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**Design for the Digital Age:
Addressing the Shift in Human Interaction Patterns**

Throughout history, design theory has taken cues from other disciplines—modernism and post-modernism both borrowed from the arts and humanities. As the digital age brings a shift in human interaction, the design world is responding with a parallel shift through the incorporation of the social sciences into design issues.

Within the design world, both modernism and post-modernism were intertwined with and responsive to the current events, social situations, and ideals that characterized the time periods in which they occurred. Modernism, a movement characterized by rational order, developed alongside industrialization, at a time when dramatic cultural and social shifts were taking place. Many people abandoned rural farm lifestyles for the promise of urban settings and factory work. The subsequent interweaving of cultures created language barriers that brought about the importance of a universal visual language. In an effort to overcome divisions of social class, modernism instituted the ideals of harmony and universality, introducing visual systems into the design repertoire. Post-modernism later developed as a rebellion against these ideals, as audiences became more consumer-driven and individual identity became rooted in culture. Post-modernists

asserted the constructivist view of the reader as meaning-maker and advocated for multiple rather than solitary meanings. The deconstructed forms that came to define the post-modern movement visually relayed this belief in multiple meanings.

Ideals from both modernism and post-modernism still exist within the modern design world, although design patterns are currently shifting as the digital age matures. The rapid evolution of communications technologies has prompted a historical shift in human interaction, commanding the addition of social science into design theory. While the initial introduction of the internet was revolutionary, the subsequent and rapid development of handheld devices and wireless connections has significantly impacted interaction patterns, playing a role in the formation and sustainability of human relationships. People are more digitally connected than ever before—it's not unlikely for people to go entire days communicating with each other without any form of physical contact. This depersonalization has incited a desire for digital formats that mirror physical interaction, instigating the natural human needs for community and self-expression. Holding the roles of facilitator, adapter, and fulfiller in this shift of interaction, design has looked toward the social sciences as a means of addressing behavioral changes.

As information becomes more widely dispersed and readily available, a technologically savvy population has come to characterize the idea of the mainstream audience in the digital age in America. A once-flourishing, consumer-driven economy has floundered as of late, causing the American view of wealth and power to become marred with economic troubles affecting the global economy. These trying times have prompted a need for mediums in which individuals can voice their opinions and feel like they are heard.

Design is addressing both the needs of community formations and individual expression. The visual system for Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign exemplified many characteristics of current design trends, translating across different channels to form an effective system and showcasing various methods for reaching audiences that mirrored social science interpretations. Two aspects of modernism and post-modernism that still present themselves in contemporary design were also housed within this campaign—modernism's ideal of a harmonious system and post-modernism's ideal of the reader as the interpreter of meaning, but theories echoing the social sciences also played a large part in its success.

Two texts from the realm of social science, John Dewey's *Art as Experience* and Victor Kaptelinin and Bonnie Nardi's *Acting with Technology: Activity Theory and Interaction Design*, have value within the design world for the provision of targeted and meaningful design. Within his discussion, Dewey emphasizes the importance of creating well-rounded experiences, while Kaptelinin and Nardi look to an audience's motivational qualities for tailoring rich interactions. Aspects of each theory have resonance within the designs that made up the Obama presidential campaign system.

From its outset, the campaign differentiated itself with a logo, which was designed by hired design firms Sender LLC and mo/de (Vit) (Fig. 1). The circulation of the logo set the stage for the campaign to separate itself from others by creating an opportunity for the audience to figuratively accompany Obama on his experience, thereby creating a unique experience for the audience themselves. According to John Dewey, a successful experience has both a clear beginning and contains certain unifying qualities that make it definable (Dewey 36–37). The logo, which was ambiguous in meaning, constituted a clear beginning

but also conveyed a unifying quality in that its ambiguity automatically set it apart by lending itself to memorability based on individual interpretation. It was also created in several different formats targeted toward specific groups, setting it up as a system unto itself and opening it up to wider appeal and recognition across audiences (Fig. 2). This creation of a logo system provided several different entry points for the relationship formation between candidate and audience.

Alongside the logo, the campaign furthered the creation of an experience by building and hosting a website. Dewey further defines a successful experience as having episodic qualities between which smooth transitions occur (44). The website provided many of these episodic qualities—it “served as a platform for grass-roots activities and distributed statements, policy positions and footage of Obama events” (Mosk and Murray). Kaptelinin and Nardi define motivation as “an object[ive] that meets a certain need of a subject” and they stress the importance of understanding people’s motivations to comprehend the larger community mentality (59). The different website features worked to appeal to the motivations of different types of people, by allowing them to become a part of the campaign and further the cause, whether through creating and joining communities or voicing their individual opinions. According to activity theory, you cannot design someone’s experience, but rather you can design conditions for that experience (Kaptelinin and Nardi 59). Through the website, the campaign provided several different conditions for the continuation of the individual experience, while always providing the opportunity for relation to the larger whole.

As an entity, the website served as a vehicle that encouraged people to form their own communities around support for Obama, both in online and physical formats. It

appealed to motivations because it gave people the freedom to form their own meanings and gave them the tools to advocate on their own. This mentality followed suit within the design world, with various designers and design firms creating visuals supporting the Obama campaign on their own dime. This was interesting because it showcased designers as the audience, displaying the same desires for community and self-expression as the general audiences for whom they designed.

Shepard Fairey was one designer whose grassroots support posters for Obama turned into iconic works (Figure 3). Fairey created two posters in his signature design style of propaganda-mimicry, each displaying an illustrated Obama looking toward the future (Booth). Each poster displayed a one-word message; one was “Hope” and the other “Progress” (Booth). Although these posters were not commissioned, they were approved by the Obama campaign, and they fit seamlessly into the visual system created through the logo and website (Booth). The posters showcased the postmodern ideal of the reader as assigner of meaning between the one-word message and the image of Barack Obama, giving them the potential to reach out to different audiences by creating an applicability toward personal meaning. Through the course of the campaign, the posters attained iconic status, thereby reserving positions as lasting visual artifacts of the Obama legacy. Activity theory says that design should be thought of as mediation between people and the outside world and Fairey’s posters embody this statement (Kaptelinin and Nardi 42). After their distribution, many people created reproductions of the posters, forming an underground community of expression and further spreading the message of the campaign.

The Obama presidential campaign showcased several new design shifts by forming a poignant experience that audiences and supporters could participate in and follow

through into the election. Because audience members can belong to several different communities, systems approaches are important to hold attention and build relationships to ideas, artifacts, brands, or anything else being portrayed through a design. The Obama campaign embodied the type of system to which American audiences are receptive.

Because of continual access to media, people are introduced to more information than ever before. The information overload and chipping away of physical contact has opened up a need for community and self-expression. The implications of the digital age on human behaviors are constantly being addressed through design and the evolution will continue as technology advances.

Figures

¹ “Obama Logo,” Flickr:

<<http://www.flickr.com/photos/zara/428458245/>>.

² “The Hardest Working Presidential Candidate Logo,” Speak Up:

<<http://www.underconsideration.com/speakup/archives/004262.html>>.

³ “Obama,” Obey Giant:

<<http://obeygiant.com/headlines/obama>>.

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3