

CONVERSING

.ON

DIVERSITY

.IN

DESIGN

Conversing on Diversity in Design

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Abstract

The design industry thrives when it has designers who explore solutions that are unique, creative, and inspired. It is because of that nature that design is an ever-changing and growing medium. Design can only benefit from having people from all races, all creeds, and all statuses of life exploring and contributing unique, creative, and inspired solutions to many of today's wicked problems. However, the design industry itself is not conducive to diversity. If diversity in the industry was truly impactful, would the competitive nature of the free market naturally diversify it? Why, then, does design in the 21st century not reflect the rich cultural heritage of the general population? From the perspective of this paper, the reason stems from a lack of community-centered design in education, production, and communication. Bringing together communities to create a larger focus on design opportunities and accessibility morphs design products into distinctive and representative figures. By centralizing communities into the design process (through improving educational and industrial accessibility), we can simultaneously grow the field of design and make it more diverse while producing creative and new solutions.

Key words:

Community Centered, Identity, Accessibility, Cognitive Design, Intersectionality

Introduction

The relationship between designers and users is unique because its foundation is built off of empathy, communication, and education, making it far more intimate of a dynamic than found in other industries. At its core, a person's use case and their individual context is what design is all about, which is why a designer who learns about their audience can design a better product for them. This is, however, without considering a designer's personal identity, the identity of their community, and the concept of communities that design for themselves. Considerations such as this also bring up the fact that in the United States over 75% of designers are white (statistics according to Zippia). For an industry that is forced to modernize constantly to keep up with the demands of users and technological accessibility/advancements, regards on racial and ethnic diversity are only now starting to be addressed. Why does the design industry lack diversity, and how does that affect the design solutions that are prompted by diverse audiences?

At which point does the consideration of race make an impact in our industry? Should we be addressing the lack of racial and ethnic diversity when educating students? Should it even be addressed at all? And if we do, should the racial and cultural dynamics that exist within our country be a present factor when educating designers? These questions open an ever-more multilayered discussion, but its main driving force is assessing the value structure within the design industry. For instance, typically, a designer's considerations only exist for their users, stakeholders, management, and creative identity; however, they tend to miss a larger audience interacting with their designs. Sasha Constanza-Chock addresses this in her writing *Design Justice, Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* by bringing up who is commonly centralized in the design process "...design industries center the most socially and economically powerful users, while other users are systematically excluded on multiple levels..." (Chock). Sasha brings this up to mention that not only is diversity important, but the awareness and challenge of the structural inequality that renders audiences invisible is key to knowing their larger users. If a designer does not challenge their value structure, they will always have designs that remain invisible to a larger audience. With such a huge portion of the industry being white, how many designs are invisible to BIPOC audiences?

"...the value of design approaches to assist multilaterals to address complex problems that transcend communities and international borders" (Thiessen). When thinking about design we should be aware that all it is is an approach to solving problems. Clarifying our problems and who they affect is the focal point of solution-based design, and when the consideration of diversity is half-hearted, it shows that the idea of the audience is half-hearted. Attempts such as hiring young designers with different backgrounds and hosting diversity fairs and seminars where the idea of change is discussed fill the room with pride and self-affirmation. But how far do these designers advance in their careers? How long do BIPOC designers stay with agencies and the communities they enter? How many of the attendees of diversity seminars challenge the value systems in their workplace? In their schools? How far has the idea of diversity gone without being defined or attained? Considerations like this lead me to believe that the path to diversifying design comes from a community-centered process, where the audience and the designer are equally integral to the process.

