Trend Studies as a Practice between Design and Anthropology

Estudo de tendências como uma prática entre design e antropologia



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ABSTRACT

This inquiry highlights the trend studies as a practice between anthropology and design. The designer is not only a creator of artifacts, but also a culture maker and proponent of future experiences between people and the designed world. Thus, this article aims to demonstrate how Trend Studies relate to the analytical and generative practice of Design Anthropology in order to constitute views and conjectures about futures. Therefore, this paper describes the use of Design Anthropology practices to identify trends and to design futures experiences. We applied a Design-Based Research with participants to examine Trend Studies in design practice from an anthropological lens. The results suggest that trends produce and reproduce discourses and operate as a design product, i.e., trends operate formalizing the existing world and also designing ways to create alternative worlds.

KEYWORDS

Trend Studies; Futures Studies; Culture Studies; Design Anthropology; Design-Based Research.

RESUMO

Esta investigação destaca os estudos de tendências como uma prática entre a antropologia e o design. O designer não é apenas um criador de artefatos, mas também um criador de cultura e proponente de experiências futuras entre as pessoas e o mundo projetado. Assim, este artigo tem como objetivo demonstrar como os Estudos de Tendências se relacionam com a prática analítica e generativa da Antropologia do Design para constituir visões e conjecturas sobre futuros. Portanto, este artigo descreve o uso de práticas de Design Antropologia para identificar tendências e projetar experiências futuras. Aplicamos uma pesquisa baseada em design com os participantes para examinar os estudos de tendências na prática de design a partir de uma lente antropológica. Os resultados sugerem que as tendências produzem e reproduzem discursos e operam como um produto de design, ou seja, as tendências operam formalizando o mundo existente e também projetando formas de criar mundos alternativos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Estudos de tendências; Estudos de Futuros; Estudos de Cultura; Antropologia do Design; Pesquisa Baseada em Design.

INTRODUCTION

Design is always tied up to future's creation (Halse, 2011; Petermann, 2014; Yelavich, 2014). As creators of models, prototypes and —ultimately— propositions, designers engage in a dialectical gap between the existing world and the world that can be. Thus, the situations that determine the possibilities for the future arise in a constant dialogue between the past and the present (Margolin, 2007). Anthropology has a critical and a practical role to play in contemporary debates about futures (Pink, Salazar, Irving, & Sjöberg, 2017), and it consequently opens room to bring future-related themes closer to the link between design and anthropology —a field called Design Anthropology.

The approach between Design Anthropology and Trend Studies is due to the mutual interest in intervening in the future through interpretations, prospects, visualizations and outputs that operate strategically and can guide the direction of creative processes (Kjærsgaard, 2011; Petermann, 2014). Both fields also use ethnography and contextual observation as a starting point for their outcomes (Suri, 2011; Raymond, 2010). Moreover, both —through their reflective practices— operate in an imaginative, inspirational, and generative way, articulating critical discourses and driving cultural and political change (Petermann, 2014; Halse, 2008; Clarke, 2011; Suri, 2011).

The most common approach to research in the field of Trend Studies includes socio-cultural research methods, techniques and tools (Mártil, 2009; Holland & Jones, 2017; Erner, 2004; 2015; Vejlgaard, 2007; Penn & Zalesne, 2010; 2016; Dragt, 2017; Gomes, Cohen & Flores, 2018; Gomes, Lopes, Cantú & Prado, 2021). In addition, some studies also consider the impacts of trends on advertising, branding, fashion and social systems (Gomes, 2015; Silva, 2015). However, there are few studies that actually describe such practices and their consequent results. Thus, this article aims to demonstrate how Trend Studies — as a myriad of analytical and creative practices — relate to the analytical and generative practice of Design Anthropology in order to constitute views and conjectures about futures. Therefore, this paper describes the use of Design Anthropology practices to identify trends and to design futures experiences. We applied a Design-Based Research with participants to examine Trend Studies in design practice from an anthropological lens.

2 Design and the Role of Futures

Design is a driver of change and actively participates in the materialization of the future. The macro area that concentrates future-oriented studies is called Futures Studies (Cole, 2001). Professionals in this field may be specialists, focused on particular fields of study — such as engineering, economics, and fashion — or even generalists, interested in broad perspectives (Petermann, 2014). Although several terms have been used to define this area — such as, futurology, futurism, forecasting, foresight and many others — the term Futures Studies is the best moniker to emphasize its plurality and diversity because, as Sardar asserts (2010, p. 182), "we can see futures studies as an erudite vessel that contains and shapes our inquiry into various aspects of the future - or a discourse that guides our systematic examination of future potentials and possibilities".

