

**Heartfelt - The possibilities for physical objects to act as mediators in emotional exchange and implications for the design process**

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# Heartfelt

- The possibilities for physical objects to act as mediators in emotional exchange and implications for the design process

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**Abstract:** This paper draws on practice centred research conducted within the field of contemporary jewellery. Its aim is to understand the process and dynamics by which objects create meaning, in particular that of an emotional nature. The key objective is to propose methods for researching this critical field of enquiry. The research itself focuses on the commissioning process which as evidence shows is increasingly relevant as a means of consumption. The research considers the micro dynamics of a situation through which a client's needs are communicated. The research draws on cultural theory and design to develop an appropriate hybrid conceptual model. Significant elements in the interpretation and identification of emotional dimensions are identified and observed. The analysis of the data questioned the relationship between the communication process and the interpretation of an object. The hybrid conceptual model used is summarised in the paper. There then follows an explanation of a method for analysing the communicative role of objects, which focuses specifically on the commissioning process. This research is directly relevant to the fields of the applied arts and design. However it is also relevant to other industries and could contribute to the meaningful development of mass customisation.

**Key words:** *Jewellery, Design, Commission, Emotion, Mediation*

## 1. Introduction

Jewellery and its place within our contemporary culture is a highly significant area for investigation. Just as archaeologists and historians use objects such as jewellery to understand social dynamics within ancient societies, so too can design researchers focus on contemporary jewellery as a means of analysing empathetic communication and the role played by objects in society. This paper draws on a research project that aims to explore this issue in detail and – in short – explain what the objects we create today tell us about who we are, how we relate to others and what we may become in the future? The project focuses on the commissioning process in jewellery design – examining how objects may mediate between the maker and client as the process develops over time. It focuses on the generation and selection of a sample group of individuals and the subsequent development of appropriate methods for interaction with the participants.

The intimate relationship a person may have with a wedding band or a piece of jewellery that is an heirloom reflects jewellery's potential to invoke emotion. In their 1980's study of consumption practices in American suburbia Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton [1] recognised that objects aid their owners' cultivation of a sense of self through the meanings they associate with them. They suggest that this meaning evolves through an active process of cultivation oriented towards the owner's goals. Emotions also motivate us and help us to make decisions about how we interpret the world and how we act. [2] They are therefore influential in the cultivation of a sense of self through objects.

Jewellery objects often seem to stimulate emotion and to encapsulate ideas and memories that are significant to the owner's sense of self, they seem to function in this way particularly effectively. To acknowledge this is to imply questions about the relationship between jewellery, emotion and the sense of self. This research seeks to elucidate these relationships through a methodology that includes the process of commissioning one-off jewellery. This is intended to identify significant elements within this process of acquiring jewellery that influence the owner's and the maker's emotional engagement with each other and the resulting objects.

Jewellery is often acquired through a commission process, which is notable as a means of consumption because it centres on an individual's specific needs and desires. The methodology for this research uses a form of commissioning process in which the researcher/ practitioner develops objects for individuals as part of a dialogue between them and a number of clients. This will allow the research to study the communication involved in this process and the roles that objects play in that communication. This communication promises to demonstrate how individuals relate to jewellery specifically and perhaps to objects more generally. It also provides an opportunity to determine the degrees and types of communication that can take place via the commissioning process.

## **2. Methodological context**

The methodology developed for this project is an example of 'practice-centred research', which seeks to integrate the tacit knowledge and creative practices of design within a clearly articulated set of research priorities. Practice-centred research has arisen over the last decade as a means for design practice to be regarded as a component within a research degree submission.[3] While the methodological debates that continue to surround practice-centred research are beyond the scope of this paper, it is relevant to place this specific investigation into its broader methodological context.

