

# Designed by the Media?

## The Media Publicity of Design in the Finnish Economic Press

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**Abstract:** The importance of design has increased in today's consumer societies. Design is regularly the subject of discussion, and the amount of media attention given to design has steadily increased. In my dissertation I examine the media publicity of design in the Finnish economic press 1988-2006. In this paper I present my main results. My principal research question is, how is design represented in the Finnish economic press?

The qualitative sample of the research material consisted of 1,131 articles collected from all three major economic paper publishers in Finland. The approach was explorative, descriptive and hermeneutic. Articles from the economic press were used to determine how design is represented in the media, and its characteristics are described in detail. Erving Goffman's frame analysis was used to analyse the materials.

The research shows a multidimensional picture of design in the economic press. The analysis resulted in five frames that describe design from various points of view. In the *personal frame* designers are depicted in private settings and through their personal experiences. The second frame relates to design work. In *the frame of mastery of the profession*, designers' work is placed in a broad context and interpreted from the perspectives of controlling personal know-how, cooperation and overall process. The third frame is connected to the actual substance of the economic press. In *the frame of economy and market*, design is linked to international competitiveness, companies' competitive advantage and the benefit design creates for the consumers. The fourth frame, *the communal frame*, is connected to those who promote design on a societal level. In this frame the economic press describes design policy, design research and education and other actors in the social networks. The last frame, *the frame of culture*, emphasises the traditions of design and above all, examines cultural transitions. Design is also connected to the industrial culture and furthermore to themes of consumer culture.

Through these frames media publicity about design is constructed from various points of view. The media thus have a crucial role in representing design and recreating its meanings. Based on my interpretation, the design phenomenon is defined often on the basis of its media representations in the public discourses.

**Key words:** *Economic press, frame analysis, hermeneutics, media publicity, media studies*

## 1. Purpose of the study, research materials and method of analysis

This paper is an overview article of the results of my dissertation "Designed by the Media: The Media Publicity of Design in the Finnish Economic Press"[1]. I started the dissertation in the research programme "The shaping of the professional designer" funded by the Academy of Finland in 2004-2006 in the University of Art and Design Helsinki. The purpose of that project was to obtain an overview of the state of industrial design in Finland and how the professionalism of designers has developed[2]. In this context the purpose of my research was to clarify the media image of design and show how the media represent design in the economic press.

Why study media representations of design? Firstly, design is particularly interesting phenomenon taking place in modern societies. Design and particularly industrial design combine production, consumption and culturally meaningful elements in an interesting way. It is widely acknowledged, in fact, that the division between manufacturing and consuming is out-dated[3]. Secondly, design is closely related to material and consumer culture studies, which, in turn, are emerging areas of interest in the fields of humanistically orientated economics or applied economics[4]. Thirdly, beginning in the 1990s, the media started to observe and address design issues more and more frequently: increasingly design was discussed in industrial and economic contexts as the following quotation shows:

"In Finland the field of design is being polarised around unique pieces of craft design on the other hand, and around industrial design serving a variety of groups, on the other hand. Between craft design and industrial design there is not much. Traditional industrial arts or "beautiful everyday goods" are being drastically reduced." (Managing director of Design Forum Finland Tapio Periäinen, Kauppalehti [KL] 10.1.1992)

Another widely-held assumption was that journalists write about design either in the cultural pages of the daily press or in trade papers. In the late 1990s it was observed that design should be addressed in the other media as well[5]. This was the starting point of my research.

What was this "design" that the economic press was writing about? A comprehensive definition seems to be "a mission impossible", owing to the various meanings design embodies. Design can be defined as "[...] the human power to *conceive, plan, and realise products* that serve human beings in the accomplishment of any individual or collective purpose"[6]. Although this definition is viable, my solution was a research material-based definition. I examined economic press articles and constructed a definition based on what the economic press was describing as design. I found that design has been divided into three distinctive areas in the Finnish economic press: craft design, industrial (or applied) arts design and industrial design, each having somewhat different emphases on practice, teamwork, type of product, manufacturing, and sales and marketing. Industrial design was the most often described in the economic press, but interestingly there were also many articles addressing craft design as well.

