Designing web platforms for the intermediation between local designers and craftspeople and global consumers

Plataformas de web design para a intermediação entre designers e artesãos locais e consumidores globais

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Abstract

The purpose of this work is to discuss strategies for communicating and adding value to local products, and enhancing the interaction between local makers and global consumers through web platforms. The research focused on "Indie Design", a movement made up of independent designers, artists and craftspeople that design and make a wide array of products without being part of large, industrialized businesses. There are many challenges to be faced in order to promote this kind of artifacts, this paper focused on the following: how to perceive local qualities of a product; how to communicate these qualities to global consumers; how to evaluate products' specific aspects related to their authenticity and sustainability; and what the best strategies for supporting local-global interactions are. Case studies of web platforms were discussed to address these issues and to highlight the designer mediation role in developing business strategies, interfaces and tools to bring producers and consumers together. Finally, a product assessment matrix was developed as a guideline for the evaluation of the characteristics and the social, economic and environmental impacts of local products.

Key words: local products, Indie Design, intermediation platforms, sustainability assessment.

Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é discutir estratégias para a comunicação e agregação de valor a produtos locais, melhorando a interação entre fabricantes locais e consumidores globais através das plataformas Web. A investigação centrou-se no "Indie Design", um movimento formado por designers independentes, artistas e artesãos que projetam e fabricam uma ampla gama de produtos, sem fazer parte de grandes negócios industrializados. Existem muitos desafios a serem enfrentados, a fim de promover este tipo de artefato. Este trabalho tem os seguintes objetivos: perceber qualidades de um produto local, sua comunicação com o consumidor global; como avaliar aspectos específicos dos produtos relacionados com a sua autenticidade e sustentabilidade; e quais são as melhores estratégias para apoiar as interações local-global. Os estudos de caso de plataformas da Web foram discutidos para abordar estas questões e destacar o papel de mediação do designer no desenvolvimento de estratégias de negócio, interfaces e ferramentas que aproximem os produtores e os consumidores. Por fim, uma análise de matriz de produto foi desenvolvida como uma diretriz para a avaliação das características e os impactos sociais, econômicos e ambientais dos produtos locais.

Palavras-chave: produtos locais, Indie Design, plataformas de intermediação, análise de sustentabilidade.

Introduction

The objective of this work is to examine intermediation strategies that add value to the identity of local products, communicate this identity, and enhance the interaction between local makers and global consumers.

Local products are cultural manifestations which strongly related to both the territory and community that produces them. These products represent the culmination of a network woven together over time, involving a biodiversity of products, traditional ways of doing things, and customs, as well as consumption habits (Krucken, 2009). The design's main contributions in stimulating territorial resources valorization and adding value to its intangible cultural heritage[1] is understand the qualities of authentic and original local products, and recognize and render recognizable local values and qualities.

One of the premises of this study is that the value of an offering is co-produced by producers and consumers, and designers can support the interaction between them. The main questions in this study are: How can we perceive the identity of a product or an artifact? How does the designer imprint and communicate elements of the local identity onto products that serve a global public? What are the intermediation strategies that can bring local products and global consumers together?

We present selected case studies of web platforms that represent examples of intermediation solutions and an initiative for the development of innovative intermediation strategies – the international project "The best of made in"[2], describing the designer's role in this context.

Identity elements in products

The preoccupation of consumers with identifying the origin of products has become stressed in recent years. We can see this in the growing search for healthy and authentic products, whose stories are "traceable"[3].

Thus, increasingly, people see a direct link between the quality of a product and the territory and manner in which it was made, and therefore they seek information to identify the story behind the product. The "authentic product" represents a return to the roots, an element of local and social integration. In some cases, the territory can serve as the "surname" of a product. The origin assists in inferring quality, and, in some cases, identifies flavors as it occurs with wine and cheese for example, as well as many other products that contain the characteristics of the territory of origin and the communities that produce them. But what is the differential of these products? What elements make them special? There is an emotional value associated with the products that respond to the consumers' desire for the "authentic" and "original". Thus, consumption becomes a unique experience, a ritual of appreciation of the singular qualities that reflect an identity.