Practice-centred research can be viewed as a diverse range of approaches that in differing ways aim to bridge practice and theory within design. One approach regards practice *as* research, claiming that a designed artefact embodies knowledge and thus can stand virtually alone as a research outcome, with only a minimal requirement to elaborate its theoretical implications. This model is perhaps more rooted in some research derived from fine art practice. Elsewhere other models are emerging that seek to gain communicable design knowledge and theory through design practice that is informed by theory. Some of its advocates have referred to the historical contribution of craft and design practice to the growth of knowledge, and indeed to the theory that draws upon that knowledge. [4] Kevin McCullough makes the case that a fusion of theory and practice – design praxis – should be the goal of design: “practice informed by theory, and theory informed by practice”. [5] That is very much the approach adopted here.

Some are making the case for design to become a more 'science-based' profession, stressing that this is not at

odds with the art and craft that lies within design practice. For example, Friedman and Ainamo argue: “Science and the scientific method do not necessarily mean positivism. Modern science and scientific method can involve diverse kinds of relationships between theory and practice, and not only a positivistic one. What matters is that we strive to make conscious design knowledge, to understand how things are and how they work based on fundamental principles. The central difference between design as science and design as art is that with design as science one does not start with the look and feel, but rather with the parameters of the problem. Look and feel and tone and feeling and flavour emerge in the solution phase once the parameters of the problem establish the basic requirements of a solution. Thus, the scientific approach to design does not contradict the artistic aspect of design”. [6]

This investigation is consistent with the view summarised above. In it the design process is a research methodology that investigates the socially mediating role of designed objects. We argue that this approach provides unique knowledge that cannot be acquired by other methods. It builds on similar practice-centred investigations that have used the design process and designed objects as research tools, such as Whiteley’s investigation of the design of upper arm prostheses, which used creative design practice and craft techniques to address problems normally considered to be the province of the scientist or engineer. [7,8]

### **3. Method for generating sample group**

Psychologist Peter Hartley [9] likens communication to a dance with co-ordinated movement, leading to mutual understanding but with the capacity to interject your own style. The initial process of this research is akin to finding appropriate dance partners and selecting complimentary music to begin the dance. This method also intends to elicit information about why people wish to be involved in this process and what it is that interests them about jewellery. The resulting data will be used to identify emerging themes and to devise methods for gathering data in the further stages of the research.

As this research relies heavily on the commitment of the participants an advertisement in the opportunities section of Artists Newsletter was used to attract individuals motivated to engage with a process that will demand a significant amount of time and commitment. The classifieds section of Artists Newsletter offers a wide range of opportunities to artists and individuals with an interest in the art world, from public commissions to requests for accounts of certain experiences for artists to use as the basis of work. The intention in advertising here was to attract individuals interested in discussing jewellery and the commission process. It was important to select participants who had a willingness to express their thoughts and feelings about this subject.

Earlier research [10] had shown that individuals with an art and design background are more able to articulate their responses and feelings about objects than others. Such a method of gathering participants could be criticised for not providing a representative sample, however the subject of the research was likely to be salient to the majority of the individuals responding to this advertisement since they were likely to possess appropriate cultural capital. [11]

In professional jewellery making context the client typically approaches the jeweller out of a desire to be involved with the commissioning process and would most likely engage readily in the communication process. Given the probable cultural capital of readers of Artists’ Newsletter it is likely that the participants and the maker/researcher will share some attitudes which are in turn likely to encourage the rapport necessary to allow the

research process to work..

The fact that the sample is not representative is not a significant issue for this research. The question it centres on is likely to be determined by a different mix of factors in each particular situation, among the most significant of which are the characteristics of the craft maker themselves. The fact that the results will not be directly open to generalisation is also inevitable in exploratory research such as this, as indeed it is in any case-based research.

The response was overwhelming - over one hundred people expressed an interest. A letter to these individuals then gave a brief description of what the project would be what would be expected from them and asked for some standard information. The questions aimed to provide an opportunity for the individual to demonstrate their ability to articulate their opinions/feelings about jewellery and the process they would be engaged in. The response to this follow up letter also exceeded expectations with forty-six individuals returning the questionnaire. The questionnaires, as well as identifying suitable participants, provided rich and intimate data that suggested potential themes relating to the subject of the research. Such themes included the notion that jewellery can represent the continuity of bloodlines by marking the emotional bond between individuals and their ancestors; associations relating to self perception and in particular physical awareness; changes in gender roles; attachments to particular places and/or times which reflect strong beliefs and provoke intense memories. The responses from the questionnaires are analysed more fully below and the coming stages of research are outlined.