The research questions I seek to answer in this paper are explorative, descriptive and interpretative. What kind of media publicity of design is found in the Finnish economic press? This question can be divided into the following sub-questions: What is represented as design and how is design described in the press? How is media publicity produced in the interpretation of the articles? How can the articles about design be understood in different framing contexts? The research interest is interpretative; my purpose was to understand better the connection between media and design.

The research materials included 1,131 articles collected in the years 1988 to 2006 from the Finnish economic papers with the largest circulation[7]. These included all design-related articles published

during these years. All kinds of genres were represented: small-news, news, columns, reports, editorials and letters to the editor.

The method of analysis used was the sociologist Erving Goffman's frame analysis[8]. Goffman did not introduce a research programme or leave directions about his how method should be applied. This means that frame analysis is more a heuristic approach for studying media texts rather than a strict, analytical method[9]. Goffman's concept of the frame is based on the analysis of face-to-face interactions and on the various ways to analyse and understand everyday social situations. Goffman's "frame" is a theoretical construction. It is also a frame of reference that helps people to make observations and identify and name for various things, situations and activities.

I used these ideas to analyse the media texts about design. Frame analysis has been applied to some extent in media research from the perspective of journalists who construct the news by choosing and emphasising certain features while blotting out other, usually competing viewpoints[10] (such as how journalists master their profession or what routines do they develop in order to master the information flow). My approach was quite different. I defined media frames as part of the reality building by the interpreter, not simply as classifications or descriptions of the reality. I examined how the textual materials in the media can be interpreted and how these texts could change the reality of the interpreter or researcher. I was also interested in determining the consequences of these different framing practices. In the economic press frames describe design as a phenomenon from different standpoints. This means that every article can be interpreted and understood from various viewpoints, and the interpretative frame will determine what is experienced as being important. These descriptions of media publicity or how it is understood are based on interpretations by the researcher.

How then should we study the articles and what are the epistemological grounds? Or in other words, how does a researcher provide new information? And on what is this "new" information based? All of the interpretations of the economic press that follow are made by the researcher. This means that the frames I will introduce are based on subjective interpretations guided by the pre-knowledge of the researcher and the information in the article texts. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it: There is no single truth, only different points of view[11]. The role of language is also central, since human understanding is to a great extent mediated by language[12]. The above-mentioned issues refer to hermeneutics and first and foremost to analytical or philosophical hermeneutics[13].

In the following sections I will present the results of my study. The results are based on the epistemological grounds described above and on the frame analytical research process. The five media frames address the media publicity of design in the Finnish economic press.

## **2. The personal frame: the personification of design**

In the Finnish economic press designers are presented as interesting individuals. I call this approach the personal frame. In these press articles designers are usually depicted in private settings. Their personal experiences, professional history and influences are discussed in great detail. This way of representing designers was popular in the "golden age" of Finnish design in the 1950s and the 1960s and in other contexts of design as well[14]. This was the time when Finnish "hero designers" emerged and were praised by the international media.

Three types of designers were discussed in this frame. Artistically oriented or applied arts designers (Stefan Lindfors, Björn Weckström and Harri Koskinen); industrial designers (Jorma Vennola, Risto Väätänen and Eero Miettinen); and craft designers (e.g. Pekka Pietikäinen, the goldsmith of the year in 2002 and Jukka Isotalo, the artisan of the year in 2003). The following quotation describes industrial designer Risto Väätänen who received the Kaj Franck design prize in 2003:

“In 1972 Kaj Franck hired the young designer Risto Väätänen to join the art department of Arabia. Today the Design Manager of Metso, Risto Väätänen, receives the Kaj Franck prize. The award, established by Design Forum Finland, is awarded yearly to a distinguished designer or design group. Housewares and ceramics have changed to paper machines, but Väätänen’s enthusiasm about design has been sustained. In the 1970s Väätänen became a pioneer who started orchestrating design work in the metal industry. – "Orchestrate" is the wrong word, Väätänen remarks – I am more in the background than out in front of the team. I do not even use the word artistry. The designers at Metso create products together with engineers. Often motivated by cost-related issues, Väätänen diminishes the artistic role of the designer.” (KL 20.11.2003)

