

Managing Product Trend in Cultural Migration

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Abstract

Producing a new product in cultural migrating community, users culturally determined needs may be unpredictable and are not easy to be recognized by individual. Similarity or standardization of product may overlook the diversity between people in different culture and communities. This shift is challenge to social and design researcher. This paper illustrates how social and design researcher engaged to understand about product changes in competing with cultural migrating and investigates some practical cases where individuals, who find themselves in new environments, use and adapt household products to support both traditional and developing expectations. These experiences have allowed us to propose some principles of product migration in practice, and techniques for social and design researcher to respond to these situations.

Introduction

The interactions between product and users are mainly important to ensure successful in new product development processes (Green and Klien 1999:92; Taylor et al. 1999:217, Von Hippel 2002:821). These authors highlighted that a successful product requires certain number of level and interaction between designers and users. In current situations and environment, however, designers working in the studio still predicting the users interactions with products are basically based on their previous knowledge and experience.

Users culturally determined needs may be particularly unpredictable in a changing society and product changes and trend among users are sometimes difficult to be understand. It is always a challenge for social and design researcher to know who their users (or stakeholders) is. In these cases, artifacts should no longer be seen as a styling shape or just an art object but products should be designed and produced with appropriate features including specific cultural aspects which can benefit to specific users needs and requirements (Leinbach 2002:3).

This paper explains a framework of using conceptual artifacts to understand about unchanged cultural values to be relevant to product transformation which can be a guideline model for social researcher in response to the needs of people experiencing cultural migration. This work will generate a methodology for social and design researcher assisting to identify cultural elements in product changing trend, within their cultural migration experience.

Migration and Cultural Migration (in the context of this work)

Migration could be seen as the main factor influencing the demographic patterns in a given geographical area. In the 1980s, Malaysia underwent a shift from an economy based on agriculture to one largely based on manufacturing industry. This process has seen both industrialization and the construction of modern infrastructure in urban areas.

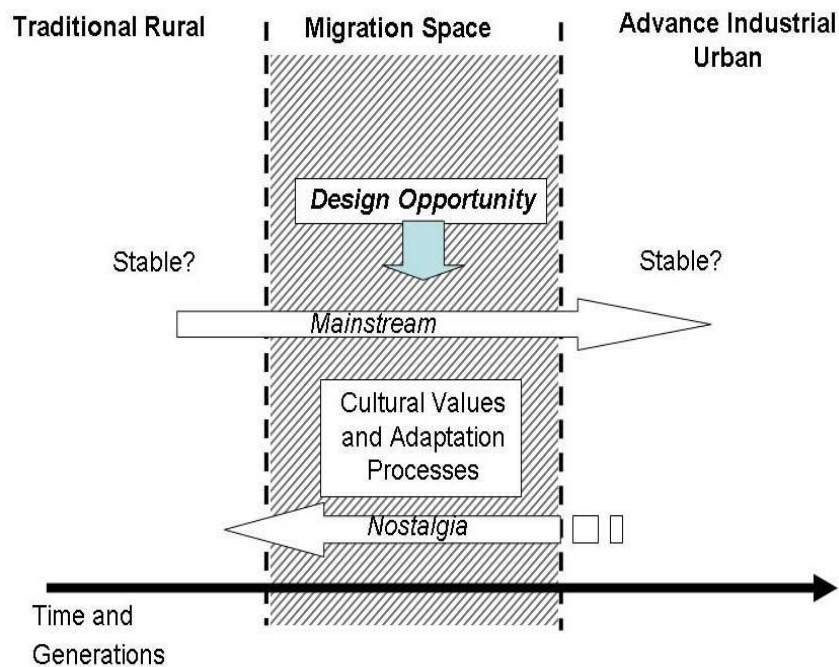
As a result living standards have improved thus contributing to increased levels of migration. The idea that migration is influenced by economic development is suggested in a study by Bloch (2002:22), which looks at the context of European economies during 1900s. Further studies by other researchers have also identified demographic and economic changes as important influences on lifestyle and products. In relation to this, Malaysia, as a developing country is no exception to this pattern.