The role of designers in planning experiences, which is much more complex than planning products, is emphasized by several authors. To provide a memorable offering – an experience – the consumer must be understood as a "guest" who needs to be drawn into the offering to feel a sensation, as stated by Pine and Gilmore (1998). Therefore, it is very important to understand the processes and context of production, consumption and usage, in order to identify the main elements needed to compose a meaningful experience. Thus one of the most important focus in the design of activities is to develop platforms that support the intermediation between who produces and who consumes, aiming at promoting favorable conditions to generate experiences.

The web-based platforms are interesting examples, especially those that follow the peer-to-peer network model, because they enable to bring culturally closer, groups that are frequently geographically distant from one another. In order to enable this cultural proximity, it is necessary to communicate product identity in a language that is accessible to various public. Furthermore, the intermediation platforms need to be clear and easy to use so they can act effectively as a bridge between heterogeneous groups, allowing them the consumption experience.

In this sense, examining those aspects that help consumers perceive the identity of a product is essential. This theme has been explored in depth by Krucken (2008) and Saikaly and Krucken (2010). Those aspects or indicators are the following:

- Intrinsic characteristics – qualities that reflect characteristics of the territory of origin, the manner, the raw materials and processes by which the product was made;
- Reference aspects of the product – information on the product story and its specific qualities, notional tables and environments;
- Reference aspects for packaging and the intermediation interfaces – packaging characteristics, communication strategies, appearance and reputation of points of sale or the interface of commercialization, usability and language;
- Indicators of origin and quality - stamps and certifications, for example organic agriculture, controlled denomination of origin, commercial certification;

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[1] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO defines "Intangible Cultural Heritage" as "the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills (including instruments, objects, artefacts, cultural spaces), that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage." This heritage, transmitted from one generation to the next, "is constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history. It provides people with a sense of identity and continuity, and promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity." For a more thorough view of the topic, see the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

[2] "The best of made in" is a web platform developed by the Italian company Co-Creando in collaboration with a network of design researchers from various international institutions: www.madeiin.com

[3] Traceability is defined as the "ability to trace the history, application, or location of that which is under consideration", according to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO 9001:2008). In general terms, traceability is related to the technical quality of the product. However, overall quality encompasses cultural and social aspects that are much more difficult to trace in a global market.

- Guarantees – returns policies, available customer service;
- Traceability and safety certification – technical information on products directly related to consumer safety, and permitting the consumers to track the path a product has taken.

The indicators listed above can provide information related to production processes, the environmental profile of the product, its quality and origin, as well as other associated historic, cultural and social aspects. An effective communication strategy can contribute to creating value for qualities involved in the production, commercialization and the actual use. In other words the designer can contribute to providing visibility for the product and its various aspects, reducing the opacity of the distribution and commercialization system and bringing the producer closer to the consumer.

Design of intermediation platforms

Intermediation platforms, as described by Jegou *et al.* (2004), are systems that encompass products, services, and communication interfaces that bring producers and consumers/users closer to interact. Several actors are involved in the transformation of resources into consumer products, beginning from the producers of raw materials, involving processors at various levels (processors, transformers and industries), agents responsible for the commercialization and distribution of products and, finally, the consumers and end users. In selling and buying a product, we activate the entire value chain (Figure 1).

Within this complex flow, which frequently involves different geographical regions, commercial actors responsible for the merchandise intermediation are added. These actors, are generically called "commercial agents", and they play a significant role in the value creation, stimulating a demand by means of bargaining power and control of buying and selling prices.

Therefore, designing intermediation platforms that communicate the aspects of product identity throughout complex value chains, and bringing local producers and global consumers closer is a major challenge, it requires several interventions on the entire value chain. These interventions support the development of strategies based on partnerships between the actors, and on the convergence of their interests. In similar cases, the development of possible "solutions", as Krucken and Meroni (2006) have emphasized, becomes a characteristic of the role of the designer in a present day context, referred to as a "service economy".

