Creativity is a social process

Having done fieldwork at the fashion house Hugo Boss, a Danish anthropologist concludes that creativity is not a result of individuals. Rather, it’s a social process that occurs among individuals.

To most people, creativity is inextricably associated with individuals who stand out as something special, thanks to their creativity.

But according to anthropologist Kasper Tang Vangkilde, creativity is not an individual trait. Rather, it’s a social process that occurs among individuals.

This hypothesis is presented in his PhD thesis ‘Branding Hugo Boss’ in which he examines how the creative process unfolds in one of the strongholds of creativity – the fashion house.

“There is a romantic conception about the creative individual – for instance the notion of the designer as a genius,” says Vangkilde. “This project, along with many other anthropological projects, represents a break with this idea because it illustrates that many different players are involved in the creative process.”

Zooming in on the process behind the product

Through eight months of fieldwork at the large German fashion house Hugo Boss Vangkilde observed how creativity was turned into clothing collections.

“Creativity is discussed in many different ways, but I study it as the process by which an innovation occurs. Lots of researchers have studied creative products such as fashion collections, but I want to go behind the products and zoom in on how they are made.”

The reason a fashion house ended up as the basis for Vangkilde’s study was partly that Hugo Boss was interested in his project but also that fashion is an ideal area to study when it comes to creativity.

“Fashion is an interesting field to study in terms of creativity because fashion is, by its definition, creative in the sense that it’s in its very nature that it has to establish a discontinuity with what already exists,” he says.

“Four times a year the fashion houses launch a new collection that must include something new, so I think it makes sense to study creativity through the fashion industry, with its strong focus on novelty.”

A formula for creativity

The researcher spent eight months at Hugo Boss studying how clothing collections were made.

Here he discovered that the creativity that eventually resulted in the new collections is a product of a highly structured process with lots of players who all have an influence on the end product.

So the popular notion of the eccentric maverick designer is not well represented in the way Hugo Boss
works.

“The creative process at Hugo Boss is very structured, and not chaotic, which is how many people would imagine a creative process to be,” he says.

“Anything that can be controlled is systematised, so to a certain extent we’re talking about being creative on command. And I don’t find that problematic in relation to creating something new, so long as there is some flexibility in the system.”

Everyone contributes to the process

A Hugo Boss clothing collection is the result of a co-operation between the creative director, product developers and designers, but tailors and dressmakers also have an influence on the products.

The creative process in which the expression of a collection is developed takes three months. But it takes another nine months of production and distribution for the new products to hit the shelves.

The process starts with the creative director deciding on a theme – e.g. ‘Battlefield’ – and some colours for the collection.

The vision goes through the system

The creative director then delegates the theme to a team of product developers, each with their own overall responsibility for e.g. shirts or trousers.

The theme is illustrated with pictures which the creative director has been inspired by, and in that way his ‘Battlefield’ vision is passed on through the system.

Product developers then establish an overall framework of their responsibilities, after which point the designers are ready to start shaping concrete pieces of clothing that match the ‘Battlefield’ vision.

Dressmakers also have an influence

During this process, staff members attend so-called ‘style meetings’ where they can discuss the vision and make adjustments to the garments that have been developed up to that point.

Dressmakers and tailors can also influence the collections as they set the boundaries for what’s practicable.

“This is not individual creativity, because the individuals come up with the individual elements, but the rest is teamwork, with the creative director ensuring that the elements fit together,” says Vangkilde.

“In a way, the creative director is a kind of instructor whose job it is to ensure that the creativity is moving along uniformly so that the products in the collection match.”

Hugo Boss wanted to learn about itself

The reason Hugo Boss allowed Vangkilde to do his fieldwork in the fashion house is that the company wanted to learn more about the processes behind the creation of a fashion collection.

“My contact in Hugo Boss’s shirt department said they wanted to team up with me because this project would shed light on some processes which they don’t normally reflect on,” he says.
“The value of my project thus mainly lies in shedding light on the creativity process, which gives the staff the opportunity to reflect on it – and that could eventually make it possible to optimise the process.

