

Abstract

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Universal design – a marketable or utopian concept?

Design constitutes a significant dimension in contemporary Western consumption societies. The design practice is important as it implicitly determines consumers' ability to create a meaningful life. The overall purpose of this thesis is to enhance the understanding of Universal design and explore this concept from a consumer perspective. Universal design opens up for a more extended view of consumers as it implies that all designed artifacts should be usable and accessible for as many people as possible. A cultural perspective of consumer research frames the thesis, which also includes design theory. In order to obtain a more diversified and comprehensive understanding of Universal design, a qualitative research approach is used and two empirical studies conducted. The first study includes 12 interviews with design experts and describes their experience of Universal design. The second study includes 17 interviews and describes their experience of design from a Universal design perspective. As Universal design is argued to be marketable among its advocates, this issue is also subject to attention. The result of the design expert study shows that the awareness of design exclusion is central in Universal design along with the ambition to get beyond disability to consider consumers capabilities as well as their requirements of aesthetical pleasant designed artifacts. Another important notion is the situational and environmental dimension of disablement, i.e. the fact that consumers are occasionally put in situations where they feel excluded by designed artifacts. In this way, we all experience exclusion due to the shortcomings of the design, but this should be recognized as a design problem and not as a user problem. The result of the consumer study shows that consumers in various age experience problems with designed artifacts due to lack of usability, which is an important aspect in relation to Universal design. However, aesthetics and the symbolic meaning of consumption are also important to consumers and this is reflected in the consumer study as well. The 'universal' aspect of the concept implies a utopian ambition but Universal design aims to broaden mainstream design. As it is not a one-size-fits-all approach but a 'way of thinking' Universal design can be applied in multiple ways depending on the intention with the design. Universal design is thus marketable and can be used to counteract design exclusion when consumers are addressed in marketing and in the design process, including consumers that do not fit the 'the norm' such as children, elderly, and disabled. The results of these studies provide insight for consumer researchers as well as marketing and design practitioners.

Key words: Universal design, design, consumers, consumer culture

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