Materialness
Expressive qualities of a physical material in textile design creativity

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Abstract: Although a physical material is a key component in textile design creativity, textile designers rarely articulate how a material is crucial for their creation. For this reason, experiential knowledge of the relationship between textile materials and the creative processes remain personal and unable to be shared with others. This paper explores the influence of the expressive qualities of a physical material on the experience of a textile designer during the process of creation. The exploration utilized a practice-led approach, i.e. the researcher adopts the role of a practitioner, creating artifacts and exhibitions, and taking them into research as case studies. The materialness conception this study offers shows that the physicality of a material has the expressive potential to inform the maker and viewers how to interpret the artifacts. This conception can be useful for textile pedagogy and designers, both in textile and in other craft design fields.

Key words: material, expressivity, textile design, practice-led research, craft knowledge.

1. Introduction: Textile Design and Craft Knowledge

As the term suggests, similarly to other craft design practices (e.g. ceramics, glass design, etc.), textile design’s importance is centered on the use of textile materials. Most textile designers know how the specific materials used to create their work are important for their design creativity, yet the knowledge of the materials they have learnt from their professional practice seems to remain tacit as they rarely give written accounts of it. Although books exploring design creativity written by craft designers have been published since the 1950s, the publications use the language of explanation, not that of argumentation [8]. As craft design depends on tacit knowledge obtained through the designer’s actual practice rather than from literature [7], the knowledge is experiential and can be acquired mainly through vocational apprenticeship with expert designers [8,22]. In other words, craft design knowledge can be generated and gained through the experience of making artifacts and that of the senses when creating them, i.e. “knowledge of familiarity” [7,17]. For the reason that tacit knowledge is not necessarily passed on through texts, knowledgeable designers can demonstrate what they know, but might be unable to explicitly describe or write about it [7]. The unarticulated knowledge of creative practices should thus be validated in the context of academic research, so that the production of artifacts can contribute to the production of knowledge required in academic research [22,23].

There are two formats of knowledge: propositional and non-propositional (experiential/procedural) knowledge, each including propositional (explicit knowledge) and non-propositional (tacit knowledge) components [21]. As
academic research prioritizes propositional knowledge that utilizes textual means of communication, this prioritization disregards tacit knowledge connected with creative practice. Nevertheless, the non-propositional/tacit content of knowledge that cannot be verbalized can evade the traditional textual communication through the use of creative practice as a means for making tacit knowledge accessible to research [21]. In creative disciplines such as art, music, and design in which professional practice plays an important role, only the textual propositional knowledge might not be enough to advance the fields. Another form of knowledge that is practical, personal, or experiential (i.e. non-propositional component) is crucial for fulfilling the gap of theoretical/propositional knowledge, so that the knowledge becomes applicable in practice [25]. This is where practice-led research in creative practices has emerged. The main characteristic of practice-led research is its focus on the exploration of issues through the production of artifacts and on the theorization of practical perspectives arising by nature in practice [20]. Practice-led research produces experiential knowledge whose parts are both explicit (i.e. communicable by textual means) and tacit (i.e. incommunicable by verbal means).

Returning to the question of the importance of materials in textile design creativity, literature on its own seems insufficient to understand this matter, because knowledge possibly generated in and applicable to textile design is mainly tacit in nature. A practice-led approach is thus adopted to research this topic whose outcomes are both verbal and non-verbal. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the findings of my doctoral research, i.e. the knowledge gained through the combination of making art textiles, questioning the audience, and literature. The knowledge is not only articulated in the written thesis, but also demonstrated in the artifacts and exhibitions. This research aims to uncover the relationship between a physical material and artistic expression, examining the influence of the expressive qualities of a material (paper string), on the experience and thoughts of the textile designer and the audience. It attempts to exemplify not only the inclusion of non-propositional/experiential knowledge of craft design in research through the use of creative practice, but also the applicability of research results to practice. The study is an example of how the production of artifacts can contribute to the production of knowledge of textile design, especially that of materials’ influence on creative and receptive processes and how the knowledge can be communicated within an academic research context.

