The variation across different interpersonal relationships can be described as different roles one have with different relations. One may act differently in different situations, and have different roles: with the parents, with siblings, with friends and with strangers.

If one acts different in different situations, what can we classify as true or false self-behavior? Gergen (1991) notes that if one needs to create different selves in order to conform to specific relationship, this may lead one to doubt what is his true identity. This can be very well exemplified by false self-behavior that comes from “support” that is “perceived as conditional upon meeting the demanding and often unattainable expectations from others” (Harter et al., 1997). Also, research show that we display a positivity bias “placing the majority of favorable attributes at the core of the self” (Harter et al., 1997). This means that we usually identify ourselves with our most positive qualities, and want to see ourselves in the best possible light.

3.2 Authenticity and honesty

According to adolescents, true self-behavior is associated with descriptions like “the real me inside”, “saying what you really think”, “expressing your true opinion”. And false-behavior is defined as “being phony”, “not stating your true opinion”, “saying what others want to hear” (Harter et al., 1997; from Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996). Does one always need to state ones true expression to be authentic? Being authentic means according to Havens (1985) that you need to reflect and acknowledge your impulses and prohibitions. Notice how he says, “acknowledge” and not “act”. Even though false

self-behavior “includes both the extremes of normal politeness and false personality” (Havens, 1985) saying your true opinion may not always be either appropriate or beneficial. Sometimes we do not state our opinion because of rules of social rules of conversation “it isn’t polite to challenge someone publicly when they disagree with you” (Hayes et al., 2000, p. 53). However, it can become a problem not to express your opinion in some situations where you have a response bias, saying what we think others want to hear, when there is no good reason to do so, and a social desirability bias, saying only what you think will make you look good.

3.3 Authenticity and moral values

According to Havens, we need to stand by our values in order to be authentic. But what are our values, and where do they come from? Are they a result of society impositions or are they created internally? Cultural norms dictate how people feel in certain circumstances (Diener et al., 2003) and culture defines the worldview that people have. At an individual level, people perceive risks and have concerns, but the socially constructed myths of their culture provide the background for their judgments (Dake, 1992). You could say that Western society is the odd one out compared with the rest of the world because of the supreme value it places on the individual and its focus on economic values. Other societies are more holistic (Graeber, 2001). Furthermore, we live in a culture where freedom, autonomy and self-determination are valued (Schwartz, 2000).

Over the years, we have increased control over our life. It might not be too much of an overstatement that a large number of people can “live exactly the kind of life they want, unconstrained by material, economic, or cultural limitations” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 85). This increased control over our life has in turn also increased our expectations of control. It can be shown that these expectations make us increasingly blame ourselves internally for our failures. Thus, one might not consider finding explanations externally, resulting in causal attributions directed at the

individual, which again can promote depression (Schwartz, 2000).

“People are free to be selfish or selfless, nasty or nice, serious or frivolous, and they are free to change the selves as they see fit. Selves are like shirts. One can discard old ones and invent new ones. At least one should be able to, in keeping with the goal of maximal self-determination as a desirable psychological and moral state. Thus, the fully self-determined self is one that is completely unconstrained – by habit, by social convention, or by biology” Schwartz (2000, p. 80). Is authenticity equal to self-determination, and is self-determination as a psychological and moral state desired? If we have no rules constraining us do we become the most authentic selves? Schwartz (2000) explains how we need rules and guidelines to make good decisions, that if we get to choose anything we want we are overwhelmed and paralyzed by possibilities.

In the way a student that can select a paper to write from six topics will do a better job than the same student selecting from thirty topics or more (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999b; Schwartz, 2000). Also, in terms of values and morality, traditional morality serves as a kind of preventive medicine; protecting people from themselves (e.g., Shweder, 1990, 1991; Shweder & Levine, 1984). This can be morality like “a good meaningful, productive human life includes commitment to education, commitment to family and to other social groups, commitment to excellence in one’s activities, commitment to virtues as honesty, loyalty, courage, and justice in one’s dealings with others and so on” (Schwartz, 2000). What Schwartz wants us to notice in this articulation, is how the description of a good life contradicts a focus on freedom, autonomy, and choice, which is the basis of self-determination.