The emergence and consolidation of new approaches such as participatory design, co-design, user-centered design, design fiction, speculative design, and critical design disregard the genius maker paradigm and highlight the shift in focus to a broader view where the role of the designer, beyond artifact design, is more concern with the anthropological approach to objects and understanding them as a fruit of the social process (Clarke, 2011). Thus, the designer is a mix of creator, cultural intermediary and entrepreneur with a broad view of opportunities; and is also necessary to be an excellent communicator capable of providing experiences and meanings to people (Nixon & Gay, 2002; Jahnke, 2012; Krippendorff, 2005; Maguire & Matthews, 2010; Press & Cooper, 2017). Therefore, the main issue about design lays on immateriality, i.e., in what it informs, orders and imposes about things. The word design comes from the latin word designare which means designate. Therefore, the design evokes the immaterial to materialize future possibilities. As stated by Mazé (2016, s/n): "[b]y reproducing things, lifestyles and imaginaries, design takes part in giving form to what will be in the future". This paper explores the relationship between design and futures in the most abstract level: in the form of ideas, visions, narratives, or what Cole (2011) calls envisioning.

3 Trend Studies

Trend Studies have two approaches, one is closer to Futures Studies and the other is closer to Culture Studies. Futures Studies macroarea can be divided in three branches: (a) forecasting; (b) polling; and (c) envisioning. Forecasting uses a mathematical approach to quantitatively predict future-related aspects. On the other hand, polling refers to market research commonly developed in the form of questionnaires. Finally, envisioning is based on an intuitive approach established through the creation of visions of the future —what Cole (2001) calls a stylized storytelling. More recently, the field of research in Futures Studies interested in the practice of envisioning has been consolidated as an area, bearing the name of Trend Studies. This approach to futures is closer to Culture Studies than to Future Studies itself. More specifically, Trend Studies is a sub-discipline of Culture Studies as it has developed in deep connection with concepts and practices of cultural interpretation and cultural research (Gomes, Cohen & Flores, 2018; Cantú, Lopes, Gomes & Prado, 2019; Gomes, Lopes, Cantú, & Prado, 2021; Gomes, Cohen, Cantú & Lopes, 2021).

A trend is "a direction of change in values and needs which is driven by forces and manifests itself already in various ways within certain groups of society" (Dragt, 2017, p. 14), such as, the social processes that lead changes of style and taste (Veilgaard, 2019). Although the concept is commonly associated with the fashion world (Raymond, 2010; Petermann, 2014; Erner, 2004) this phenomenon extends to the most diverse sectors.

Trend studies have been disseminated beyond the fashion field (Mozota, 2003) reaching the creative industry (Petermann, 2014; 2017). This is a creative phenomena that has a major influence on culture and society (McCracken, 2006). Thus, this form of predictive -or prescriptiveresearch has been consolidated as a business practice associated with the design industry. However, as Petermann (2014) points out, it is a contemporary phenomena and concerns how we deal with the future. Erner (2015) separates two possible views in approaching trend studies. The first perspective considers the individual as irrational and manipulated by trends, while in the second one -what the author calls democratic modernity- trends constitute a process without subject, hence, there is no central command over them and the power to influence them is dispersed among various societal agents.

Contemporary approaches such as those of Erner (2015) and Peter-

mann (2014; 2016) analyze trends as a driving force of cultural change. The construction of narratives by various agents of society produces a complex fabric of social meanings, which result in socio-cultural trends. These cultural meanings are established -on the trend industry- through the creation of future visualization through the use of "stylized storytelling" (Cole, 2001). The outcomes of a trend research can be insights, propositions, aesthetics, strategies, products, services, and so on. Thus, the practice of trend studies involves both anthropology and design skills.

4 Design Anthropology

Design anthropology proposes a specific form of knowledge in which the interpretation and translation of knowledge occur at the intersection between contextual practices and future-oriented and innovation-oriented predictions about society (Kilbourn, 2013). Thus, Design Anthropology combines observational and social and cultural analysis with projective and generative exercises. Moreover, this area is derived from the experimental integration between design and anthropology practices, including interventionist forms of fieldwork and design through iterative cycles of reflection and action (Otto & Smith, 2013). However, ethnography is rarely projective (Hunt, 2011) whereas design is interested in design intent (Suri, 2011). Consequently, Design Anthropology combines design processes and tools over ethnographic practice, as well as anthropological practices and knowledge during design project development stages.