2. Combining Explicit and Tacit Knowledge through Making, Reading, and Questioning

Although the issue of methodology for conducting practice-led research in art and design has been debated for over two decades [1,9,10,12], no clear consensus has been reached, meaning that novice researchers have no standard set of methods to follow. Broadly, practice-led research discipline focuses on the interrelationship between theory and practice and the relevance of theoretical models for creative practitioners as research outcomes. The approach to my research followed the broad concept of practice-led research. However, the study shows just one way of doing research in art and design that aims to combine practice with theory (tacit and explicit knowledge) in order to enhance the knowledge of textile design which practitioners can acquire in order to improve their creative practice.

2.1 Research approaches: The Interplay between Making, Reading, and Questioning

My doctoral dissertation Paperness: Expressive Material in Textile Art from an Artist’s Perspective [forthcoming] centers on the following research questions: 1) how a physical material (paper string), when used to create
artistic textiles, influences a textile designer, her creative processes, and the resulting artifacts; 2) how expression arises in creative processes by using paper string as the chosen material; and 3) how paper string, when seen in completed artifacts, influences spectators and their processes of interpretation. Although my textile practice was the main approach to answer the above questions, creative practice as such is not necessarily research. Creative practice is considered research when it includes the following elements: research questions, research methods, and a research context in which the research is conducted [2,27]. My textile practice thus functioned as the basis of the research that moved the whole research forward when used together with other approaches.

The approaches used in this research include: first, creative productions, which means making artifacts and reflecting on my creative processes; second, reading literature; and third, expert interviews and surveys, which means questioning others about their experiences and evaluating their answers in comparison with my own. Conducted through actions and reflections, the interplay of the approaches aimed to interweave propositional and non-propositional (i.e. explicit and tacit) contents of experiential knowledge together. Supported by documentation throughout the research process (Figure 1), the interplay eventually formed this practice-led study. Positioning my textile practice as the basis of this research, two series of textiles: “Seeing Paper” (2005) and “Paper World” (2007) were planned and produced around the research questions. Problem-focused thinking while experiencing the actual creation can bring about not only tangible artifacts but also an understanding of the process whose role may answer the research questions. Some repetitive actions may also extract the crucial points of the creative production.

![Figure 1. Dialogue between research approaches, documentation, and data collection](image-url)

A literature survey gave a better understanding of the developing research problem during the five phases of the research (Figure 2). While the research problem developed, the literature used to tackle it in various phases differed. Reading inspired the creative productions and vice versa. On the one hand, thoughts that came about
through reading were introduced to and experimented with the actual creative activities. On the other hand, the creative productions directed my decision about relevant literature, which could offer theoretical contexts for discussing the problem from different perspectives. Questioning in this research was conducted using two methods: public questionnaires and expert interviews [13,19]. While the former was conducted during the two exhibitions (“Seeing Paper” and “Paper World”), the latter was done afterwards. Regarding the first means, I designed feedback forms and distributed them at both exhibitions. The forms aimed to document the response of the viewers experiencing the exhibitions and artifacts, exploring whether the material could influence the viewers’ interpretations. Regarding the expert interview, I carried it out with a Finnish textile artist who has created almost all her works of art with paper string as the material. The interview attempted to gain a personal insight into this material that might still be useful for the research.

Figure 2. The evolving process of this research

2.2 Documentation: Recording the Real-world Practice and Research

When a professional designer utilizes his/her creative practice as a vehicle for research, the process of creation ought to be presented as material for argumentation. To transform the process of creation into data, it needs to be represented in textual and visual formats. Documentation can assist in capturing the experiential knowledge in creative practice, so that what the designer learns from within his/her practice becomes explicit, accessible, and communicable [27].