4. THE ADOLESCENT AND TRUE VS. FALSE SELF-BEHAVIOR

In a sociological perspective the focus is on groups of people and relationships (Den Ouden, 2012), and we are, as Aristotle recognized, social animals (Myers, 2000). We seek acceptance, and

in this social context, we become how we are perceived to be by others (Den Ouden, 2012). The paper will further elaborate on how this pursuit for approval in a social context can make you feel false, if the behavior makes you into something that differs from what you understand yourself to be.

“Being yourself can result in rejection. It’s difficult to find people similar to myself” is a statement from an adolescent in an interview done by Warrington and Younger (2010, p. 158). This comment illustrates the feeling an adolescent have concerning the display of her real self among her peers. Another student note that “to be part of the cool group you have to be kind of bland because if you have some strong opinions of views on something, you’re viewed kind of as different, and you get shunned” (Warrington and Younger, 2010, p. 165). Adolescents feel like they need to conform in order to be accepted and therefor they have to put on a “false act” and not be their true self. Another concern adolescents face, is not being the same in all situations: “I really think I am an happy person and I want to be that way with everyone bit I get depressed with my family and it really bugs me because that’s not what I want to be like” (Harter et al., 1997, p. 839) is a comment from a 15-year-old, another 15-year-old say that “I really think of myself as friendly and open to people, but the way the other girls act, they force me to become an introvert, even though I know I’m not” (Harter et al., 1997, p. 839). All these statements exemplify how the different kids feel like they are not themselves as in all situations, but they wish be, and some feel forced to be something that they are not in order to fit in.

If being authentic does not always require one to “act”, only acknowledge, could it be claimed that it the subjective feeling of false self-behavior that is the root of the problem? Neff and Harter (2002) who examined close relationships, and found that the people that was reporting low levels of self-esteem and depression, as a result of subordinating their own needs to avoid confrontation, were the people who *subjectively felt*

inauthentic (Wood et al., 2008). Concerning adolescents; “individual differences in the level of *perceived false self-behavior* are of particular concern to developmental psychopathologists since the higher this level, the greater the potential for conflict between multiple selves” (Harter et al., 1997, p.848).

Several findings demonstrate that “adolescents can readily distinguish true and false self-behaviors” (Harter et al., 1997, p. 844). As Harter et al. states, though very young adolescents and kids do not understand the concepts of false and true self-behaviors, adolescents from 13 years old understand this concept, and it becomes more salient among mid adolescents and beyond. In studies of *self-reported* level of false self-behavior (Harter et al., 1996, p.848), it has been demonstrated that “adolescents highest in false self-behavior reported lowest level of global self-esteem and were most likely to report depressive effect”. Then most of the conflicts come from having two attributes where one is perceived false and one is perceived true. Although there are many reasons for why adolescents report that opposing attributes cause conflict, in two studies (Bresnick, 1986; Harter & Monsour, 1992) the most often commented reason was that the behavior *went against their understanding of who they wanted to be*. Such as a girl getting nervous on a date, but understanding and wanting herself to be talkative. Which again reflect the positivity bias, we have a certain way we want to be, based on our values. Furthermore, according to Den Ouden (2012), our values are acquired early in our lives, mostly in the period of learning up to the age of twelve.

5. DISCUSSION

Is Havens (1985) definition of authenticity correct? Can we define an authentic person by someone who acknowledges his own impulses and prohibitions, someone who reflect upon himself and stand by his values? The author is not able to find any arguments against this definition, and supports it. Furthermore, this means that whether or not someone is authentic is only

evident to the person in question. In addition, how we choose do separate true or false self-behavior is connected to *who we wish to be*, and who we wish to be is connected to cultural norms and values (Diener et al, 2003; Dake, 1992).