Literature Review

The value of diversity is hard to miss when confronted by the lack thereof. Considering it in the context of design, diversity is extremely important. Because communication is so fundamental to design, people with a wealth of communication and problem-solving skills are extremely important for the field. For instance, it can be said that if you put a graphic designer, an interior designer, an architect, and an engineer in one room, you could say that's a very diverse room. However, if all the designers in the room are white, then it becomes difficult to say that the room is diverse. That is because it is easier to approach topics of diversity such as gender identity, sexual identity, and ableism rather than the matter of race. Typically, conversations on race have a rhetoric of fighting discriminatory practices or shedding light on the lack of diversification in an industry/corporation, and although this paper will be doing the same thing, there are important variables on the matter of race, inclusivity, and identity overall.

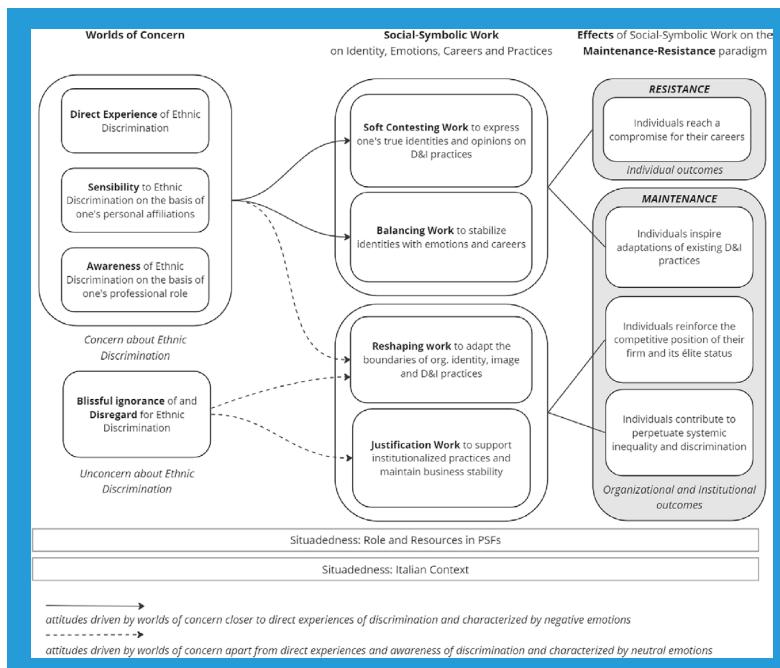
Each lived experience is different, making inequality a very individualized experience. In the article Revealing Intersectional Dynamics in Organizations: Introducing 'Intersectional Identity Work' Doyin says, "Identity work emphasizes the dynamic interaction between individual and environment, and the effort expended in creating congruence between the two" and continues to mention that everyday encounters trigger individuals to ask themselves who they are.

For minorities in fields that are dominated by a white majority, these types of everyday questions can easily become larger than life. More often than not, you become seen as a representative of your race, gender, or age. You become the platform people use to discuss their opinions on current affairs because they view you as a bridge to your community. Willingly or not, you become an expert on all things related to your community since you are a stand-in for the diversity that is needed. These types of everyday interactions can leave a lot of mixed emotions because the individual who often finds themselves being a minority in the room becomes unwillingly a representation of their community. The spirit of the individual is forgotten, and they are now viewed as the interpreter of their community. Contextualizing it further within an industry perspective, Doyin provides interviews where members were asked about their personal experiences with the lens of intersectionality. A common theme is that the most connecting point for many encounters between subordinates, superiors, and clients is through their individuality. However, an alienating sensation came when individuals were perceived only by their ethnic community.

For a competitive industry, it is hard to understand the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of diversity. If a focus on diversity has a rational benefit to the industry and the business, wouldn't the competitive market naturally pursue more diversification efforts? Brennan J. puts it best with his Coca-Cola example. "Suppose Coke innovates by switching to less expensive aluminum. Coke would then make extra-normal profits and could undercut competitor's prices to gain extra market share. All things equal, Coke would beat other firms when competing for investors or consumers. All things equal, competitors would then be forced to copy Coke's lead and switch to aluminum." When looking at a concept such as diversity in the same way that we look at something as tangible as aluminum, one clear question opens up. If there is any clear statistical advantage at diversifying, why wouldn't a competitive industry leap at that chance? This perspective is challenged by something that Brennan calls "cognitive diversity," a form of diversification piloted by variants in perspectives, understandings, and background knowledge. For instance, a design agency that has/had designers with color blindness will naturally approach color in their products differently than an agency that has never hired a color-blind designer. However, after introducing this concept, Brennan warns us that people make business decisions with a lens of trust. Trust is built when a team can relate to one another and feel as though the person they are going to do business with has the same values. This makes the entire process more cooperative and mutually beneficial, which then, in turn, builds more trust, a naturally cyclical model.

