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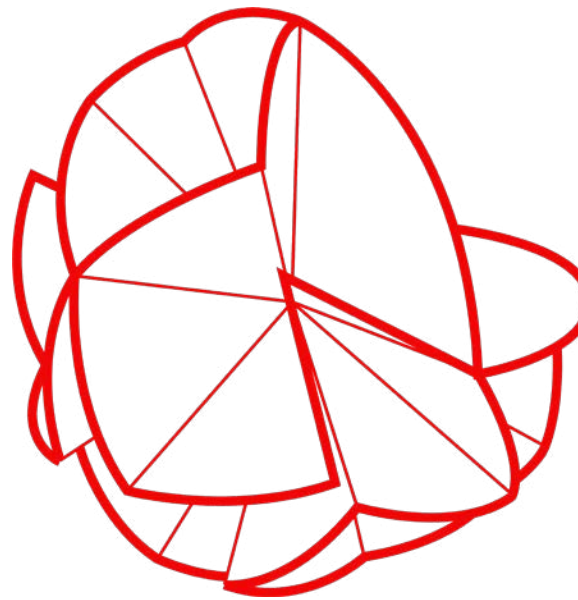
Disrupting Geographies in the Design World

Proceedings of the 8th International Forum of Design as a Process

Alma Mater Studiorum — Università di Bologna



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Track 2

Intersectional Design for an Accessible and Empowering World

Social positions and identities are multiple and seek to reveal the interconnected systems of subordination that together influence people's life chances. Extending beyond gender-specific and empowering categories of social identity (youth, old age, disabilities, non-heteronormative sexuality, despised ethnicity, income, religion and more), intersectionality focuses attention on a variety of multi-level interacting social locations, forces, narratives, norms, factors and power structures that shape and influence human life.

Intersectionality is increasingly suggested an innovative design framework with the potential to advance understanding of, and action, on inequalities, by highlighting processes of stigmatization, but mainly to encourage a critical reflection to move beyond singular categories, foregrounds issues of equity.

The track intends to collect design studies and practices which include the perspectives and worldviews of people who are typically marginalized or excluded, in which social justice and equity can be understood as a way of transforming how resources and relationships are produced and distributed to ensure a dignified and ecologically sustainable life for all. It also aims to outline in which way the dimensions of time and space, fluid, changeable and experienced through our interpretations, senses and feelings, influence different kinds of knowledge, through a deconstruction of the conventional social orders of meaning. Possible topics include concepts of accessibility, empowerment and people autonomy.

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Social justice
Empowerment
Diverse knowledge
Gendered innovation
People autonomy

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Abstract
Following recent social and global transformations, cultural organizations have undergone a major redefinition in their role as keepers and promoters of knowledge and heritage, developing virtuous examples and reference models for the free, open, and autonomous enjoyment of all audiences. This contribution - contextualized in a current doctoral research on the enhancement of cultural heritage, promotion of institutional and territorial identities - is presented as a reflection on the recent awareness and attention to the issues of inclusiveness and accessibility in places of culture, especially higher education institutions. Through an analytical work on numerous university case studies, focused on institutional merchandising products, it was possible to outline common attitudes and effective communication strategies that promote core values related to multiculturalism, body positivity, gender equality, women's empowerment, and integration of ethnic minorities.

Keywords
Accessibility
Cultural Heritage
Diversity
Higher Education
Inclusivity

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Inclusivity and accessibility in cultural sites: an evolving path

Free access and enjoyment of cultural heritage by all individuals is recognized in the Article 27 of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights", emphasizing the importance of collective participation in cultural, artistic, and scientific life as a dynamic process in continuous evolution (United Nations Publications, 2018).

In order to guarantee this fundamental right, places of culture are challenged to repropose their resources in an accessible and comprehensible way to a wide variety of possible users with different needs and expectations (Falk, 2016; Sarraf & Bruno, 2013).