Web platforms as an intermediation strategy: the case of Indie products

This study focuses, specially, on local products created by craftspeople and independent designers with strong cultural references. These products can be referred to as "Indie Design" and can be considered as part of the Indie movement[4] and the DIY (Do It Yourself) culture. A growing number of Indie shoppers look for this kind of niche and handmade products instead of mass-produced products. These products are usually sold directly to buyers through craft fairs, street markets, and a variety of web platforms. Web platforms are particularly interesting as an intermediation strategy for these products. They allow craftspeople and Indie designers to communicate and market their products directly to global consumers, independently of their geographical location.

Nine case studies of web platforms that play a strategic role in the intermediation between craftspeople and local designers and global consumers, were developed. The objective was to identify possible strategies for web platform design. The cases are listed in Table 1.

These cases were selected through internet search using the following key words: independent design, independent designer, indie design, indie designer and indie shopper.

Two criteria were considered for the selection of the platforms listed on Table 1: (a) the platform must enhance and communicate the identity of local products, and (b) the makers, craftspeople and independent designers must be visible on the platform (Figure 2).
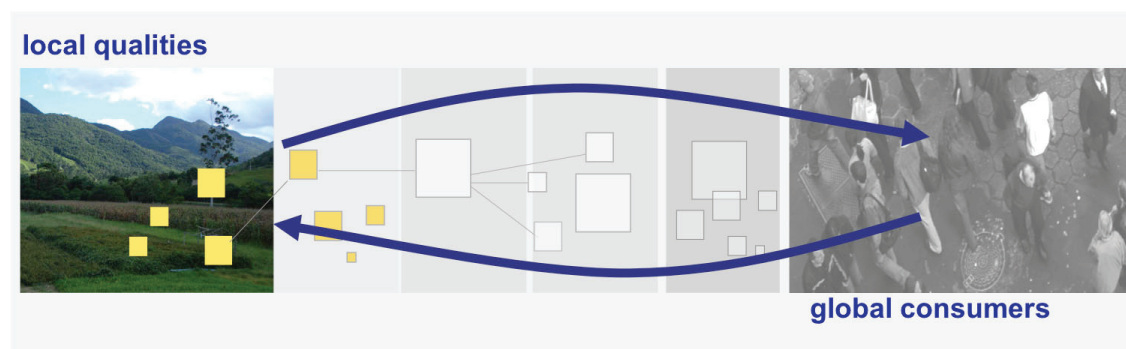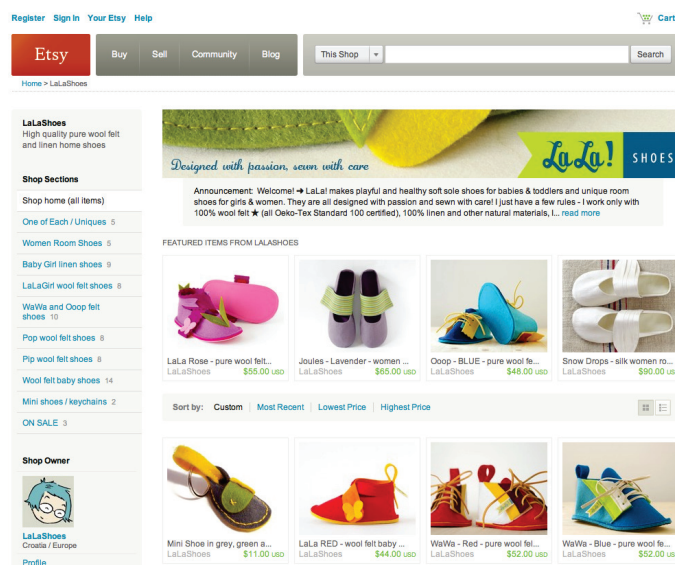

Figure 1. Visualization of the value chain as a basis for identifying intermediation strategies between local producers and global consumers (Krucken, 2009).

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[4] The Indie Design movement is made up of independent designers, artists and craftspeople who design and make a wide array of products without being part of large, industrialized businesses. Such products may include jewellery and other accessories, ceramics, clothing, glass, metalwork, furniture, cosmetics, art and much more (Wikipedia, 2010).