Figure 1 shows the multiple means I used to document the overall research process (making, reading, and questioning). Sketching was used to present my ideas visually, especially when conceptualizing some pieces and designing how they would look and could be formed. Sketches marked with dates were made in the research diaries or on separate sheets of paper, which were then attached to the diaries. Diary writing [3,16] was done at
the end of each day during the periods when I was creating artifacts. Each entry was indicated with a date. I attempted to verbalize my actions and experiences in the creative process, from conceptualizing to manipulating the material, in diary books (altogether four diary books of 200 pages). In addition to the daily writings, when encountering a problem at any stage of each production, I stopped the handwork and wrote down the problem and my experience with it in the diary. Writing was therefore a reflective process, facilitating my self-awareness of accumulative thoughts, intentions, and decisions in the creative production. Diary writing was also used when reading literature to record the texts and my thoughts about them. This usage of the diaries facilitated an interaction between my readings and my creations. Diagram drawing in the same research diaries was employed to visually portray my creative process. I used this means instead of writing on those occasions that I was not fully capable of articulating my experiences. The diagrams also helped me afterwards to articulate what I had not earlier been able to express. When reading literature, diagram drawing was also used to serve as a tool to help me understand some texts. Photographing documented each artifact in the following states: 1) when it started to be created, 2) when the manipulation technique was changed, forming a distinct feature of the work, 3) when it was finished and placed in the studio, and 4) when it was installed in the exhibition space. During the opening of both exhibitions, photographing was also utilized in connection with the questioning approach to document the movements of some visitors in order to understand how they viewed the exhibits. Questionnaires were used to gather comments from visitors who volunteered to answer my questions. Its small size (10cm x 10cm) aimed to give visitors the impression that filling in the form would not take much effort.

As mentioned earlier, the research problem of this research (i.e. the exploration of the relationship of paper string as a physical material to artistic expression in textile design creativity) developed when the research was progressing. The five phases of the research process, which were divided up based on the periods of the creative productions (Figure 2), later structured the written thesis. Each phase started with the research problem and ended with an outcome to be taken on as a reframed problem grounding the next phase of research. The reframed problem combined other components such as artifacts and exhibitions in the research, so that the relationship between paper string and artistic expression could be examined in particular contexts, i.e. the resulting artifacts were put into theoretical frameworks as research contexts for discussion and interpretation.

3. Paperiness: The Emergence of Explicit and Tacit Knowledge

3.1 Three Parts of Written Dissertation

As structured by the five-phase research process, my doctoral dissertation consists of three main parts: 1) Before the actual creation of the artifact, 2) The conceptualization and the creation of the artifact in the studio, and 3) After the actual creation of the artifact – viewing artworks in exhibition space. Each part contains one chapter, except for the third part, which consists of two chapters.

The first main chapter, “Paper string and artistic expression: two components,” describes the two components of research – paper string and artistic expression – as individual components. While the materiality of paper string is studied based on its physical and cultural significance in Finnish design history, artistic expression depends on expression theories in the philosophy of art. During the Second World War, paper string was the main substitute Finnish textile designers needed to use to create practical yet aesthetic textile items for everyday use, such as
clothes, shoes, curtains, etc. Many design historians regard this period as the time skilful handicrafts were revived [18, 26]. Regarding artistic expression, many philosophers give various conceptions of it, which can be grouped as the following: expression as reflective experience [6], and expression as metaphorical exemplification [11], for example.

The second main chapter, “Incorporation of paper string and artistic expression in creative production,” narrates the two creative productions. While “Seeing Paper” aims to explore paper string as the origin of specific expressions in individual works, “Paper World” highlights ways in which the material could make my expression explicit in the overall exhibition. The creative process of “Seeing Paper” began with material selections of three different kinds of paper string to create two series, each including three artifacts of the same form and technique. During the process, I physically and emotionally sensed the properties of different paper strings, tried to channel my artistic expression through manipulating the materials, and ultimately created metaphorically living artifacts in the forms of female bodies. Conversely, the creative process of “Paper World” started with contextual components, i.e. exhibition space was brought into the study. This process clarified how paper string as a material can become a part of artifacts and an exhibition. In order to make the audience interpret the concept of metaphorically living artifacts as I intended, “Paper World” was designed in keeping in mind the principles of phenomenological thinking, especially Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world [14,15]. Stating that one interprets the meanings of a thing as they are “in the world” by looking into his/her own contextual relations to that thing, this concept inspired me. Combined with my previously gained knowledge of Finnish history regarding paper string’s significance, I created artifacts representing household items, not all of which could be seen in separation from neither each other nor the context in which they were situated.