The transition from a merely conservative approach – intended as protection and safeguarding – to an active and engaging perspective has opened the door to the topics of inclusiveness and accessibility, giving a new social role to cultural institutions:

> The concept of museums and, in general, of cultural heritage is shifting from simple exposition and preservation of the history and traditions of a culture, to that of a participative and inclusive space where culture is not only "consumed", but also collectively created through the experiences and points of view of the public. (Muscarà & Sani, 2019, p. 245)

Many of these cultural organizations are currently moving towards common objectives to guarantee a fair, open, and autonomous access to the offered resources, also responding to the policies promoted at national and international level. For instance, The European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage is a valuable example for the promotion of an integrated and participatory approach to cultural heritage, and the contribution to its adoption across European policies. One of the outcomes of the proposed actions included in the report is the initiative *Heritage. All-Inclusive!*, promoted in the context of the European Heritage Days 2021[1]. Institutions from 50 countries were involved through the organization of more than 70 thousand events such as exhibitions, seminars, and workshops designed for a wide audience.

In this occasion, many actions concerned the removal of barriers (physical, linguistic, cognitive, sensory, cultural, economic or technological) that hinder participation, considering a broader definition of "diversity" (Cetorelli & Guido, 2017; Olivares & Piatak, 2021), determined not only by physical conditions, but also by cultural ones (geographical origin, religious faith, level of education, etc.) and social ones (gender, salary, dietary needs or habits, etc.).

By widening the concept of diversity, new tools and objectives are established to improve the dialogue and relationship between cultural institutions and audience:

> Inclusivity and exclusivity are neither abstract nor absolute qualities; they can only be measured according to specific socio-cultural relationships. Key among those is the ideological performance of the museum as exemplified in its collections and programming activities, and by the specific narratives privileged by the museum and shared with specific sub-groups, classes or strata within the population as a whole. Integral to this performance are both the museum's presentation and the visitor's interests, which constitute distinct coordinates within a connecting matrix of culture practices. (Coffee, 2008, p. 271)

1
Annual event established by Council of Europe and European Commission (18-19 September 2021).

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Another highly topical aspect is the digitization of cultural heritage (Borowiecki et al., 2016; Fanea-Ivanovici & Pana, 2020) and its fruition through virtual tools and platforms enabled by new technologies (such as virtual reality, augmented reality, additive manufacturing, etc.). While, on the one hand, this approach allows broader access by offering personalized and original experiences - as proven by numerous initiatives during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ginzarly & Srour, 2022) - on the other hand, it can create new discrimination caused by the digital divide - understood as the gap between those who have access to digital technology and those who do not - reinforcing economic, educational, and social inequalities.

The narrative side of universities and higher education institutions

Cultural sites can be considered not only those with historical, artistic, and architectural value such as museums, archaeological sites, and cities of art, but also contexts for production and transmission of knowledge such as universities, higher education and research institutions (Sebastiani, 2007).

These specific organizations play a complex role as bearers of values that directly affect their communities as people. One of their tasks is to communicate and enhance goals, policies, and practices undertaken for the well-being of all in terms of equality and inclusion, with special attention to vulnerable groups and minorities (Jucevičienė et al., 2018).

In particular, the so-called University Third Mission seeks to transfer knowledge outside academic environments to create a social, cultural, and economic impact:

> All third mission actions are carried out in the belief that the prerequisite for the socio-economic development and growth of a region is the ability to trigger 'virtuous co-evolutionary circles' between research, education, technology, business, and services, thus, fostering the enhancement of the intangibles represented by the social capital of a region (e.g., culture, traditions, environment, lifestyle, social inclusion, and cohesion). (Frondizi et al., 2019, p. 23)

Hence, the success of the objectives dictated by the Third Mission is not only defined by the direct actions undertaken by the university in benefit of its external context, but also by its ability to narrate its results to the stakeholders and the general public.