Table 1. List of the case studies: web platforms for intermediation of Indie products.

Platform	Link
ASOS	http://www.asos.com/ (the Designer Collaborations section) http://www.asos.com/Designer/Designer-Collaborations/Cat/pgecategory.aspx?cid=8767
Beehive co-op	http://www.beehiveco-op.com/
Elsewares	http://www.elsewares.com/
Etsy	http://www.etsy.com/
Flow	http://www.designflowid.com/
Indieshopper	http://www.indieshopper.com/
Moxsie	http://shop.moxsie.com/
What Designers	http://www.whatdesigners.com/
YOOX	http://www.yooxgroup.com/en/thecorner.asp (The Corner section)

Figure 2. Etsy, created "to enable people to make a living making things, and to reconnect makers with buyers", provides the story behind the products by presenting the maker profile, the materials he/she uses and the inspiration behind the design process (Etsy, 2010).

Each case study addressed the following issues:

- Platform mission;
- The country where the company that owns the platform is based;
- The platform structure;
- The list of the platform actors;
- The products and categories offered;
- The services offered;
- The strategies adopted to communicate the products;
- The characteristics that distinguish each platform.

The study, analysis and comparison of the cases showed that: the products are subject to rigorous selection; all the platforms seek to promote the idea of "unique" products and an authentic offer; the platforms main service is the commercialization of products, other services include supporting the craftspeople and designers in communicating their products; most platforms have their own community to enhance the interaction with end users; they adopt different strategies to promote the sustainable aspects of their products and collections (Figure 3).

We noticed that environmental sustainability is primarily related to the selection of raw materials and production processes. The most "eco-sustainable" products are highlighted on the platforms, and are provided greater visibility. Social sustainability is related to aggregating product value, providing information about the story behind the products, the culture and territory of origin. Platforms offer detailed information about the craftspeople and designers, their personal stories, inspirations and production techniques. Economic sustainability is based fundamentally on the possibilities of the producers to have a direct access to the market and commercialize own products directly to end users.

The in-depth study of selected cases of web platforms, developed in 2009, served as a background knowledge, support and inspiration for the development of "The best of made in" platform initiative.
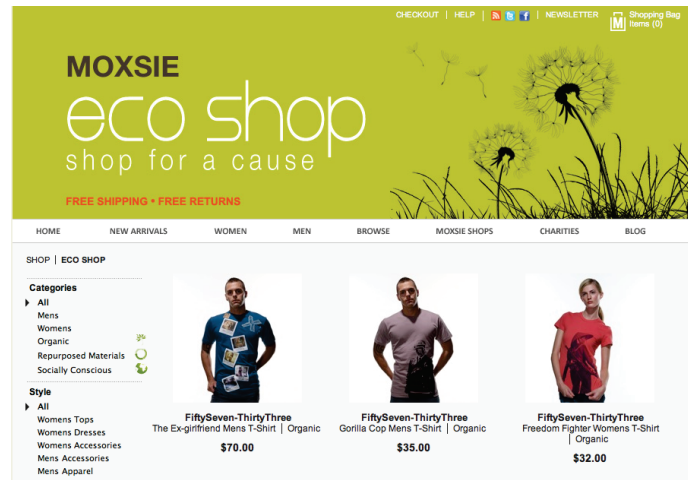
Figure 3. The Moxsie platform publicizes and markets designers with "unique" identities. They give preference to those who adopt a cause and/or develop sustainable products (Moxsie, 2010).

"*The best of made in*" initiative: design of a multi-actor web platform

"*The best of made in*" (Figure 4) is a multi-actor web platform, that objectives are to enhance the value of high quality local resources and handmade products, and promote the visibility of artisans and independent designers from South America, India, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The project focuses on fashion and home products sectors. The project was born from the growing need of craftspeople to communicate and sell their products in a global market, keep abreast of new trends and market needs, improve their products and develop new products and collections in partnership with designers.

