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Journal of Product Innovation Management Special Issue Call for Papers:

Design Thinking and Innovation Management: Matches, Mismatches and Future Avenues

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Motivation for and objectives of special issue

Scholars and practitioners acknowledge the central role of design as a driver of innovation and change (Brown, 2008; Martin, 2009; Liedtka, 2015). In a way, the importance of design as a source of value creation had been scrutinized for decades (Peterson et al., 1986; Hirschman, 1986). Most of these investigations however addressed design as the aesthetic and symbolic dimension of products, i.e., design as “form”, identity and emotions, which gave design a marginal role in the realm of innovation studies (Capaldo, 2007; Dell’Era and Verganti, 2010). What has driven the steep growth of attention to design in the latest years in the business community is a change of perspective: design is not only an aesthetic driver of innovation but as a whole innovation management practice, a new set of processes, mindsets, capabilities, and organizational settings. It is something practiced not only by designers but by everyone in organizations who seeks to innovate. The emergence of new paradigms such as human-centered design (Buchanan, 2001), participatory design (Sanders and Stappers, 2008) and especially design thinking (Brown, 2008; Martin, 2009), have marked the transforming role of design in the field of innovation studies.

Design Thinking, in particular, is making the headlines, with an extremely rapid diffusion in the interest and practice of organizations. Far from being connected with the “form” of products, Design Thinking is accepted as a formal method for creative problem solving, with the intent to foster innovation. (Brown, 2009; Martin, 2009; Liedtka et al., 2013). Although the concept has different interpretations, Design Thinking is usually characterized by three traits: a human centered perspective, where innovators build empathy with users; the leverage of creativity as a driver of innovation (sometimes even in contrast with

assets as knowledge, technology and competitive positioning); and an intense use of prototyping as a rapid and effective source of communication and learning among stakeholders (Brown, 2008). Design Thinking employs divergent thinking as a way to ensure that many possible solutions are explored in the first instance, and then convergent thinking as a way to narrow these down to a final solution.

The increasing attention of practitioners to Design Thinking is evident by looking at the recent moves of large innovation consultancies. The recent acquisition of Lunar by McKinsey or Fjord by Accenture, are just two examples of a broader phenomenon. Accenture, Deloitte, IBM, KPMG, and PricewaterhouseCoopers rank among the most aggressive players in acquiring design agencies in order to renew their offering and refresh their innovation services. Design Thinking is booming in those industries where the digital transformation requires new competences and capabilities for developing effective customer experiences. Also, software developers and integrators, such as Adobe, Microsoft or Oracle, have extensively adopted Design Thinking practices.

This rapid diffusion of Design Thinking in practice has not, however, been coupled with a similarly rapid and robust diffusion of its theoretical underpinnings. Yet, in the past few years, the concept of Design Thinking has started to attract attention among innovation scholars. Initially, a number of publications in academic journals have focused on trying to bring more theoretical clarity on a concept that appears elusive and ill-defined (Liedtka, 2004; Borja de Mozota, 2010; Brown and Wyatt, 2010; Johansson-Sköldberg et al., 2013; Seidel and Fixson, 2013, Kolko, 2015). With only partial results, the speed of evolution of its applications and its breath are still escaping scholars' effort to capture its ontology. Indeed, according to Carlgren et al. (2016), the literature about Design Thinking provides ambiguous or partial definitions. Some focus on its mindset, e.g., as an abductive way of thinking (Martin, 2009; Leavy, 2011); some focus on its creative dimension (Kelley and Littman, 2001; Brown, 2008); some focus on its attention on the user, or the ability to frame problems, to visualize, and to build prototypes (Carlgren et al., 2016).