Among the various storytelling tools available to convey messages and values, merchandising is gaining consideration and interest. It can be found in all cultural contexts that aim to disseminate knowledge also beyond the direct interaction with the visitor. Merchandising – intended as a system of useful products, bearers of meaning – is one of the elements constituting the institutional image Fig. 1.

It conveys a message rooted in the institutional identity, consisting of cultural heritage, mission, and values. This message is then delivered to an audience that establishes a relationship with the institution, influenced by the perceived value that stimulates a sense of belonging or identification.

We can talk about the rise of a more entrepreneurial vision within higher education institutions:

> Marketing and merchandising can be seen as specific entrepreneurial ventures carried out by universities to reposition their reputation around the world, a way to expand connections with external stakeholders, to approach new market demands and, in terms of future perspectives, to become students' first choice; in other words, to distinguish themselves from competitors, just like enterprises do. (Fantauzzi et al., 2019, p. 5).

In addition to its undeniable relevance from a communication and marketing point of view, the merchandising object also has a strong symbolic value. If in the museum context it is a tangible witness of the visit, allowing to evoke and extend the memory, in the university context it assumes a dual significance: for internal users, it becomes the emblem of an experience prolonged in time, influenced by the sense of belonging and identification (Gambardella, 2019), while for external users, it represents an element that contains the university's values.

Methodology

The presented work is part of a doctoral research focused on the enhancement of communication through new processes and strategies for the development and distribution of dedicated merchandising in university and polytechnic environment.

The exploratory analysis (Yin, 2017) aimed to identify virtuous examples of universities' integrated communication and merchandising strategies, with a particular emphasis on the ability to communicate their cultural heritage, mission, and values. It was carried out with the profiling of 150 universities (50 Italian, 50 European, and 50 extra-European). The selection of case studies was based on a geographical distribution criterion with a first focus on the Italian context, gradually expanding the scale of the investigation to a global level. The intent was to select a wide variety of institutions with high reputation and transversal research areas, exploiting university rankings such as the QS World University Ranking. Unfortunately, in some cases, no information could be found on the presence or absence of university merchandising initiatives. For this reason, universities that did not activate or promote documented activities were not included in the mapping.

All the included information was obtained from the official channels of the various universities (website, social profiles, publications) and, for the Italian cases, from online journalistic articles.

The goal was the definition of a map of different strategies, merchandising products, and communication languages, identifying peculiarities and common approaches to the enhancement of cultural heritage and institutional identity. The profile of each university was structured compiling a three-level analysis: university context, merchandising system, and products Fig. 2.

The first level summarizes the main characteristics of the analysed university, with a focus on the identity elements that become the content of the narrative through merchandising. In par-

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ticular, it reports: year of foundation and motto (important for measuring the history of the institution through past and future anniversaries), type of institution (recognizing different communication choices between public and private ones), schools and faculties (identifying key disciplines of teaching and research, and the possible presence of internal resources with design and management skills related to merchandising), visual identity (as a fundamental element for recognizable institutional communication through graphic and chromatic choices), and cultural heritage (as a generative element of the narrative starting from the presence of locations and historical architecture, links with the city and/or territorial context, references to works of value and affiliations with other institutions, illustrious lecturers and alumni, etc.).

The second level covers the merchandising system related to the management of development, production, and distribution of goods, analysing merchandising objectives, product categories (clothing, accessories, stationery, gift items, typical foods), sales channels and distribution, purchasing facilities, sales management, use of proceeds (when declared).

The third level focuses on specific merchandising items and collections with their tangible and intangible qualities - such as materials, production chain, possible certifications, co-branding actions, collaborations with local organizations - and all the aspects that make them bear values. Through a semiotic and content analysis of the objects (Muratovski, 2016), it was possible to identify when the communication strategies consciously used elements of the university identity: by defining relevant categories, it became clear which elements were emphasized and which audiences were addressed Fig. 3.