A designer, in the broadest sense, is a human being who tries to cross the bridge between order and chaos, between past achievements and future possibilities (Papanek, 1995). Thus, design practices seek to make connections between past, present, and future in order to understand the past to create the future in the present (Gunn, Otto & Smith, 2013). This path taken by the designer is —simultaneously— synchronic and diachronic. Synchronic because it deeply analyzes present culture and diachronic because it takes into account the material and immaterial culture from the past to the present time. On the other hand, ethnography —anthropology's main research method— has as its main activities the exercise of seeing and listening. The ethnographer effectively participates in the observed phenomenon and moves from his culture to the observed culture scenario (Rocha & Eckert, 2008).

Therefore, ethnography uses direct observation, writing and ipseity as a toolkit for analysis. The written record in notes, journals or experience reports is part of the daily research (Gunn, 2009). Hereupon ethnography resembles literature in order to recreate cultural forms from the researcher's perspective and under their interpretation (Rocha & Eckert, 2008, s.n.). The poetics of the ethnographic text constitute an essential part of ethnography, because from the perspective of ipseity, each researcher narrates his own unique and non-transferable experience. The ethnographer performs the work of a bricoleur, gathering fragments of observations and experiences that occurred throughout the research by reconstructing the culture observed in the form of interpreted text.

Furthermore, ethnographic practice started to apply other nontraditional forms of data collection due to the emergence of experience as an important factor to be considered in fieldwork, or as defined by Pink (2013), 'the sensory turn'. The ethnographic trend studies must use all senses (touch, smell, hearing, sight and taste) to perceive new surroundings (Raymond, 2010). This sensory capability is a point of convergence between design and ethnography. However, Murphy and Marcus (2013) highlight other similarities: (a) both fields exist as a product and as a process, i.e., design and ethnography deals with a complex research process and with a product of this process; (b) practitioners in both areas understand that their processes are the sine qua non of what they do even though the product of design and ethnography tends to receive more attention; (c) both are person-centered, notwithstanding strongly related to the social; (d) designers and ethnographers may fall into over abstraction, which is why they may end up being questioned; and finally, (e) both are open to reflexivity, i.e., ethnographers describe their research and decision-making during inquiry and designers debate, think and also write about their processes.

Finally, Design Anthropology encompasses a dialectical practice between past, present and future, i.e., a constant dialogue between observation, cultural interpretation and the proposition of futures. Therefore, the approximation between Design Anthropology and Trend Studies becomes a way to expand the possibilities of designed futures.

Design-Based Research as a Methodological **Approach**

Design-based Research (DBR) is a research method originated in the educational field (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012) and has as characteristics: pragmatic; grounded; iterative, interactive and flexible; integrative; and contextual (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). DBR is not based on hypothesis formulation. Unlike traditional research methods, DBR collaboratively analyzes practical problems for developing solutions from design principles and technological innovations. DBR also proposes iterative testing and refinement cycles of the proposed solutions in order to produce new design principles and improve the implementation of these solutions. According to Wang and Hannafin (2005, p. 6-7), PBD consists of a systematic and flexible method "based on collaboration among researchers and practitioners in real-world settings, and leading to contextually-sensitive design principles and theories".

Thus, a DBR project was developed in order to investigate the process of ethnographic-inspired poetic observation and the projective and generative exercises typical of design (Hunt, 2011; Suri, 2011). Therefore, participants were tracked for an entire semester where they were trained and then applied design and anthropology tools to identify trends and to design future experiences. The DBR process can be divided into five macro phases (Dix, 2007): (a) informed exploration, the first phase which consists of the initial scanning that will support the intervention by understanding the problem and the literature review (bibliographic research); (b) presage, this phase corresponds to the understanding of the research application context and the relationship between the variables involved; (c) process, this is the central phase of the research process in which innovative interventions are developed and evaluated in an iterative fashion; (d) product, this phase includes the analysis of the collected data in order to evaluate the results obtained by the intervention; and (e) extended evaluation, the last phase aims to reinforce theory. Thus, the outcomes, findings and implications leads to possible improvements in the theory and in the practice.