As mentioned earlier, we often identify ourselves with our most positive attributes. Consequently, if we then have values that support our human flaws, like moodiness, ability to make mistakes and general faultiness, and do not look at them in a necessarily negative way, then perhaps we will feel more authentic, in opposition to someone who views them negatively. Also, conforming to others, sacrificing freedom, does not diminish ones authenticity, as long as conforming do not go against our values. If our values are “commitment”, then conforming might be a positive thing, even if we do not particularly want to commit because of reasons that are not as strong as the values. E.g. we might not always like our work, but we see the value working.

Then is it agreeable that “The only question that really matters,” declared Carl Rogers (quoted in Myers, 2000, p. 62), “... am I living in a way that is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me?” and “The crucial challenge is to find your inner voice, and inspire others to find theirs” (quoted by Den Ouden, 2012, p. 50)? Is Carl Rogers question the only one that really matters? And is finding your inner voice the “most crucial challenge” as Stephen Covey proposes, in light of well-being? The author suggests that it depends on how you interpret it. If you interpret Maslow’s outlooks on authenticity and inner-feeling voices, where one must discover his most fulfilling vocation in life (Simons, 1987), as an act of selfishness, with self-actualization as the apex of self-improvement, one might say that this does not lead to well-being. This is because, as previously stated, “a sense of belonging is an important parameter in people’s perspectives on happiness” (Den Ouden, 2012, p. 43). However, if we interpret self-actualization as a way of being authentic, in the definition of Havens (1985), as reflecting upon one self in relationship with others and committing to good values, this will in fact lead

to well-being. The problem might be if one believes that their authenticity is hidden, and one needs to find some secret inner voice, one might believe that the true self is hidden, and therefore constantly feel subjectively false.

Products and service development that reflect on good values and makes the user subjectively feel authentic, could contribute to what one could call a “transcendental innovation”. The author coined this definition. Transcendental innovation signifies a process that puts emphasis on ethical, social and psychical features in design, additionally to economic and functional aspects.

Why is this important to designer to consider other perspectives than the economic one? “Understanding what things are valued by people, and why, is essential for the understanding their feelings towards new solutions” (Den Ouden, 2012, p. 22). The economic perspective views us human as rational decision makers, able to access all information and calculate the results of every possible action, wanting to maximize exchange and use value. However, people act in ways that seem economical irrational, because the values they are maximizing are not material (Graeber, 2001). We are influenced by our values, our habits, cultural norms and personal psychological accounting systems.

In the context of this paper, it has been found that people do not want feel false, and do not want to feel manipulated or overruled. They seek the feeling of authentic expression and also often having a positivity bias, viewing their subjectively appreciated best attributes as their core self. This is something that should be respected while creating products and services.

Particularly for adolescents and particularly for kids under the age of twelve, if one is creating interactive books or other products based on storytelling, one can benefit of telling a story that is based on good values, for the reason of increasing psychological well-being. It can be shown that this has already been done frequently in books and animations for kids.

6. CONCLUSION

Conclusively, the author of this paper would like to introduce the term “transcendental innovation”, which the she defines as a process that puts emphasis on ethical, social and psychical features in design, additionally to economic and functional aspects. This is important to take into account, considering that people are irrational, and the values they want to maximize is not always material. The article puts a particular focus on authentic expression and well-being, where understanding how people feel concerning their authentic selves is an important insight, as well as how a focus on good values are important for well being.

This paper concludes that one should be aware of the subjective feeling of true and false self, refraining from designing products and services that make users feel manipulated and overruled, but designing products and services that contributes to the feeling of authentic expression. Also, when designing products and services for kids and adolescents that emphasize storytelling, the stories should be based on good values, in order to support well-being.

This article can provide a valuable contribution to designers who want to take a holistic view, and envision how their designs can give added value. Although, products and services need to have an economic reference frame, psychological and sociological perspectives can be considered to contribute to a transcendental innovation.

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