Therefore, this process of economic transition has led to the emergence of a population which is based in industrial urban areas rather than traditional rural ones (Talib 2000:36). Increasing migration from rural to urban area has also been influenced by Malaysian government socio-economic planning aimed at restructuring society through Malaysian government education and training Programmes. The migration results from these government planning can still be observed in the Internal Migration Report for the year 2000 (Malaysian Department of Statistics 2006).

In general, "Migration" has been defined as the movement of humans from one district to another, sometimes over long distances or in large groups. However, in a previous study, Papastergiadis (2000:53) revealed that in any current definition of the migrant, an account of the complex array including sexual, political, economic and cultural forms must also be considered. Similarly, Gordon (1964) as cited in Bloch (2002:22), also revealed that in the process of migration, one will experience different stages in the assimilation process which involved cultural, structural, marital, identification and attitudinal acceptance.

In this work, migration not only focuses on the people that migrate between geographical areas but also when they moved between time and space, which involved moving between social classes and the changing of products they might adapt and adopt within their migration experience (refer to figure 1 below)

Figure 1 - Schematic model of "Migration" ,in this work context (Rahman 2010)



Moving from traditional rural to advanced industrial urban (sometimes in reverse; eg. Middle class "downsizers") in any changing culture trend, users will be introduced to the interplay of conflicts between cultural values and the processes of adaptation. In this situation, we might not know the appropriate products which occupy the migration space (Figure 1) but a combination of speculative designing together with social inquiry input could be a useful tool to understand those unpredictable areas of products and social migration. Based this work early observations, it is recognized that products could transform and/or migrate into a different practical form in response to the social changes and environment of the users through numerous, confusing and unpredictable routes. These can be observed in individual cases but are difficult to measure as a "snapshot" across communities where individuals are found at all stages of this migration.

In most cases observed it is found that users are experiencing social and cultural changes in adopting a modern urban lifestyle, whilst at the same time, still trying to adapt elements of traditional products and practices where appropriate to their new urban settings.

Through our initial background research with geographical migrants in the UK, we began to recognise that there are more than just cultural elements influenced product interaction with users. In the hybrid lifestyles of migrants (as in many developing countries) there are also other aspects and possibilities of interaction in terms of ergonomics, usability, safety, hygiene, and practicality, which can be potential areas for social and design researcher to engage with where the needs of having traditional tools to assist cultural practices is still occurred.

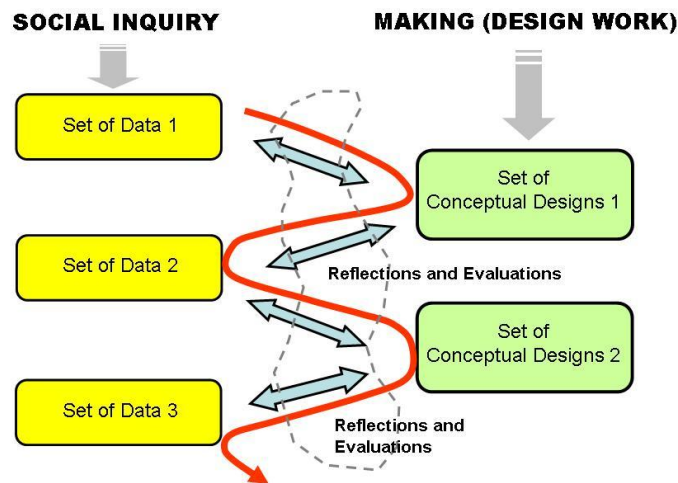
Framework

Framework for this investigation is generally built up into two (2) main components, which are continuously interrelated and contributed to each other. The first (1) part focused more to an account of how products interact with stakeholders¹ in their culture environment.

The second part will be focusing on the process of developing a specific conceptual design for culture, which can be used to analyze and evaluate the understanding that has been gained from stage 1. The social inquiry works (involved with stakeholders) will directly inform the design or artifacts development process of this research, which in return assisted in the continuous social inquiry works.

Here, the conceptual design work or artifacts is a continuous process alongside the social inquiry and responding to insights emerging from it. In turn, set of conceptual designs or artifacts developed in the practical design work being used as provocative objects (conceptual designs) bridging users' cultural determined needs and inspiration to products as the programme of interviews and group work (design workshop and discussions) proceeds. This conceptual design work or artifacts has continued to be a continuous process alongside the social inquiry and responding to insights emerging from it. In turn, a speculative conceptual design or artifacts has been used as instrumental in this research as the programmed of interviews proceeds.