Applied arts designers, industrial designers and craft designers are each portrayed differently in the press. The more artistically oriented a designer is, the more personal or peculiar he or she can be. The appearances of industrial designers are often restrained by the organisation for which they work. Applied arts designers take advantage of media visibility and usually market and promote their products and designs in the press. It is also the demand for anonymity that constrains media appearances of the industrial designers. It can be argued that there is a sort of path-dependency when designers are presented as persons. These differing and culturally determined ways of representing the self steer the ways designers behave and determine how they relate their stories to the economic press. I suggest that the representations of designers are easily understood in terms of the "front stage behaviour" versus the "back stage behaviour" introduced by Goffman[15]. This means that, for example, industrial designers are restricted by their profession or the rules of conduct. They do not freely give their personal opinions, and they seem to maintain their privacy. Instead, industrial designers operate on "the front stage", sharing information about their work as representatives of companies or design agencies. By contrast, craft designers usually emphasise their design philosophies and the influences on their art. They express their personality quite strongly, and they speak out in a forthright manner. This behaviour is accepted because of culturally determined codes: this is exactly how craft designers should behave and is a reason these designers are seen as interesting individuals. The personification of design can be linked to a larger historical development in representing designers and artists to the public[16]. It is also an influential way of constructing media publicity of design around the personalities of the designers.

### **3. The frame of mastery of the profession: the professionalisation of design**

While the personal frame highlighted designers as interesting persons, the frame of mastery of the profession is reserved for a different viewpoint. The basic question is how designers and other actors in the field describe design as professional work. Designers' ordinary work and work-related events are represented widely in the economic press.

First of all, there are descriptions of how a designer masters his or her work. Articles of this type concentrate on personal performance and ways of practicing a design profession on an everyday level[17]. Design is considered from the perspectives of controlling personal know-how and using it in design tasks. In the next example, extracted from the economic press, freelance designer Heikki Naulapää describes the work

process he used for the Aprilia motorcycle company. Later, in the year 2007, he was hired by BMW's design organisation:

"A freelance designer must all the time show what he or she is capable of. You are as good as your latest design. If you don't know how to sell your know-how and promote your way of thinking, then your views will not advance in the organisation. [...] If the problems in manufacturing are taken into consideration in the early phase of building a concept then there will be nothing new. – It is a condition for successful design: a product's functionality must be understood and the whole product must be properly outlined." (*Metallitekniikka* 8.2.2005)

The second layer of this frame of mastery of the profession consists of issues related to controlling the design process. These articles address the division of organisational tasks that usually take place in industry. The focus is on descriptions of complex design processes. The third layer of the frame, controlling cooperation, deals with issues that are connected to essential groups of people in the product development process. In the economic press journalists write about external and internal design actors and their communication issues. It is usual to highlight the problems of the interaction among different professional groups[18]. On the other hand, working business relationships are applauded. There are also attempts to control the results of the design process. This can be interpreted as an attempt to influence to the overall design process.

#### **4. The frame of economy and the market: the commercialisation of design**

It can be argued that the frame of the economy and the market is closely linked to the substance of the economic press. These articles usually contain discussions about the relationship between design and the economy. It is also usual to address issues of economic benefits from various points of view. The first and most abstract level of these discussions takes place when design is related to international competitiveness. All design discussion participants in the media texts agree that the nation and industry will benefit in economic terms if design is properly exploited. It has also been observed that there are too few companies that have taken this challenge seriously. Several issues are emphasised in this layer of the frame: the economic recession in the 1990s, the role of design in export sales and Finland's position in global competitiveness are frequently mentioned. I chose the next quotation as an example of this frame because here a journalist is discussing the role of design during the exceptionally deep economic recession at the beginning of the 1990s:

