10.3 The art of noticing: design by paradoxes

Objective

An oxymoron is a figure of speech in which contradictory terms appear jointly. Oxymorons can be a creative and unusual combination of opposite words such as a 'friendly enemy' or 'act naturally'. In this exercise, we will ask you to observe different products and describe through an oxymoron the ability of different designs to contrast and balance opposite requirements.

Background

An oxymoron combines opposite characteristics into a single concept. In binary logic, an oxymoron like 'a friendly enemy' is a contradiction: either someone is a friend or an enemy. In real life, however, things are not always so neat. We can use oxymorons to express nuances. For instance, someone can be our enemy, but this person may exhibit some friendly traits, or he/she can behave in ambiguous ways. In other cases, the oxymoron helps us express assessment relative to the situation. Logicians find oxymorons inconsistent and call them paradoxes. However, most human beings have no problem accepting the presence of antagonist traits in behaviours and situations.

We can think of every judgment we express as based on an oxymoron. For instance, when we say that Julia is tall, we mentally refer to some implicit baseline of what being tall and short means in a specific situation. Four feet is very tall for a 3-year-old baby; 6.5 feet is maybe tall on average for most people, but not that tall in a professional basketball game or if you are from a country where the population is taller than average, such as Slovenia. Depending on the situation, we can think of any person as somewhat tall and somewhat not tall (Iandoli, Ponsiglione, and Zollo, 2016).

Not only do we accept oxymorons, but we play with the ambiguity of natural language to create new ones when we want to highlight the complexity of a situation. For instance, when we suggest someone 'act naturally', we refer to a self-imposed behaviour that should look spontaneous. Acting naturally satisfies the complexity of social situations in which others expect us to conform to specific rules and social norms. On the other hand, people appreciate smooth and natural behaviour and the ability to adapt swiftly to changing circumstances. The reason why this happens is that our interlocutors have contrasting needs that have to be satisfied jointly.

This necessity is typical in design. Designers have to deal with opposite user requirements: while, ideally, we would like to satisfy those requirements to the same high degree, technical constraints often stand in the way. For instance, who would not love a car that is both environmentally friendly and very fast? Until not many years ago, this was a technical impossibility, and designers had to compromise between efficiency and performance. Technological innovation can help by providing solutions that better accommodate a trade-off. In the car example, electric vehicles combine well the two requirements of green and fast.

However, some of the environmental burdens are merely shifted to another area. In this case, to the impact of making and disposing of batteries, not to mention the development of 'clean' energy sources for recharging the battery.

In this exercise, we suggest that oxymoron thinking can help discover design trade-offs and inspire us to find innovative solutions. Here are some great examples:

- Ikea Democratic Design, based on the company's belief that 'good design combines form, function, quality, sustainability at a low price' and that 'good home furnishing is for everyone'.
- The Dummies book series helps readers 'transform the hard-to-understand into easy-to-use'.
- The L'Oreal campaign 'Because you're worth it', playing on the contrast between 'I take care of my beauty because I deserve it' versus the sexist approach to cosmetic ads that was dominant in the 60s and that emphasized the message 'I take care of my beauty to please him'.
- HomeAway, the American company that offers lodging rentals to travelers and vacationers.
- Volkswagen Clean Diesel (oh, boy! That oxymoron did not work).

Instructions

The first step is to observe reality to identify examples of oxymoron-driven design, for which we suggest the following steps:

1. Identify an average example of a product (e.g. the average table, the average car, the average kitchen appliance), meaning a product whose design looks relatively standard and obvious. An excellent point to start could be product advertising, since ads often use paradoxical language to express how a product excels compared to its competition. For instance, check the Volvo ad showing a crashed car saying 'We design Volvo like this' to allude to the proverbial safety of Volvo cars.
2. Identify a prominent attribute of the design (e.g. 'safe'), and think of its opposite, and see if and how the opposite is incorporated in the design (e.g. for a car to be safe, it has to break easily in a controlled way).
3. Identify 2 or 3 design variations of the item you have selected that depart from the average and specify which dimension they do on a continuum based on opposites (e.g. plain-ornate, classic-modern, rigid-foldable, funny-serious, conservative-liberal). Opposites can be functional, aesthetic, or cultural.
4. Identify designs that err on either side of the spectrum, those that try to combine opposite requirements, and those who compromise by aiming at an average of the opposites.
5. Express which one you like best and why.
6. List one or two design ideas that could potentially lead to some innovation in the design, using the logic of contrast and balance.

References

Elegant Design: A Designer's Guide to Harnessing Aesthetics

Iandoli, L., Ponsiglione, C., & Zollo, G. (2016). MODELING NAÏVE CAUSALITY IN EVERYDAY REASONIG WITH FUZZY LOGIC. *Fuzzy Economic Review*, *21*(1).