The platform actors are: Co-Creando Company, the partner institutions, the international network of design researchers, the platform users, and the community. Their roles are as following:

- Co-Creando Company, creator of the initiative, coordinates and manages the platform;

- The partner institutions collaborate in the research and development phases;
- The international network of design researchers participate in the research, in the selection of producers and products, and in the development of the platform;
- The artisans, independent designers and micro-enterprises communicate and commercialize their products and stories, and collaborate with other stakeholders;
- The users purchase products by using the platform;
- The community, represented by people interested in the initiative and the products interact with the platform through blog and other web 2.0 tools.

"The best of made in" principal action strategies are:

- Promote local artisans and micro-enterprises, and commercialize their local products;
- Communicate and add value to the product identity;
- The tools and services offered on this platform are reported in Charts 1 and 2.
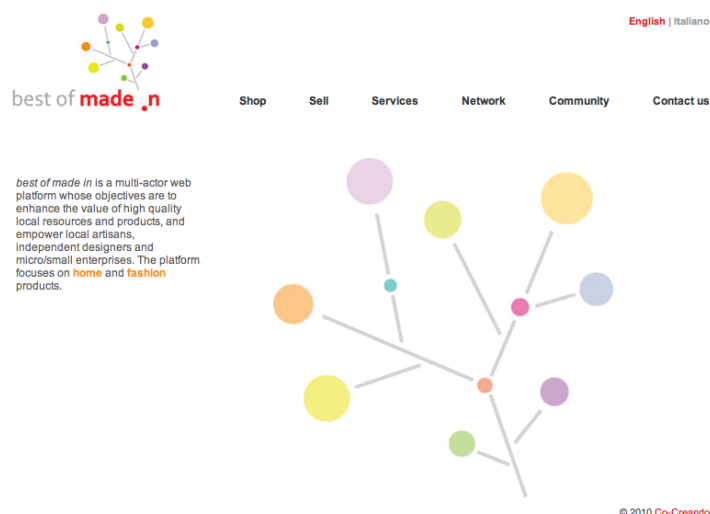
Figure 4. "The best of made in" platform seeks to enhance the value of high quality local resources and products, and promote the visibility of artisans and independent designers from South America, India, the Mediterranean and the Middle East (Best of made in, 2010).

The interaction in the development of new offers – combining products, services and information – is one of the central aspects of the "The best of made in" platform. In this context, it is opportune to introduce the term "value co-production", first used by Normann and Ramírez (1994), to describe the reciprocal relations between actors that characterize the service economy. According to the authors, businesses compete in the marketplace by means of offers (physical goods, services and information) and not with isolated products. To create these offers, described by the authors as a set of interactions (between companies, producers and consumers) that take place over time, the actors must operate in a coordinated manner. Consumers are also active partners in producing value and are considered to be "value co-producers."

The designer's role, in this and similar situations, is to mobilize value creation in new ways, promoting the interaction and synergy of producers, designers and consumers. The platform project aims at supporting the re-configuration of roles and the relationship between the various actors involved.

Product evaluation matrix

"The best of made in" products are subject to an evaluation process, a particular attention is reserved to the sustainability aspects. The following information is required for the evaluation of each product:

- Producer profile as described in Chart 3;
- Product characteristics as described in Chart 4;
- Social, environmental and economic qualities of the product and the entire value chain as described in Charts 5, 6 and 7.

Chart 1. Services and tools for promoting local artisans and micro-enterprises and commercializing their products.

Action 1 – Promote local artisans and micro-enterprises, and commercialize their local products
• Information and support to understand market trends and user needs, for the purpose of providing subsidies for new products development; • Online communication and commerce for the purposes of launching and providing exposure for the platform products, as well as marketing these products to geographically distant consumers; • Co-creation of design-driven products through the reinterpretation of local identity aspects and traditional production techniques; • Orientation toward synergy between the platform actors for the development of thematic collections for special occasions such as Christmas, target markets and specific needs.

Chart 2. Services and tools for communicating and adding value to product identity.

Action 2 - Communicate and add value to product identity
• Provide support for differentiation and analysis of the products attributes and values; • Provide support for the analysis of the products positive impacts, related to its social environmental, and economic sustainability; • Provide support for product communication, their attributes and values, through language and interfaces targeting various public; • Identification of strategies for adding value to the local identity of products through designer actions.