"Finnish design is going through tough times. The general recession is killing design firms around the country, and whole industries are in danger of vanishing for good. [...] – The problem is how to bring both designers and industry to the same table. There are plenty of examples in Finland of how a well-managed company combined with an adept design has provided viable industrial manufacturing. – Design provides the needed surplus value for a product. Since the world is already full of things, design remains almost the only means with which to shape a product's identity." (KL 10.5.1991)

The second layer of the frame of the economy and the market is closely connected to a company's product development. The focus is on the relationship of design and the competitive advantage of the company[19]. Instead of abstract discussions about international competitiveness, the efficiency of companies and the role of design are discussed in detail. Issues such as rivals in the market, design-generated cost savings, companies' design management and overall market/design/company -linkage are discussed in the articles. Thirdly, design and the benefits it creates for consumers and users are emphasised. Differentiation, distinction, communication, styles, fashion, identities and brands are connected to design and furthermore to designers' capacity to generate economic growth for a company[20]. It is also stated and widely accepted that in the end, it

is the consumers who choose the market winners. By comparing, choosing, buying and using well-designed products, consumers have the power to influence the market[21]. The logic behind this frame is clear: well-designed products are positively accepted, and they will simply sell more.

### **5. The communal frame: the communalisation of design**

"Communal" is a challenging term owing to the various meanings it incorporates. I defined it as the collective actions of usually non-profit organisations conducted on a national level. The communal frame is usually about general design promotion. The articles in the economic press interpreted in this communal frame concentrate on actors and actions that promote design. In other words, communal actions in design refer to the active development of design in societal networks without the requirements of economic gain or other financial benefits for the actors. The Finnish design policy programme "Muotoilu 2005!" was launched in 2000[22]. The programme was widely publicised in the Finnish press. The next example is about national level design promotion in the context of the design policy programme. The Finnish Minister of Culture Suvi Lindén in an interview about the programme, stated:

"The purpose of the design policy programme is to acknowledge Finnish design know-how and develop it further. Design has to be linked to technical products, and it should be recognised as a factor that improves the competitive advantage of Finnish industry and commerce. Technological competence is not enough to ensure success in the future: it is crucial to pay attention to the issues of usability and product images. [...] Industrial design is nowadays an important part of the government platform and the system of innovation in Finland." (Minister of Culture Suvi Lindén quoted in KL 10.2.2000).

The articles interpreted through the communal frame address also such issues as design education and public design research. Emphasis is not only on the results of the education or the studies conducted, but also on the long-span development of the design community. The number of students, higher education, the funding of public research and the utilisation of the research results are announced and discussed in the pages of the economic press. Finally, the actions of the design community in Finland are brought into the discussions. Promotional actors such as the Design Museum, the Finnish Association of Designers Ornamo, the national design promoting organisation Design Forum Finland and established design exhibitions and design prizes are described in the economic press. The fulcrum of the communal frame as I interpreted it is the ambition to achieve overall improvement of design in Finnish society.

### **6. The frame of culture: a cultural shift in design**

Like any other creative and innovative planning involving artificial things[23] is based on human culture. Interpretations conducted in the frame of culture are based on design traditions and above all, on the examination of cultural transitions that slowly change peoples' perception of design.

The first layer of the frame is comprised of traditions of design culture. In the economic press "Finnish design", which historically has been highly valued, and traditional applied arts design are still addressed to some extent. However, transition at the level of cultural foundations is visible. Although traditional design culture has not vanished for good, design is increasingly discussed as part of the nation's industrial culture[24]. This means that companies and industry actively take part in discussions that define culturally relevant meanings for design. I argue that the traditional culture of Finnish design in the 1950s was constructed on very different bases than industrial design culture since the year 2000.