The third chapter, “Paper string and artistic expression in context,” portrays how the audience of both exhibitions perceived the incorporation of material and artistic expression embodied in artworks exhibited in a specific context. As revealed in “Seeing Paper,” exhibited in a modernistic gallery (Figure 3), its visitors seemed unlikely to interpret the artifacts without correlating them both with other things or experiences that they had acknowledged and with the exhibition space. The white cubic gallery space, which seems neutral, is illusory [24]. It has a strong impact on the audience’s interpretation of the exhibits. “Seeing Paper” did not appear to the audience as metaphorically living artifacts, as I had expected. “Paper World” thus attempted to exhibit both the incorporation of paper string and artistic expression I had experienced in its creative production and the concept of metaphorically living artifacts, so that the audience could understand them. Dewey’s concept of art as experience led me to embody the attitude of a viewer while making artifacts, in order that the viewers in return would try to appreciate my viewpoint and to understand what the artifacts attempted to say [6]. Having anticipated what I would see in the artifacts and exhibition as a beholder, I thus created this series to be exhibited in a gallery converted from a house (Figure 4). The concept of the artifacts and exhibition as well as the role of paper string incorporated with artistic expression seemed to come across to the audience. The audience’s interpretation also confirmed the issues of the influence of the exhibition space and contextual elements and of the audience’s reading of the artifacts with reference to their own personal experiences.
3.2 Materialness: A Concept

The last main chapter, “Discussion – paperness as conception intertwining material and artistic expression,” analyzes the findings of my research, reflects on the whole research process, and evaluates the applicability of the findings to textile education. This study proposes the concept of materialness as the main research finding. The concept indicates the ability of a specific material to convey meaning through its physical qualities to the designer and audience. Materialness intertwines a tangible physical material with artistic expression, shaping the total creative process of craft design in which a material and its interaction with the designer play the key role. Materialness directs the designer’s skilful hand and the sensitive mind to create the artifacts in a specific manner, and to exhibit them in a pertinent exhibition context. The physical qualities of a material also influence the ways in which people apprehend and comprehend artifacts. As demonstrated in both creative productions involved in this research, paper string could transform the ways in which I shaped the creative processes and those in which the viewers perceived and interpreted things. Also, gallery spaces and their contextual elements have proved to support or oppose the transmission of the intended concept. Especially in “Paper World,” paper string functioned as a symbol of non-functionality, denoting that the artifacts in functional forms do not have any practical uses. The unusual material in the form of an everyday object can inform the viewers about the aesthetic potential of the object, so that the viewers would reflect on the object differently from their habitual recognition and understanding of a thing whose appearance is similar to the object perceived. This occurrence implied that paper string has the expressive potential to create a new meaning for ordinary forms and that the concept of the series as metaphorically living artifacts in the forms of ordinary entities is understandable by the audience. In other words, paper string expresses its power over the form. Made of an atypical material, the artifact in a utilitarian form becomes representational, serving as means for understanding the meaning or metaphorical truth of a functional everyday artifact.

Materialness as a concept has been introduced to textile pedagogy. I have held courses based on this conception in order to test the plausibility of this concept as an alternative approach to textile design. Students were asked to choose a material atypical to textiles with which they had never worked, without thinking about the resulting object and its function or the technique of manipulation of the material. In addition, I encouraged them to photograph their creative process and to keep a diary about their material and creative process. This not only made them become aware of and understand their practice, but also improved their skill in discussing the
meaning of their work. The students’ work as the result of these courses appeared interesting and refreshing. This concept seems to have the potential to complement the tradition of textile design teaching, which aims at training students in various technical skills. Materials then follow techniques and are chosen to support the capability of the techniques. By following this tradition, a novice practitioner’s thinking might be consumed by his/her skilled techniques. For example, a student skilful in weaving tends to use only materials in the form of yarn on a loom, or a student majoring in printing might consider printing a pattern on only the flat surface of fabric. This easily limits the variety of materials that can be used for each technique. In order to free their thinking, students could also study the materialness concept, which in turn might advance the technical skills. Understanding that materialness is an ability of a material to express a meaning through its physical qualities, students can learn another way of creating textile art that begins with a material of special interest to them. This way of selecting a material can shed light on unusual or new materials for textile creation, giving students confidence to create textile design from materials of unusual forms and various qualities.