#### **4. Results of questionnaires.**

The rich and intimate data provided by the questionnaires exposed the individual motives for wishing to enter into the process of commissioning a jewellery object. The motives were varied and ranged from a desire to challenge gender assumptions to a need to replace a sense of loss.

Out of the forty-six respondents who returned the questionnaire only three were male. These included an established jeweller, a performer and someone who had been volunteered by his female partner for a joint commission. The performer was interested specifically in commissioning work, which commented on the gender assumptions he had experienced regarding jewellery. He described the jewellery object he was interested in acquiring as a 'manly tiara' an object he felt was usually seen as particularly feminine and as such would add comment to his performance. The male jeweller was interested in the research from a professional perspective. He was curious to discover an alternate side to being the commissioned jeweller. Within the female responses there were references to recent family bereavements, personal illness, low self esteem, marriage and divorce as well as accounts of being the victims of crime. These subjects arose from open questions that did not intentionally use emotive probes.

The age of respondents ranged from twelve to sixty-seven, the majority being between twenty-five and fifty-six. The males who responded were scattered throughout the age range. The majority of the respondents, as was to be expected, described their occupation as 'Artist' or 'Designer', many with additional jobs, for example teaching, administration, or work with community art projects. Some did not refer to themselves as Artist or Designer but often their work had an artistic dimension. For example a woman criminal justice consultant had just finished writing a novel. In her response she recognises an association between the process of writing and what she imagines the process of conceptualising and making a piece of jewellery to be.

Predictably, the respondents tended to report a strong interest in jewellery and a desire to acquire it. From

many of the respondents there was an obvious desire to be 'on the other side' of the commission process which could be expected among respondents for whom this means of acquisition is familiar. Other respondents expressed a curiosity to discover what someone else perceived their needs and wants relating to jewellery to be, in other words, an opportunity to see another person's perception of you embodied in an object. There is a certain indulgence in a process where attention is placed entirely on your needs and an object results from this activity to remind you of this opportunity. This activity is likely to be associated with the place, event and situation in which it occurred. This sort of indulgence is uncommon in everyday experience; such experiences command a high price and therefore are perceived a luxury. A couple of the respondents described jewellery as representing the experience of places, exotic holidays and cultural experiences. These objects then represented an escape from mundane day-to-day activities and a sense of adventure. They also presented a self perceived public image of the cultured adventurer. An event, place or situation in which an object is acquired would seem influential to the interpretation and resulting significance of an object. This illustrates the necessity to examine the situation in which an object comes into an individual's possession, in this case the commission.

The majority of the respondents referred to jewellery as something that aroused happy memories. Memories of a certain person or place were often mentioned in relation to a particular jewellery object. Individuals described associations between significant family members and friends and the objects those individuals had worn on significant occasions. One respondent recalled a childhood memory of sitting on her grandmother's knee and playing with a windmill brooch her Grandmother would often wear. This memory was how she identified with her Grandmother and she had then related this experience to her fascination with 'spirals' which had played a large role in her work as an artist and thus her current self-image. Jewellery was described by five individuals as being a container of family history, representing a continuum. One respondent described the distress she felt because she had not discovered that her deceased mother had wished her granddaughter to inherit her wedding and engagement ring until weeks after her death, by which time her mother had been cremated and the rings lost. The resulting upset motivated her to commission an object which would in some way replace the continuum of female descent by collaborating on a piece with the researcher and her daughter. The traditional associations of jewellery with love and religion and its use as a sign of union were an obvious influence in the appropriation of jewellery objects by these individuals.