In my interpretation of the research materials since 2000, there is an increasing amount of debate about the connection between consumer culture and design. It is clear that, over the last decade, consumption has shaped, driven and constrained at every point by cultural considerations[25]. Consumer culture - the culture of consumption - is a unique and specific form of activity. Or as Don Slater puts it: "Consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets"[26]. The following excerpt is an example of the consumer cultural layer of the cultural frame in the Finnish economic press as I interpreted it:

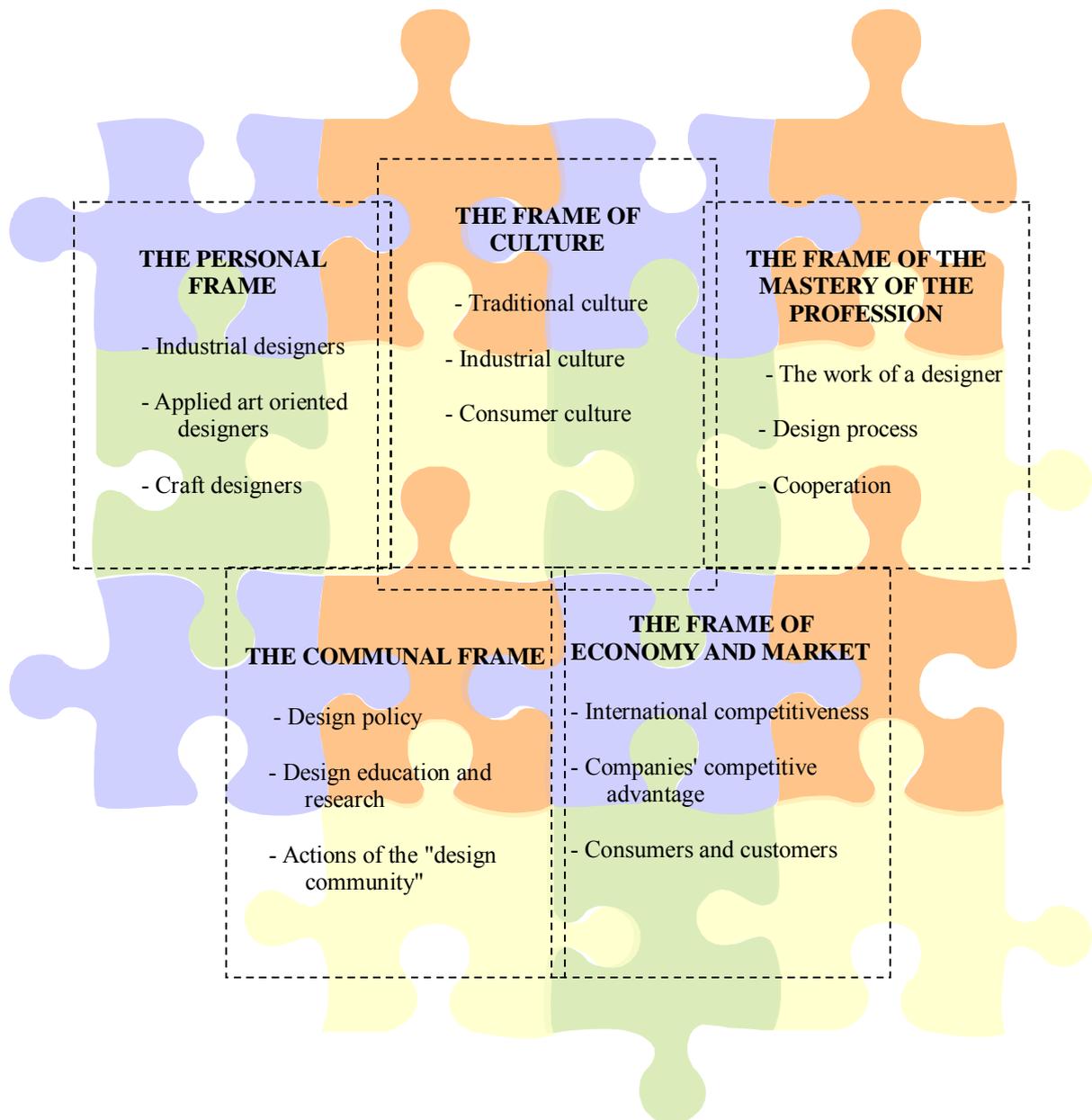
"A product has one second or two seconds to grab my interest; otherwise, it will remain on the shelf as a loser. How to beat competing products, which product (brand) promises the most, which functions best, which matches my lifestyle and feelings? The same questions arise everywhere, whether the topic is clothing, cars, mobile phones, make-up or flights. The markets of plenty and increasing competition make differentiation created by design a vital condition. A brand image created by design is crucial. A brand crystallises consumers' rational, functional, emotional and symbolic values. The relationship between people and products is deeper and more multidimensional than is usually thought. The stronger the emotional and social relationship towards a brand, the harder it is to choose differently." (Kauppalehti Presso 5.8.2006)