Chart 3. Information about the producer.

(a) Producer profile
Producer name (artisan, designer, group or company) Brand Geographic origin History Contacts Photo

Chart 4. Information about the product characteristics.

(b) Product characteristics
Product Name Description Product Inspiration Composition Dimensions (Home Product)/Size (Fashion Product) Color Certificates Price Gift Package Price National Shipping Cost Estimated National Delivery International Shipping Cost Estimated International Delivery Return Policy Photo

Information about the social, environmental and economic qualities of the product and the entire value chain can be classified according to the related positive impact on society, environment and economy. These analysis parameters are described in Charts 5, 6 and 7.

Final considerations

At present, one of the greatest challenges facing a designer is to communicate and add value to a product's identity in a global context. As shown by the cases

Chart 5. Information about the product impact on society.

Social sustainability: positive product impact on society	
Self Empowerment	The artisan or the majority of employees making the product are women.
	The artisan or the majority of employees making the product are members of a marginalized ethnic group.
	The artisan or the majority of employees making the product are over 65 years old.
	The artisan or the majority of employees making the product are living with disabilities.
Cultural Empowerment	The product preserves tradition through the knowledge of production techniques passed on from earlier generations.
	The product is made by hand using ethnically or regionally traditional materials, techniques, or both.
	The product is made in a community setting, not in an industrial-style factory.
Quality of Life Enhancement	The product is produced in a home setting to enable parents to stay home with children.
	The making of this product helps an artisan over 65 years old remain active.
	The sale of this product funds a development project in the community where the product was made (for ex. an education and training project and the like).

Chart 6. Information about the product impact on the environment.

Environmental sustainability: positive product impact on the environment	
Eco-friendly Production	At least 50% of the materials required to produce this product are made from post-consumer waste.
	100% of the materials used to produce this product are made from post-consumer waste.
	At least 50% of the materials required to produce this product are made from biodegradable materials (for ex. untreated seashells, bamboo, and the like).
	100% of the materials used to produce this product are sustainable harvested materials (for ex. 100% bamboo).
	Materials used in making this product are grown free of pesticides
	No toxic materials are used in the making of this product (for ex. traditional lacquers, veneers, or varnishes).
Energy Conservation	The product is made by hand.
	The product is made by hand and with machines that have no impact on the environment during their use.
	The required energy input to make this product consists of at least 50% Green energy, i.e. Low environmental impact sources.
	The product is energy efficient, i.e. When compared to similar products, this product requires less energy through its use.
	The product is carbon-neutral shipped through offsets, i.e. Shipping does not increase carbon emissions.
Environmental Conservation	The product materials are the result of sustainable use of native species, i.e. The rate of use is no greater than the rate of regeneration.
	The planting, harvesting, or production of materials for this product do not result in ecological destruction, i.e. Do not contribute to ecological destruction.
	No Genetically Modified Organism - GMO ingredients were used in the production of this product.
	The production and sale of this product contribute to the ecological preservation of a species or an ecological location.

Chart 7. Information about the product impact on the economy, with emphasis on the producer.

Economic sustainability: positive product impact on the local economy	
Economic Empowerment	The product is made in an artisan-owned small business.
	The product is made in an artisan-owned cooperative.
	The product is union made under a collective bargaining agreement.
	The artisan receives more than 85% of the retail price.

discussed and "The best of made in" initiative, the task of mediation, characteristic of the design field, is becoming more complex and is involving an increasing number of actors.

Furthermore, the principal role of the designer in a platform project is to enable the arrangement of products and services into new offerings and develop interfaces and interaction strategies, to facilitate and provide support for the collaboration among actors, and development of innovations. Therefore an integrated whole view of the production-consumption system is required. Professional competencies from various areas (such as information technology and management experts) must be involved aiming to make the solution work. The designer, however, assumes the role of facilitator or enabling agent of collaborative innovations, promoting interactions in society.

Acknowledge

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