The loss of jewellery was mentioned on several occasions by over a quarter of the respondents. One respondent had lost a friend's necklace and had wished to find a significant way in which to replace it. Other people mentioned seeing jewellery objects in shops in previous years and mourning the lost opportunity to purchase them. They had never forgotten the object they had never actually owned and had compared all other jewellery to it since. This group seem to hope that this research process would result in an object that would live up to the memory of that lost object. One respondent recalled her recollection of burglaries where jewellery had been stolen. This person had lost jewellery which had been gifts from loved ones and now felt that the positive connections they had with those objects were now in some way overwhelmed by the negative memories and upset connected to the burglaries. This respondent was hoping that the commission process would, once again, allow her to feel positive about jewellery objects.

As mentioned earlier a desire to have a piece of jewellery made that represented a certain relationship or a significant moment in time is seen as desirable. Individuals described the stage they felt they were at in their life and what significance this stage had to their overall sense of who they were and how they saw themselves within

the scheme of things. It would seem that these individuals believe that the opportunity of the commission will provide an opportunity to gain a better understanding of their own identities.

A significant number, over half, of respondents described their jewellery as being an opportunity for self expression. However six respondents admitted to not being wearers of jewellery. They reported an interest in jewellery and in owning it, and they would carry objects with them that they referred to as jewellery for example crystals, but they were not interested in displaying their jewellery or using it to adorn themselves. People who related to jewellery in this way often referred to their jewellery as having 'magical properties'. They seemed to consider these objects talismanic devices. An object that they felt somehow protected them or gave them confidence in a certain situation.

Respondents reported a physical connection to their jewellery; comments were made about gems stones being 'grounding' the touch of these objects providing a sense of connection to the earth. There were illustrations of jewellery providing physical awareness both as a private or public experience. This seemed to be a welcome experience which on occasion would reinforce a positive 'sense of self'. Individuals commented on how jewellery would be selected and worn based on a particular mood and/or occasion. The sensation of wearing jewellery would provide comfort on certain occasions; comfort on a day-to-day basis where someone may play with their jewellery and enjoy the tactile feedback and comfort in a particular role where body proximity is significant to this experience. The jewellery may act as a costume that allows an individual to perform a role; in other words to 'feel the part' and confirm a chosen 'sense of self'. A couple of respondents expressed beliefs that jewellery allowed them to transform. Jewellery is seen as an opportunity to express one's individuality in a way in which clothing is limited. Women who referred to themselves as being overweight described finding jewellery liberating in that it did not have the functional limitations of clothing and they could feel that they were expressing their individuality through their appearance as they perceived non-overweight people having the ability to do with their clothing.

Generally the rich and intimate responses to both questions; the significance of jewellery and the significance of the commission, reflected an emotional dimension, which appeared linked to the individuals' sense of self. The researcher was drawn to certain participants who had been particularly candid and articulate in their responses and through the description of their experiences, the stories they told, had encouraged her to empathise with them. The ability to empathise with the client may be a valuable contributor to the success of a commission. If a client is able to articulate their feelings then the maker is in a better position to respond to their personality and produce an object that represents the client's aspirations.

## **5. Discussion of sample selection.**

There was a significant difference in the number of females who responded compared to males. The most obvious possibility is that women are more likely to wear jewellery within contemporary British society. The chosen sample group will reflect the variety of respondents. It will therefore include five females and only one male participant. A variety of ages responded and this will be represented in the final selection.

The criteria for selecting participants was primarily concerned with a willingness to be involved with the project, an ability to articulate opinions and feelings regarding the subject area, availability and convenience. Any of the individuals who fitted into these criteria would be appropriate as participants. However some of the individuals who were selected appeared to have an additional dimension that indicated that they had the potential

to provide interesting results. As mentioned earlier, some of the participants recounted stories which encouraged the researcher to empathise with them. This led her to believe that working on objects for these individuals, would stimulate emotions in her which would enable her to engage in the dialogue more effectively. It could be argued that the researcher should detach herself emotionally from the research wherever possible in order to remain objective. However, the research takes a constructivist approach and recognises the significance of the subjective experiences of both the maker and the client in this process. Therefore the selected group will include individuals who the researcher felt empathy for and individuals whom she did not in order to evaluate the difference this may make in the results of the commission.