Communicate university values through merchandising: some examples

The results of the exploratory analysis led to the definition of different categories of content conveyed by merchandising, highlighting which messages are preferred in university institutional communication Fig. 4. Heritage-related narratives remain the main theme used to emphasize competitive differentiation and the definition of a historical identity that is synonymous with prestige and quality, in accordance with the concept of heritage university (Lombardi, 2015).

From the values point of view, universities privilege aspects linked to distinctiveness - through the reproduction of motto, coats of arms, identity graphic signs, institutional colours - and those linked to environmental sustainability, often involving the promotion of virtuous behaviours and the reuse of resources. Despite a growing diffusion of initiatives related to inclusion and accessibility, the research has shown that the desire to communicate these university core values has not fully expressed yet its potential through merchandising products, finding only a few representative examples, strongly influenced by their cultural contexts. The identified case studies are consciously developed and effectively communicated through collections or single products, linked to important topics such as multiculturalism, body positivity, gender equality, women's empowerment, and integration of ethnic minorities.

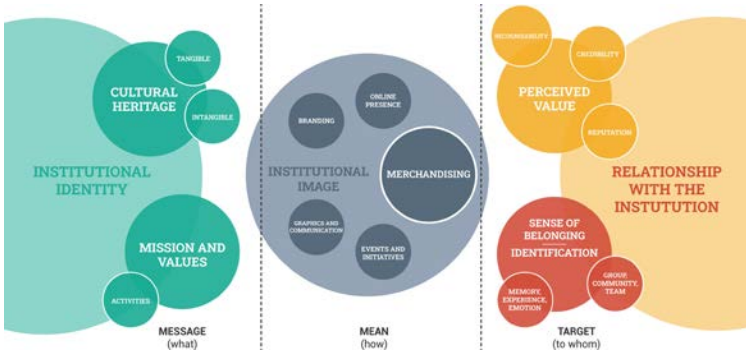

Fig. 1

Fig. 1
The role of merchandising in institutional communication. Credits: Authors.

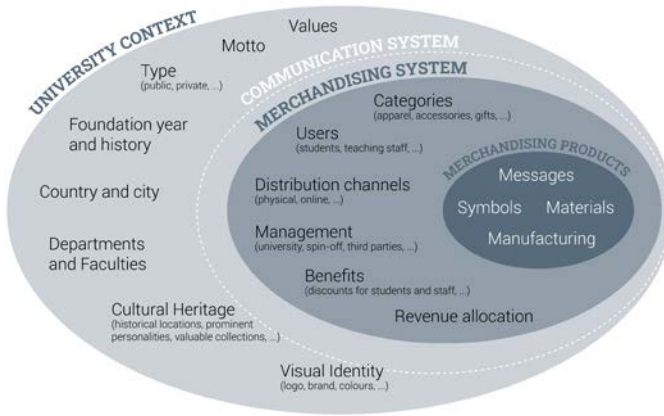

Fig. 2

Fig. 2
Levels of analysis defined during case study profiling. Credits: Authors.

Fig. 3

Fig. 3
Categorisation of themes emerged during the semiotic analysis of merchandising products. Credits: Authors.

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Specifically, two main attitudes were identified Fig. 5. In some cases, the university recognizes itself as an active player promoting internal initiatives aimed at its community (students, lecturers, etc.). The first approach can be seen in the merchandising collections of Free University of Bolzano (Italy), University of Basilicata (Italy), KTH - Royal Institute of Technology (Sweden), and The University of Queensland (Australia).

In the Italian context, the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, founded in 1997 with the motto "Trilingual and intercultural", adopts an interesting approach. Its strong multicultural identity, also fostered by the partnership with the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, is expressed with coherence and uniformity in the official product line[2] that enhances the territorial context without limiting the universality of the message. In fact, the unisex clothing and the presence of the three official languages on objects such as mugs, and kitchen aprons embody the open and multicultural spirit.