Concepts like cognitive diversity have a hard time working in systems unless they are properly managed and built with a good foundation. Why is that?

Typically, in large populations, people tend to lack trust when there is a significant presence of a minority population since they are unable to relate to them. When referencing both Doyin and Brennan's work, we see this occurs due to a dissolvance of a minority member's individuality, a lack of shared values, and personal biases and/or misperceptions. Left to their own devices, these attributes can manifest into discriminatory practices. In the reading Don't rock the boat: The Social-symbolic Work to Confront Ethnic Discrimination in Branches of Professional Service Firms, Daniela Alberti describes to us what discrimination looks like "receiving lower performance ratings based on prejudice toward one's competence...having one's opinions often ignored or authority questioned, actual lower compensation, social exclusion, and less access to career opportunities". Discriminatory practices sway people away from pursuing certain careers as going through these types of circumstances leaves minority members with a sense of isolation and repelance. These types of systems tend to also be cyclical, often encouraging a status quo in organizations as presented in this model.



Deciphering discriminatory practices occurs when we first consider people individually and their intersectional backgrounds. Backgrounds that often overlap with multiple social identities that are unique to them. This is because value systems are individualistic, no matter how many layers of identities are atop one another. Daniela shows us this with her interviews of various employees working in an Italian law firm who had to confront their social identities through interactions with either their team or with their client. A particular one that stood out to me was a Turkish employee who described his experiences when he made his culture more prominent at work.

"I am often asked about the life of women in Turkey. A colleague, as a joke, kept asking: 'Do you eat bread?' [...] Informally, I talk to colleagues to explain the traits, concepts, and peculiarities of my culture (Islam)." (Daniela) This stood out to me because this interviewee proceeded to mention how he had to defend his Muslim identity during the apex of ISIS influence, often giving explanations behind certain dynamics within his religion. His experience is completely different from that of his Brazilian co-worker, who would have to repress his Brazilian heritage when working with certain clients. This is to say that discrimination does not exist in a general sense but rather as a complex and multilayered stigmatizing force.



Considering discrimination in the design industry context, there is an important thing to mention. A design system that harbors discriminatory practices will create discriminatory designs. What does this mean? In *Diversity and Social Justice in Technology Design: Reflections on Diversity-Aware Technology*, Laura Schlenez describes how discriminatory technology (specifically AI in this case) tends to occur from unbalanced and non-representative data "...because the dataset used to develop and train an AI-based system does not represent the diversity of those affected by the system, it does not work for them" (Schlenez). She continues to mention how technology that is advancing and becoming more automated cannot work alongside marginalized groups when the data structures it relies on do not factor in the history and context of its diverse audiences. A problematic process such as this creates an even more discriminatory design that not only makes marginalized stakeholders invisible but even more marginalized! This is why having designers of different backgrounds facilitate research on usability and user wants and needs opens a wider world of design overall. It creates more space for variations on design that aren't considered possibilities yet. Considering that, whose responsibility is it to have an inclusive field? Is the responsibility on the designers who enter the industry or the leaders and members who are already in the industry? Truthfully, it is very hard to say.