Many of the responses contained personal and emotional sentiments about both jewellery and the commission process. In this group of individuals the ideas about commissioning jewellery include the following themes, the jewellery commission: as a means of self expression, used to create a talisman or a portable shrine to a particular memory or a particular person, as a representation of bloodlines or lineage in a family, as a connection with the place and time in which it was acquired and the significance of that situation to the individual, as an antidote to loss. This loss related to: the loss of a person, the loss of the item that somehow represented the person and the loss of an ideal which was represented by the jewellery object. Another theme which is often mentioned is the physical experience of wearing and using jewellery objects. This theme often arises in connection with issues relating to a 'sense of self' that individuals have when wearing certain objects.

In devising ways in which to interact further with chosen participants the themes that have arisen in individual responses will be taken into consideration when devising semi-structured interviews. All the chosen case studies will be of a similar structure using multiple methods in order to triangulate the gathering of data. The process will include interview, the making of sample objects and the collection of responses to these through semi-structured diaries and disposable cameras. Further interviews will enable analysis of data gathered through these processes.

Each case study will vary in detail. These details will acknowledge the individuality of each participant and aim to exploit the subtle connections between maker and client that will hopefully create a rapport and/or invoke emotion in that relationship.

## **6. Conclusion**

To conclude, this process of investigation aimed to generate a sample group suitable for an exploration into the possibilities for jewellery to act as a mediator in emotional exchange in the commissioning process. It recognised that certain individuals may be more appropriate candidates as clients in this process as they possess an interest in and an ability to articulate their feelings about jewellery. Emotions have been highlighted as a motivating factor in the signification of jewellery objects for these individuals. The results of the questionnaires revealed prominent themes which would seem significant in the understanding of how individuals appropriate jewellery. These themes will inform further research that aims to use the jewellery commissioning process to understand how objects work.

This investigation aims to open up ways to explore not only the making process and what can be understood about it, but also the related aspects of being a designer/maker. In the commission scenario this involves participation in a complex social interaction which has an influence on the experience of the client and the maker. Therefore a study of the micro dynamics of the process of the commission by a practitioner who is actively involved may tell us how we can develop working methods that best suit a client's needs.

It is also important to reflect on how the knowledge acquired through this research will aid the process of understanding emotion and its relationship to objects. This is a critical issue at the moment that many within design theory are exploring. This subject is being explored through the commission process, a process central to the acquisition of many craft objects and increasingly relevant as a means of consumption more widely. However, no research to date has explored the social and psychological dynamics involved in this process. This research will begin to analyse this method of consumption. In a world where communication appears necessary for a peaceful and cooperative community it would seem relevant to seek possibilities for objects to enhance mediation and enable cultural understanding. Overall, this study will explore if physical jewellery objects can act as mediators in emotional exchange by aiming to understand the process and dynamics by which objects create meaning.

Jewellery design is relatively new as an academic research-based discipline, and there is a need to explore and define appropriate methods of research. The methodology has been developed through knowledge of research in related fields such as psychology, sociology and design and through an exploration of the practice of jewellery design. The aim is to discover if established frameworks can be used to form a hybrid model that allows research through and into jewellery.

There may be educational implications within the findings of this research. The methods for educating designer makers may need to include a stronger emphasis on being able to talk and listen to the user. This research may provide suggestions as to ways in which empathy may be achieved.

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<sup>2</sup> Levine, R and Shweder, R. *Culture Theory Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion* Cambridge Uni Press 215 (1984)

<sup>3</sup> This aspect of practice-centred research is beyond the scope of this paper and has been the subject of considerable debate within the design academic community, See in particular: Proceedings of Design plus Research Conference, Politecnico di Milano, May 2000, and Proceedings of Doctoral Education in Design Conference, La Clusaz, France, July 2000.

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