Once again, in Italy, the University of Basilicata offers a collection of unisex clothing linked to body positivity. Sweatshirts and T-shirts bear the motto *I am perfect the way I am*[3], promoting the inclusion of all sizes and shapes and the acceptance of one's own body, a theme particularly suitable for the age group of university students.

On gender equality issues, the *Giants*[4] awareness campaign, launched in 2015 and promoted by the Swedish KTH, aims to promote female enrolment in engineering courses through the example of renowned personalities such as Hedy Lamarr (American inventor), Ada Lovelace (English mathematician), and Edith Clarke (American electrical engineer). The initiative, based on communication strategies and events, included the distribution of dedicated merchandising such as cotton shopping bags with the campaign motto "The future is too important to be left to men".

In the context of integration of ethnic minorities, the example of The University of Queensland in Australia stands out, devoting an entire collection of institutional objects to the theme of reconciliation[5], confirming its commitment to the Reconciliation Action Plan[6]. The painting *A Guidance Through Time* by Aboriginal artists Casey Coolweel and Kyra Mancktlelow, inspired by the reconciliation between Aboriginal culture and university values through a pattern that recalls the Brisbane River, has become the graphic element that personalizes a wide range of objects including water bottles, ties, and notebooks. The entire collection is produced by a certified indigenous supplier, and the proceeds from sales contribute to scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In other contexts, the university promotes social initiatives carried out by cooperatives and associations that work to contrast discrimination and increase inclusiveness, becoming a strategic partner for the dissemination of these initiatives to a wider public. This second approach can be seen in the merchandising collections of IUAV – University of Venice (Italy), University of Bern (Switzerland), University of Glasgow (UK), and Brown University (USA).

2
https://www.unibz.it/it/home/press/unishop

3
https://www.unibastore.com/prodotto/felpa-perfect-the-way-i-am/

4
http://www.kth.se/giants

5
https://uqshop.com.au/collections/rap-a-guidance-through-time

6
University's document of intent aimed to acknowledge the participation and inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in higher education through different actions.

The *Malefatte Collection*[7], proposed by the Italian IUAV, includes bags and pencil cases made of PVC recovered from the advertising banners of Athenaeum events. Each product is a unique piece, made in collaboration with the social cooperative Rio Terà dei Pensieri, which is involved in the rehabilitation of inmates of the men's prison of Santa Maria Maggiore.

The University of Bern is taking part in the international Blue Community project for the responsible use of water, and this commitment is reflected in a specially designed merchandising product. Specifically, the Blue University carafe[8] is made of recycled glass and its production is handled by the Glass Design Competence Centre, a social integration initiative for the training of unemployed people.

Social engagement related to issues of inclusion and women's empowerment were promoted by the University of Glasgow through a partnership with the charity Chifundo & Chanasa, by selling a collection of shoulder bags, made from recycled denim and chitenji fabric by women in Malawi. The proceeds helped fund scholarships enabling the most talented girls in Malawi to attend medical school.

Of interest is the *Brown makes a difference*[9] initiative of Brown University, which offers several collections of products created through partnerships with social cooperatives that help different vulnerable groups. These include *Think I Knit*, a project that makes and sells beanies knitted by single mothers who have difficulty finding steady work to support themselves, and *Extreme Needlepoint*, a community-based non-profit organization that employs new artisans in Puerto Rico and supports their training.

The role of design and possible future developments

Within the field of enhancing and promoting cultural sites through merchandising, the role of design is to develop useful products that are highly narrative, consistent to the context and cultural system, bearer of a clear and shareable message. An in-depth knowledge of the institution, its potential, its social commitments, and its territorial network is required to prevent these products from becoming a mere marketing strategy, detached from the actual university's values. As the case studies above show, merchandising is not just an end itself, but a means of communication justified by the institution's commitments and actions, becoming witness and narrator through its material and immaterial characteristics. Therefore, its value becomes more authentic when the choices made in terms of design and communication correspond to the message that the university wishes to communicate (for example, through a thoughtful selection of materials, production partners, environmental and social impact).