Fig. 4 - Research Work and Design Scheme



Both processes, creating or designing conceptual artifacts and doing social inquiry is more likely to provide good results for this investigation. Thus, in designing process, the output could only reflect to the possibilities but with no absolute guarantee, this design work or artifacts is validated by the social inquiry work and its output.

Analysis

The analysis process has been developed based on social science qualitative data analysis techniques in generating themes, coding, together with reflective process that fed tacitly in to the designing activities, as well as informing explicit analysis. In practical, both, designing and analytical action, are contributing to inform each other and assisted to progress the analysis process.

¹ Stakeholders here is referring to sampling/participations from this work, who is experiencing cultural migration moving from traditional rural into industrial urban adapting household products in Malaysia.

Methodological Findings

Part of the research work was to produce conceptual designs or artifacts in the form of visualizations to assist researcher and research subjects in exploring possibilities in user-product-interaction. It is also to explore different ways of using these design visualizations with stakeholders. The presentation format, the concepts selected, and the physical settings for the interactions with stakeholders, all affect the productivity of interviews and discussion sessions. Below are some of the productive approaches identified in the research work influence stakeholders' engagement:

- Presentation formats influence participants' engagement - The early design or artifacts presentations were in printed handout form and in 2 dimensional visualization formats. Having these 2D illustrations for my interviews and workshops had its own disadvantages and limitations. For example, when showing 2D illustrations to the participants, the actual use and practical problems of the designed product could not be tested to evaluate the real practice and actual environment where the product should be operating. In this situation, participants had to imagine how the products might work based on the visualizations shown to them. The alternative approach of changing its presentation format from photo real into 2D illustrations has triggered participants engagement not only to discuss about the physical aspects of the products but also to other non physical aspect such as its practicality and function.
- Selecting familiar cultural types (eg. kitchen tools) triggers active participation - Having conceptual designs developed from existing familiar cultural products, encouraged active participation in stakeholder sessions. Using these familiar forms did not just assist in developing future design ideas, it also mobilized the implicit elements of culture through participants' using the product as a starting point for speculation about improvements and discussion of related practices and beliefs. This indicates that familiar products will be more productive than novel futuristic products, which might cause the discussions to digress into other non related areas.
- Cultural constraints in engaging with participants - To connect with the participants, some cultural constraints need to be considered. The researcher discovered that each of the interpersonal activities in the research required a different approach. For example, expert interviewees could be contacted formally and directly because they shared the researcher's professional understanding and recognize the value of the research, whether they were cultural authorities or a policy expert. Thus, an expert interview does not require any special care in preparation or incentive for participation. However, the situation was different when it came to conducting Home Interviews. There was no formal source that could lead the researcher to suitable people, this required the researcher to have some knowledge of local settings, for example some participants were found by asking diners at traditional food stalls for recommendations to other potential samplings or participations.
- Friendly Introduction session is essential to deal with 'local' culture - The introductory phase was essential to building rapport and enabling the development of further dialogues. From the experience, researcher recognized that participants' responses were heavily influenced by their social background and the education system they had experienced. Participants' first reactions to engage with design revealed a rather passive response in developing their ideas about the research subject. To improve this, the researcher created some activities based on shared topics of interest to engage and facilitate their communication with him.

Conclusion

A central feature of this work is the use of design practice and its outcomes to provide part of the environment for engaging with users in their homes or other familiar environments. In addition, the designer also must develop good skills of interacting with and observing stakeholders. This is evident above where the designer is using the research methods to understand the subjects and their culture. The designer/researcher will need to pay attention to certain features in developing their design work (as explained above). Engagement with participants must also take account of participants' background, culture and environmental settings. In this work it was observed that the designer could not predict the course of cultural factors. However, by adapting this approach, it is identified that particular elements of culture can be useful for designers knowledge to support their design process in new product development.

This kind of contextualized understanding cannot be gained in studio work (Ireland 2003:22), however, it requires commitment and participations with/from stakeholders and, as indicated by Bowen (2009:137; Rahman and Rust 2009; Rahman 2010), stakeholders cannot imagine future possibilities without a stimulus such as the use of design work or introduction of conceptual designs to understand about cultural phenomena.

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