



Everyday Companions. Meaning-Making Process Through Handbag Design

Research Through Design Case Study

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Abstract

The recent decade has witnessed significant growth in the handbag market due to the changing values and increasing needs of handbags globally. Fashionable and innovative materials and techniques have become available and inspired designers to push the boundaries of handbag design. However, the lack of a theoretical foundation in handbag design may hinder the practice of handbag designers that needs to keep up with the contemporary market. This thesis aims to illuminate how heritable knowledge can be gained from the history of handbags and applied to contemporary handbag design practice. It provides designers with a vision for creating handbags as communicative and meaningful products.

The doctoral thesis, entitled *Everyday Companions. Meaning- Making Process Through Handbag Design*, examines handbag design in Estonia from 1918 to 1940 and uses historical knowledge as input for contemporary handbag designing. The emphasis is on the cultural construction of the meanings of bags. Meaning-making in this thesis is restricted to the process of designing handbags that includes the making and testing of handbag prototypes with potential users or audience; the thesis excludes the meaning-making involved in product marketing. The study



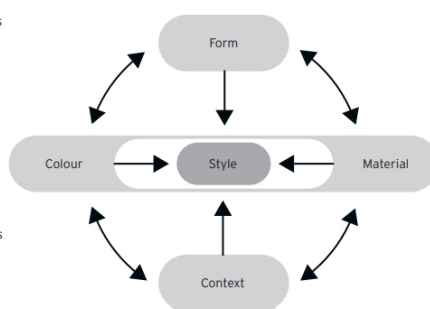
asks: How is it possible for a handbag to communicate meaning and how can the designer generate meanings in the handbag he/she designs? Vihma's (1995) semiotic study of design products is taken as a basis for this thesis. The semiotic approach makes it possible to concentrate on meaning-making through handbag design. It provides explanations of the interaction between individuals and handbags and illuminates the perception of meanings through signifiers – the physical features of bags.

The thesis consists of three creative cases preceded by qualitative research on handbags represented in Estonian periodicals and conserved in museum collections. The historical period from 1918 to 1940 is chosen as the beginning of handbag fashion. Although handbags were also worn before these years, they became ordinary everyday necessities around the end of the First World War and their styles started to change in parallel with clothing fashion. This twenty-two-year period between the world wars was the first period of the independence of Estonia in which rapid developments in handbag design both locally and internationally were evident. Estonia was integrated into the European cultural context, and fashion trends from central Europe reached Estonia and were adopted and adjusted for the local market. Through the analysis of historical data, three themes reflecting novel, classic and local characteristics of bags emerge and lead the research inquiry.

The creative outcome of the cases includes three collections of bags whose design processes are informed by the most outstanding features from each thematic characteristic. The objective of the collections is to test the meaning-making potential of bags. The focus is on the perception of the physical characteristics of bags. I

Figure 11. The model for conducting a semiotic analysis of handbags has three focus points to manage the data on bag characteristics: form, surface and social- and practical-use related characteristics, which are all included and related in style descriptions

- I Form related characteristics
- II Surface related characteristics
- III Social- and practical-use related characteristics



examine the creative collections of bags interpreting and representing novel, classic and local characteristics from the practitioner's perspective through my reflections on the making of the bags and the audience's perspective through qualitative analyses of their feedback.

The research contributes new insights into handbag history, as well as the designing and making of meaningful contemporary handbags informed by history. A suggested semiotic model enhances the understanding of the communicative potential and meanings of handbags through linkages between the physical characteristics of bags and their perception past and present. The findings of this research are expected to be beneficial for handbag designers and students alike in



understanding the value and potential role of the handbag as a trustworthy everyday companion for many.

Summary of research through design activity

Research through design was used in the thesis to focus on deepening understanding and providing tangible applications for the contemporary field of handbag design using practical experiments.

The thesis consists of three cases, the part of which was always a collection of bag prototypes informed by semiotic analyses of historical bags on three relevant topics. The topics (novel, classic and local) were adopted to enable the research to focus on one theme at a time. Bags collections (1) “Bags for Dreamers Only” with seven bags, (2) “Bags for Collectors Only” with three bags and (3) “Bags for Me” with seven bags were designed and prototypes were produced by the doctoral student herself to enable to comment on the designing and making process. The description of the creative process from inspiration and collection range to 3D design development and the reflections on bag making with practical comments and relevant findings were added to the thesis.

All the bag prototypes were displayed publicly to provide audience feedback on the perception of the bags. Observations, field texts and semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect and then analyse the data to provide new knowledge on the relations between meaning-making and design practice.

Underpinning research, context and summary of methodology

Contextualisation of the research is a multi-layered activity. First, Estonian handbag design as a research context is described in this thesis through an existing literature review and practitioners’ experiences to highlight original viewpoints that come from the local context and can be beneficial to both local and international stakeholders. Second, providing an overview of the existing research on handbags and handbag design reveals several research gaps that the thesis aims to fill. And third, to explain the need to combine history and contemporary practice in the meaning-making process, the relevance of historical bags as a starting point for design analysis and inspiration and research themes (novel, classic and local) are explained.

The thesis applies research through design approach and sequencing tactics. The serial method carries out experiments chronologically, where each case generates insights or raises questions that lead the work onward. The key characteristic of the method is the systematisation of local knowledge through reflective practice.



Meaning making in this thesis relies on semiotics and follows the idea of perceiving meanings instead of receiving messages. The thesis focuses on Susann Vihma's theory of product semiotics and adjusts it according to the practitioner's needs. It develops the model that improves the understanding of the multifaceted features of bags relevant to the meaning-making process and presents the importance of various parts of bags. The model provides information on analysing handbags, their forms, surfaces, and modes of social and practical use.

Throughout the research, several data collection methods are used to explicate the historical input and the contemporary outcome of the creative work to answer the research question about the perception of bags and their connotations and to define the meaning-making abilities.

When historical data is collected through periodicals and historical bags, contemporary data is gathered through observations, collecting field texts and semi-structured interviews conducted during the displays. Summative content analysis and object analysis are applied to analyse historical and contemporary data alike.

References produced by researcher from/during doctoral research

2019 Exhibition "Bags for Me", The Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn

2018 Short-term display "Bags for Me", The Estonian Academy of Arts, bookbinding workshop, Tallinn

2017 Exhibition "Just Leather, Eunique Applied Arts and Design 2017", Karlsruhe (exhibiting part of the collection "Bags for Dreamers Only")

2017 Display "Bags for Collectors Only", the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design shop, Tallinn

2017 Display "Bags for Collectors Only", Kaubamaja's Shoe World and e-shop, Tallinn

2016 Exhibition "Kotid. Ainult unistajatele / Bags. For Dreamers Only", Hop galerii, Tallinn

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