Ashlyee Freeman's Designing inclusive organizational identities mentions that "... if members of an organization feel that their personal or social identities do not conflict with any aspect of the organization's identity and they can more comfortably express their authentic selves without having to mask their social identities...". When designers enter a space that embraces them, is open in its communication, and puts effort into building trust and bridges, it only incentivizes further growth both generationally and in the moment. This is key to building a more diverse and inclusive crowd. You bring in a diverse crowd by making your identity be receptive to a diverse crowd. Ashley goes into more detail on this by saying that if members of organizations see themselves as a part of the organization's identity, it fosters a deeper sense of responsibility and community. This, too, can only occur if a methodology supports it.

Freeman posits that the best methodology is a focus on participatory design, "A participatory process can also help avoid benevolent marginalization in the organization of groups that are marginalized in society". Involving the community members that you want to be represented/designed for within the design process is the best way to work for them. This process not only develops a better and stronger design but also a stronger identity overall. We see that with a proper methodology, systems enforce a naturally symbiotic relationship in which diverse foundations bring in diverse designers who bring in diverse designs with diverse representations that reinforce diverse foundations. This, too, is cyclical in its nature.

Methodology

The demand for diversification in the design field is not an unattainable nor even a surprising request. The industry has already been changing, and with the platforms for education and toolsets required to become a designer being more and more accessible, the diversity in designers and designs overall is more than ever. With that being said, however, growing the change is the most important aspect. My methodology is focused on taking our demand of fostering a more diverse industry and communicating with experts who have already delved into what it means to live and breathe. More specifically, making the pathway into the design industry clearer through educational credit rewarding programs led by mentors and diversity advocates is the focus of my methodology. This methodology is inspired by a project I worked on in my fall semester 2023, where my team and I proposed to leaders at the CentraCare Medical School Campus in St. Cloud that the best way to have more rural doctors is by investing in the future. They would do this by providing University of Minnesota students, alongside physicians, with internships if they mentored and talked about their personal experiences at public schools around St. Cloud. This program would connect university students with professionals and high school students with college students, making the path for education and career availability very clear.

I propose the same thing when focusing on diversity. More diverse students in the classrooms, in the workforce, and in the design industry overall means decreasing the barriers to the path of entry. Connecting with high school students within the community to show them at an early age that there are paths they were initially unaware of exists has a resonating effect. By using industry professionals and college students to act as a pipeline for these students to the university creates loyalty among soon-to-be college students and makes the college body more diverse. The same way this is impactful for high school students, connecting community colleges and transfer students around Minnesota with the same program is just as impactful.

Making the incentive be college credits for soon-to-be transfer students allows them to see what the program would be like, and connecting with industry professionals will show them what the industry itself is like. That is why for my proposed methodology, I will be conducting interviews to ask about the best approach to cultivating diversity-focused environments within the education program. Communicating with experts like Theresa Moses, Bryan Green, and Dean Prasad will be the first step in seeing how feasible this opportunity is. Doing this also decreases the economic setbacks that occur to students early on in their education, which is the most limiting factor. The core of this methodology exists in demystifying the industry and connecting students with one another!

Conclusion

In my experience studying design, the one thing I have learned over and over again is that anyone can become a designer. Often, some designers are already designers without being aware of it or having studied it. The industry is becoming more and more open overall; with the accessibility of new-age technology rising, it is repeatedly shown that anyone can be a designer while the workforce is still dominated by white designers. How does an industry that lacks a BIPOC workforce evolve to be one that incentivizes it? Design can be abstract, communicative, artistic, and boundaryless, the lack of designer diversity is harmful to end users and stakeholders alike. It is harmful as systems that practice these discriminatory practices, either abrasively or subtly, produce designs that also discriminate against marginalized groups. It is also these practices that diminish the value of BIPOC designers, diminishing their value individually and collectively. Changing the structure of these design systems by bringing together communities to create a larger focus on design opportunities and accessibility morphs design products and communities into distinctive and representative figures. This diversity is what drives accurate representation, and accurate representation is what drives communal harmony. This benefits all designers, producers, and users alike.

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