4. Conclusion: Knowledge Contribution

This study sets out to pass on the craft knowledge of textile design, in particular the knowledge of the expressivity of a physical material. The expressive qualities of paper string in the creation of textiles are examined using my own creative practice as the basis of the research. I studied the influence of the material on the maker, the production, the artifacts, and the exhibition, by constantly observing and evaluating it in relation to these events, and by acquiring some theoretical concepts for discussion. Documentation by means of writing a diary about or photographing the artifacts in progress recorded the issues I explored during their creation. The texts and photographs were then used to write a complete account. This study exemplifies a way in which a textile practitioner can theorize design based on his/her practical perspectives. A creative production can be seen as an opportunity to test various thoughts in practice. It informs a designerly way of knowing that is the knowledge of design practice existing in the process, the designer, and the product [4,5]. This means that a creative production has the potential to generate the designer-researcher’s way of developing his/her own professional practice, i.e. what he/she is doing in a creative process and why, and what happens as the result of his/her actions, which may be explained and strengthened by related literature.

The craft knowledge generated in this research can be seen as the inclusion of propositional knowledge by means of multidisciplinary literature (e.g. phenomenology, aesthetics, design history, etc.) and non-propositional knowledge by means of professional textile practice. According to modes of communication, each format of knowledge has both propositional and non-propositional contents. In non-propositional/experiential knowledge with regard to textile practice, while the propositional content (e.g. the actions used to manipulate the material) can be made explicit as a written text or as visual representations, the non-propositional content (e.g. the artist’s and audience’s imagination of the artifacts) cannot be fully articulated and remains pluralistically interpretable. However, the displayed artifacts in the exhibitions are means for demonstrating the non-propositional content of the experiential knowledge gained through craft making, which is structured around the research questions. Although this part of craft knowledge cannot be fully expressed in words, it can be visually shown in tangible forms of artifacts open for interpretation. When the artifacts are interpreted, the interpretation in turn contributes to discussions that accumulate some established knowledge.
The concept of materialness this study offers is an example of experiential knowledge of textile design generated from within professional textile practice. The concept shows the expressive potential of a physical material that can assist a textile designer in performing a creative production and in shaping the interpretation of the audience. Having trained students in textile design with this concept, it has proved its applicability to the actual practice of other textile designers, thus signifying the usefulness of the research in practice. By using my professional practice as the basis of the study, I can combine tacit knowledge (non-propositional content) personally gained through the current creative production and the previous vocational training with explicit knowledge (propositional content) available from pertinent literature, to approach and tackle the research questions. The combination of the knowledge components thus produces the materialness concept as new knowledge whose parts are both tacit and explicit. The tacit content of the knowledge generated can be demonstrated through the artifacts produced during the research process. The artifacts in turn can be discussed with the explicit knowledge (e.g. literature) used to approach the research problem. This accordingly shows one way of validating tacit knowledge in academic research, through the use of the designers’ creative productions as case studies whose processes can be analyzed and discussed using interdisciplinary theoretical tools.

This research also illustrates how practice-led enterprise can play an essential role in enhancing and articulating knowledge of craft design embodied in the professional practice of craft designers who also adopt the role of researchers. Using one’s own creative practice as the basis of research facilitates a deep and detailed examination of the research problem, and makes knowledge of craft design practice no longer personal and implicit but accessible and shared among other practitioners, educators, and researchers.

5. References