In the next section I will draw conclusions based on the five media frames discussed above. I see the frames as a flexible system that creates and recreates the media's image of design in the Finnish economic press. This suggested media publicity of design (constructed on five frames) is just one possible interpretation. I will leave the consideration of the credibility of my interpretations to the reader, as hermeneutic approach suggests. Interpretation and understanding take place when the text and the pre-knowledge of the reader meet in a fusion of horizons. Understanding the interpretations suggested in this research are by no means different: readers of this article will engage the spiral of hermeneutic understanding as I did while reading and interpreting the articles about design in the Finnish economic press.

## **7. Discussion**

The media frames for design introduced in the previous sections are based on interpretations made by the researcher. Interpretation and understanding are implemented as a spiral-like movement from text to interpretation. I boosted the interpretation by using a frame analysis. The reason for this choice was so that the results of the analysis would appear more focused. Frame analysis was the theoretical background for better understanding how design has been presented in the Finnish economic press. Thus, interpretation and understanding were guided by the pre-knowledge of the researcher and the media texts, that were analysed: in hermeneutics this is called a fusion of the horizons, which opens up "a third view". This third view is a mix of pre-understanding and analysed texts and is more than the sum of its parts. The outcomes of the hermeneutic analysis or understanding change when the interpreter changes.

Based on my analysis, I suggest that media publicity of design in Finland is characterised by five focal themes: personification, professionalisation, commercialisation, communalisation and a transition in cultural focus from, the traditions of design to an industrial culture and a consumer culture. All of these frames were discussed in the previous sections. Publicity about design in the Finnish media can be seen as a puzzle in which different frames overlap and are interrelated, as I suggest with the following figure:



It can be argued that the frames themselves construct the publicity about design from various points of view in the media. The frames describe situations, actions and the actors involved in design. The media frames also make it possible to understand the relationship of design actions vis-à-vis the culture. Thus, the media have a crucial role to play in representing design and recreating its meanings.

The research gives a multidimensional picture of design in the economic press. In the personal frame designers were depicted in private settings and through their personal experiences. The second frame related to design work. In this frame of mastery of the profession, designers' work was interpreted widely. Design was considered from the perspectives of controlling personal know-how, cooperation and the overall process of design. The third frame was connected to the actual substance of the economic press. In the frame of the economy and the market, design was linked to international competitiveness, companies' competitive advantage and the creation of benefits for consumers. The fourth frame, the communal frame, was connected to the actors promoting design on a societal level. In the communal frame, the economic press described design policy, design

research and education and other actors who actively develop design in the societal networks. The last frame, the frame of culture, was linked to the traditions of design and above all, to the examination of cultural transition. In the frame of culture the traditions of design were emphasised. Design was also connected to the industrial culture and furthermore to themes of the consumer culture.

Based on my interpretation, these media frames are guided by the mediatisation of design. The design phenomenon is defined often on the basis of the media representations in the public discourse. The media publicity of design outlined in this research connects socially constructed and structurally organised actions. Socially constructed action in design is connected to the experiences, social recreation and collective development of design. Structurally, design is described as professional know-how, as a process and as a profit-generating action in a society.

The events described by the media affect the way in which people experience the world and the meanings they connect to the events around them and their lives. By affecting experiences, the media indirectly affect human actions. People have become used to reading media representations on a daily basis, but they are not used to interpreting the various meanings that are incorporated in the media texts.

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