“So there’s no practical application for my project in the sense that if we know X, we can do Y. But by becoming more reflective about the creative process, we can perhaps continue working to optimise some of the factors that are crucial to the process.”

**Branding is essential**

Another central conclusion in the thesis is that every single innovative feature that comes out of a fashion house must match the house’s brand.

"In fashion research, and in general too, it’s often thought that fashion is simply about creating 'the new' in one form or another. But a central point in my work is that this innovation takes place within a specific brand identity, what I call the logic of branding,” says the researcher.

“At Hugo Boss, there are five different brands, each with its distinct brand identity, and it’s crucial that the specific innovation in a particular fashion collection matches the specific brand identity.”

**Focus on continuous development**

So a new collection must match the specific brand identity so that it can contribute to the ongoing build-up and development of the brand's identity.

Vangkilde also noticed this focus on continuous development among the designers:

“When I followed the fashion designers on their various inspiration trips, it was characteristic that everything and everyone around the designers was made into objects of observation and closer inspection. The designers displayed an extraordinary attention to their surroundings,” he says.

“Whereas I myself only saw complete objects such as a lamp or a museum piece, it seemed as though the designers always saw things that were in the process of coming into existence and which could therefore be made into something else. So it seemed like they could be inspired by anything.”

**Creative professions have creativity in common**

Anthropological research is basically about gaining insight into people as social and cultural beings. And Vangkilde follows that trend in that he sought concrete knowledge about the creative process, while also studying the fundamental human aspects behind it.

"The relationship between the general and the specific is always at stake in anthropology. You could say that I’ve only studied a small group of people – those who work at Hugo Boss – in a particular social context, so perhaps it’s not right to draw conclusions based on that,” he says.

“It’s hard not to be speculative, but I think there are some aspects that apply generally to the creative industries – e.g. fashion designers, artists, musicians, filmmakers… people who make a living from creating something new.

“Within these professions, I think we can draw some parallels and transfer some of the insights about creativity. And the discussion of creativity as something social rather than individual certainly applies everywhere.”
Hugo Boss is not a typical fashion house

The researcher does, however, believe that had he conducted his fieldwork in a fashion house other than Hugo Boss, the results would be different.

"Hugo Boss is an atypical fashion house in the sense that it doesn’t have a famous top designer, like e.g. Chanel, which has Karl Lagerfeld as its creative director. A major part of Chanel's image is associated with Karl Lagerfeld, who has to a great extent established himself as an autocratic, creative genius."

This obviously has a bearing on the perception and the execution of creativity, Vangkilde is convinced that the creative work at Chanel is also systematised to some degree.

“If Karl Lagerfeld were to say everything had been put into a system, that would undermine his own position and thereby the brand’s image, but I’m sure their creativity has been systematised.”

Read the Danish version of this article at videnskab.dk [6]

Fact box

Kasper Tang Vangkilde’s thesis ’Branding Hugo Boss’ also describes how Hugo Boss designers have a lot in common with Siberian hunters.

This may sound a bit strange, but it’s a common method within anthropology to identify features that recur in various contexts.

What the hunters and the designers have in common is the ability to understand alternative ways of thinking.

The hunter needs to be able to identify with how the prey reacts, while a good fashion designer needs to be able to identify with the brand and the style that the collection is supposed to express.

There is a romantic conception about the creative individual ? for instance the notion of the designer as a genius. This project, along with many other anthropological projects, represents a break with this idea because it illustrates that many different players are involved in the creative process.

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Kasper Tang Vangkilde
Dyed clothes came into fashion in early Iron Age

Critical of the fashion industry

Kasper Tang Vangkilde's profile (LinkedIn)

PhD defence: 'Branding HUGO BOSS'

Source URL: http://sciencenordic.com/creativity-social-process

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