Most contributions have so far been inward-oriented, i.e., to better understand what Design Thinking is. A consequence of this inner focus is that the scientific discourse on Design Thinking has in a way unfolded in a vacuum: often independently from other theories, and in particular from other innovation theories (Verganti, 2008; 2009; and 2017; Norman and Verganti, 2013; Verganti and Dell'Era, 2014). How is Design Thinking positioned in relation to established innovation frameworks such as Dynamic Capabilities (Teece and Pisano, 1994), Lead Users (Von Hippel, 1988 and 2005), Disruptive Innovation (Christensen, 1997), Open Innovation (Chesbrough, 2003), Flexible or iterative innovation processes (MacCormack et al., 2001; Thomke, 2003)? How does it relate to emerging new practices, such as Agile/Lean Development (Ries, 2011; Cooper and Sommer, 2016) or Design Sprint (Knapp et al., 2016) or behavioral theories related to innovation? What is its empirical effectiveness and field of application compared to these other approaches? This last question is central as Design Thinking is sometimes overlapped, sometimes in contrast, with some of the above frameworks.

Without a deeper attempt to connect Design Thinking with the landscape of innovation theories, the implication is that scientific discourse on innovation would fail to capture one of the ideas that have a greater impact on practice. A thorough scholarly investigation of the matches and mismatches of Design Thinking with alternative innovation paradigms and frameworks can significantly enrich the comprehension of its potentialities and future avenues (as well as its contingencies, validity, and limitations). This is especially true considering that Design Thinking is already spreading to other areas such organizational change and leadership; which once again is a sign of its versatility, but also of its conceptual fuzziness.

Suggested topics and/or research questions

This special issue therefore aims at connecting Design Thinking (DT), which is experiencing significant diffusion as a problem-solving and transformation practice, to the innovation management discourse. In particular, the purpose is to critically reflect on the opportunities and limits of Design Thinking through the theoretical lenses provided by innovation management literature.

Theoretical and empirical contributions may address, but are not limited to the following topics. Both qualitative and quantitative research approaches are welcomed in order to provide a robust set of contributions characterized by diverse methodologies:

Innovation Theories

- What are the particular features of DT in comparison to innovation theories (e.g., Disruptive Innovation, Open Innovation, Lead User Innovation)?
- What are the main advantages provided by DT in comparison with established innovation approaches? What are the main limits of DT? What contexts are most amenable to DT?
- Which domains (e.g., industries, innovation types, and problems) are best addressed through DT?

Innovation Processes

- How can DT practices be operationalized?
- How can value generated by DT practices be measured? What quantitative techniques complement DT? How do different quantitative assessments of DT reveal alternative perspectives?
- How does DT enable collaboration in innovation? How does DT affect individual creativity? What is different versus other theories of collaborative innovation and creativity?
- How does DT contribute to the agility of innovation processes, supporting “fast fail” approaches and enabling new experimental modalities?
- How does DT enable embedding new digital technologies (e.g., Big Data, Machine Learning, Virtual and Augmented Reality, Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, Internet of Things) in the innovation process?

People for Innovation

- How does DT change the way innovation work is carried out? How would you assess team members for a success collaboration? What are the best outcomes to measure?
- Which competences, skills, mindsets, and attitudes distinguish a Design Thinker? What is unique about them? What measurement techniques are recommended?
- How can the acquisition and effectiveness of DT capabilities be assessed?
- Is DT reframing leadership practice? If so, in which particular way compared to other theories of leadership in innovation?

Organizing for Innovation

- How does DT support organizational transformation and change management?
- How does DT affect the innovation culture of an organization? How can this impact be measured?
- What are the main individual and organizational barriers to adopting DT?
- Does the adoption of DT require specific organizational roles, functions, and structures?

The submitted articles should help position Design Thinking theoretically. Contributions that offer theoretical reflections, empirical evidence, and qualitative insights are welcome.

Submission deadline and anticipated publication timeline:

Call for papers announcement: May 2019

Submission due date for papers: January 31, 2020

First round decisions: May 31, 2020

Conference in support of JPIM Special Issue*: July 2020

First revision due date: September 30, 2020

Second round decisions: December 31, 2020

Second revision due date: March 31, 2021

Third round decisions: June 30, 2021

Third revision due date: September 30, 2021

Final editorial decisions: December 31, 2021

Anticipated Publication: Spring 2022

Dedicated conference / workshop plans

(*) The Conference will be held in Williamsburg, Virginia and organized by Mason School of Business, College of William & Mary with the following objectives:

- Bring together promising scholars (15-20) to advance research on DT;
- Identify studies suitable for this special issue;
- Nurture a special debate session on the role of DT in Higher Education.

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