As a consequence of the analytical work based on existing collections and objects, the initial results confirm the importance of the variety of cultural and geographical context considered for the preliminary selection of case studies: in English-speaking countries and the Far East, for example, associations of students are actively involved in promoting the university and managing the merchandising processes. This participation is not influenced by the presence of design courses, as the valorisation of research in all its fields is a sufficient reference point for ad hoc products, usually realised by external partners.

7 https://malefattevenezia.it/en/category/iuav-en/

8 https://www.unibe.ch/university/portrait/self_image/sustainability/blue_university/carafes/index

9 https://insite.brown-textbook.com/SiteText?id=61366

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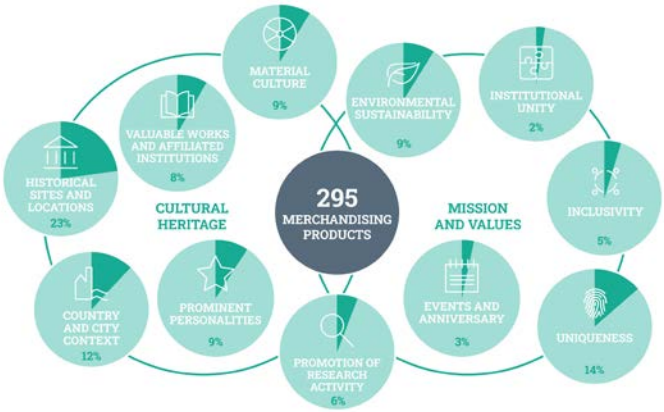

Fig. 4

Fig. 4
Quantitative distribution of merchandising products in the identified themes. Credits: Authors.

Fig. 5

Fig. 5
Mapping inclusive merchandising in worldwide universities: selected case studies. Credits: Authors.

Similarly, the initiatives described above in promoting inclusion and accessibility result from the attention that each university pays to the needs and the specificities of the population and the territory in which it is located, by demonstrating its commitment through specific initiatives.

After the development of a graphical tool useful for the case studies analysis, the next research step concerns the definition of guidelines that will result in a practical toolkit to support design of inclusive and representative merchandising products for universities, cultural institutions, and beyond. These guidelines will also aim to measure the accessibility content of the products currently distributed and sold, and will provide all the concerned parties (designers, communication and marketing executives) with an important resource for assessing any integration or redesign actions.

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DIGITAL SPECIAL ISSUE 1

The 8th International Forum of Design as a Process, themed "Disrupting Geographies in the Design World" was held in Bologna from 20 to 22 June 2022. The event was organised by the Advanced Design Unit of the Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna, Department of Architecture, in collaboration with two partner universities: Tecnológico de Monterrey (TEC) and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

The Forum engaged speakers from the Global Design community, expanding the original vocation of the Latin Network for the Development of Design as a Process to include researchers and designers of the Mediterranean Area, Middle East, IOR (Indian Ocean Region), and Global South regions. The goal was to share new perspectives on imagining design futures in a responsible and just perspective, at the forefront of change, while building strategic partnerships and creating accessible knowledge.

Structured around three pillars — seminars, workshops, and exhibitions — the Forum hosted meetings, reflection opportunities, networking activities. It involved designers, scholars, young researchers, design entrepreneurs, in an experimental format.

Speakers' contributions not only inspired the practices of the designers' community, but also resonated with students and the broad audiences. The presentations explored intersections of materiality and culture, post-coloniality, decoloniality, gender studies, and other areas of human thought and action which seek to analyse, question and challenge the disruptive geographies in the world, today.

The papers submitted to the five tracks proposed are published in the Digital Special Issue 1 of *diid. disegno industriale – industrial design*, celebrating during those days its 20th anniversary and serving as the fourth partner of the event.

The Editors
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