Results

The results of this study will be presented in the following sections according to the DBR macro phases.



1 - Faith Popcorn's Brainreserve - Trend Bank: https://faithpopcorn.com/ trendbank/

6.1 **Informed Exploratio**

The informed exploration was constituted by the bibliographic review of central themes of the investigation, such as the relationship between design and futures, Trend Studies and Design Anthropology. The results of this stage allowed the elaboration of the intervention phase that followed

6.2 Presage

To guarantee the initial understanding of the research context, a series of workshops was held in which the participants explored the anatomy of trends (Veilgaard, 2008), the ethnographic practice (Hunt, 2011; Suri, 2011) and the elaboration of cultural probes (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti, 1999; Peeters et al., 2013). The participants were introduced to trends mapped by the trend agency Faith Popcorn's Brainreserve¹ in order to reflect on political, economic, social and cultural aspects that shaped the scenario presented by the agency. This activity enabled the participants' reflection about the different forces acting in the establishment of socio-cultural trends.

The ethnographic experience is individual, unrepeatable, and tends to yield results that cannot be predicted. Thus, interpretations of the observed reality are expected to differ depending on the path taken by each participant. Firstly, some parameters of ethnographic research were presented to course participants' during an ethnography workshop. Participants were instructed to use direct observation as a technique to investigate knowledge and practices in social life and to recognize collective actions and representations in human life. Moreover, participants were introduced to forms of field recording, which can be described in notes, journals or reports. Another essential aspect of the field research presented to participants was ipseity, i.e., the individual aspects of experience, interpretation and ethnographic description. Finally, the participants were split into pairs and conducted a pilot investigation on the university's own campus. The results were presented to the entire group of participants.

In this first cycle, the pairs reported difficulties in making attempts to approach potential interviewees and conduct these interviews. Furthermore, the complexity involved in the need to draw a "thematic line" for

conducting research also represented one of the problems reported. On the other hand, teams that chose to observe and record images were successful in building a thematic narrative through the use of images and keywords. This fact highlights the importance of observation and the use of image not only as a recording technique, but as a method to express the research process. This also highlights the phenomenological aspect of this type of research in which the researcher develops ways of making representations of the materiality, sensoriality and sociality of the path (Pink, 2008).

Another resource presented in the workshop phase was Cultural Probes (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti, 1999). Cultural Probes have been recognized as useful tools to inspire and inform design researchers (Peeters, et. Al., 2013), since they consist of a set of artifacts used for self-documentation (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti, 1999; Peeters, et. Al., 2013). The set of artifacts suggested for the research included: photographic camera, field diary, field maps, blank postcards and a blog. These resources helped in the in-situ registration of the research carried out by each participant.

6.2 Process

The processing phase was carried out with fieldwork in two brazilian cities: Florianópolis and São Paulo. After being instructed on the anatomy of trends, ethnographic practices and cultural probes, the participants carried out their research in working groups. Each group was able to develop their own itineraries, guiding their research experience through the movements of the urban environment. This process resulted in different paths (albeit in the same regions) and different views on urban space and local cultures (figure 1).

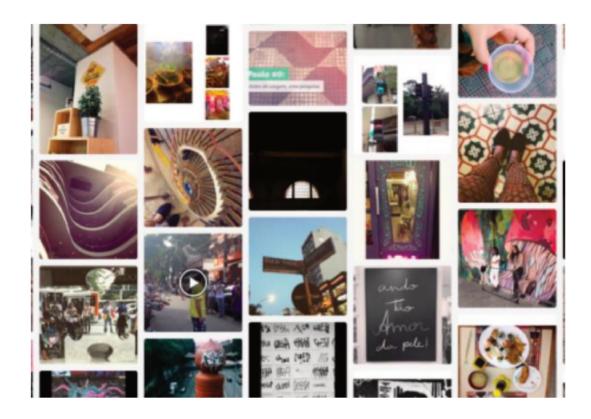


Figure 1 - Participants during the fieldwork

Source: authors.

From the drift through city scenarios and the observation of the surroundings and passers-by, each participant found the form of registration that best suited their needs. Among them, blogging was one of the most prominent (figure 2). Like many ethnographers who have been using technologies as a way of recording research even during fieldwork, many participants have adapted better to this form of recording than to traditional maps and field diaries. Although almost all forms of registration have been tested by all participants, blogs seemed to have the advantage of making it possible to register different types of information on different media in the same place.

Figure 2 - Blog records



Source: authors.

The use of postcards sought to emphasize the capacity of artistic expression to expand the limits beyond verbal language in the expression of an idea (figure 3). Through drawing, collage or other forms of representation, participants were able to use design skills to represent cultures, narrate experiences and imagine possible futures. Audiovisual resources allowed participants to record situations that occurred during the field research in a more complete and engaging way. Some situations that were registered in photo or video could be revisited in the analysis of the material collected in the field work. Field situations, environments and experiences could be recorded focusing on the phenomenological elements of ethnographic knowledge (Pink, 2013).

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Figure 3 - Postcards made by participants

Source: authors.

The diverse and multisensory nature of field research has already been mentioned, however, as stated by Pink (2008), the ethnographic practice is not only made up of moments experienced during field research, but is constructed by a series of long periods of interaction and intellectual work. Therefore, the visualization wall — a tool suggested by Raymond (2010) to assist in visualizing field material in researching trends — was one of the activities proposed for the return of fieldwork (figure 4). The visualization wall functioned as a way to remember and represent the materiality, sensoriality and sociality of the incursion in the two cities (Pink, 2008). The different forms of recording enabled participants to revisit the research material, extending the field time and

allowing for a more in-depth analysis of the experience. In addition, it also made it possible to see the research through the eyes of others, through sharing experiences in blogs and during the assembly of the visualization wall.

After assembling the visualization wall, participants were able to group symbolic elements and to share their research experiences. The discussions gave rise to a series of thematic axes that were reiterated by the material collected in the fieldwork. The thematic axes were registered and distributed among the groups. All the material produced during the processing phase could be consulted in the next phase, which consisted of conceptualizing a trend.

Figure 4 - Visualization wall assembly

Source: authors.

2 - See also:

6.4 Products

The elaboration of a stylized storytelling for the communication of trends was based on the works of Cole (2001) and Petermann (2014). Likewise, Mozota (2010), Raymond (2010), Caldas (2006), Brunini (2011) and Gomes, Cohen, Lopes & Cantú (2021) suggest the communication of trends through trend books or trend reports. As a practice focused not only on cultural interpretation, such as ethnography, but also on future prescriptions (Brunini, 2011; Hunt, 2011), Trend Studies have a strong relationship with Design Anthropology.

Considering trend videos as the most recent form of enunciation in the trend communication process, participants also produced a trend video. The videos made by participants were composed by materials from field research (photos and videos) and also by other materials that helped in the conceptualization and representation of trends. The trends presented by the participating groups were: The Glory of Life², Itenticity and iPower. Some groups used neologisms in order to better represent the identified trends. All trends were presented through trend books (figure 5) and trend videos.

Figure 4 - Visualization wall assembly





Source: authors.



The trend called Itenticity, for example, approached the breaking patterns related to gender and the body. It also tackles the discussion around the most diverse forms of self representation. The trend was represented by means of a trend book in printed and digital version and also by a trend video. Going beyond mere description, the narratives proposed future visions and design elements. The stylized storytelling created by the groups shows a closer approach to prescriptive scenarios, which tend to be more idealistic, as highlighted by Margolin (2007). Trend videos³ embody the discursive aspect of design as an active force in change processes.

6.5 Extended Evaluation

Through reflective and generative practices and supported by methods, techniques, toolkits, and emerging research technologies in three fields -design, anthropology, and trend studies- the present study described an investigation that resulted in trends and futures visualizations. The experience undertaken allowed the recording in situ of a trend research based on methods and practices of anthropology and design. The development of prescriptive narratives based on contemporary driving forces has produced anthropologically informed design products such as trend books and trend videos.

7 Final Considerations

The outcomes and findings of this study claim that trends produce and reproduce discourses and operate as a design product, i.e., trends operate formalizing the existing world and also designing ways to create alternative worlds. Even though trends do not directly determine Creative Industries productions, they guide choices and decisions by aligning themselves with discourses —formal, functional, aesthetic, and ideological— that guide creative and personal choices, influencing both production as well as culture and consumption. Therefore, the designer is a creative agent who shapes a future experience based on a process permeated by a trend-driven perspective, taking into account the identification, interpretation, conceptualization, presentation and application of trends.

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