What is Social Visual Communication Design? Proposals on How to Identify and Define it

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ABSTRACT

Social design can be understood as a discipline that focuses on using design for good. The notion that designers need and can do good with their design had been proposed by many authors, scholars, and designers throughout design history. In hopes to define and determine if the social design applies to visual communication design, the author conducted a study by reviewing literature samples from a conference and journal that focuses on social design. After analyzing the literature, the author can formulate a framework to define social visual communication design; which is by identifying whether the design is socially based on Its form, content, or context. From 43 papers that are sampled, the author found that most visual communication design papers can show social qualities when discussing the context of the project/design. Other findings on this study are the fact that social aspects in the form are seen more on papers presenting design projects, while social content is seen more on analytical papers. From this study, the author hoped to be able to open further discussions on social visual communication design.

Keywords: social visual communication design, participatory design, co-design, human-centered design.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social design is a term that had risen to popularity in the 2010s as IDEO promoted its human-centered design approach [1]. But even before, the idea of designers designing to do good has been around. Ken Garland written and published 'The First Things First Manifesto' in 1964 as a 'call for a return to a humanist aspect of design' [2]. The manifesto was signed by 22 designers back thein 1964, later it was updated in 2000 under the name 'First Things First Manifesto 2000', signed by 33 designers and published in various design publications such as in North America, Britain, Netherlands, and Germany [3]. The latest iteration of the manifesto, the 'F1rst Th1ngs F1rst' is an open manifesto that can be signed the site https://www.firstthingsfirst2020.org/, which shows how the idea still strives until 2020.

At first glance, the social design seemed like a peculiar term. 'Designing' is commonly used for 'making', in which the word that comes before 'design' are often objects or concrete things that are being made. If so, then what would 'social design' make? A simple search on the term explains social design as design that is aimed at responding or solving social issues [4, 5, 6]. However, as simple as it sounds, discussions of what social design is and how it should be can be found in various literature and also academic symposiums. This suggests that social design itself as a discipline has expanded [7], and new perspectives to view social design may be needed.

As a designer and also a scholar that studied social design on social occasions, the author sees the necessity to reframe social design, especially in the visual communication design perspective. The reason behind this motivation derives from the First Things First manifesto briefly stated before. As the manifesto was originally signed by "graphic designer, photographers, and students..", it shows that visual communication designers also had a root and foundation on social design. However, as visual communication design and social design had both progressed, the relationship between the two came to be questioned. What is the social visual communication design? Is social visual communication design still relevant to designers and researchers? What are the limits or boundaries of understanding the meaning or definition of social visual communication design? This paper aims to discuss the matter accordingly, especially in the Indonesian design context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Visual Communication Design

Visual communication is communication that is conveyed through a visual form [8]. Visual communication is often understood using two models of theory: the communication model and also semiotics [9]. Through the communication model, we can understand visual communication as a process of communication, which consists of a communicator that communicates to an audience through specific communication channels. Through semiotics, we can understand visual communication as a process of signifying, which consist of how a sign is presented (visually), what it signifies, and what interpretation that comes to people who see the sign. Both theories see visual communication as a body of knowledge that consists of formal properties, meaning or content, and also context or setting on the whole communication itself.

Understanding the three components (form, content, context) itself isn't something new. Viewing through the lens of form, content, and context itself isn't new, as it is also often used to analyze art, including visual art [10]. By understanding the three components, one may be able to see a wider perspective and conclusion on determining the value of art and design. These three categories will also be used as categories for the content analysis conducted on this research.

Content can be understood as subject matter and also meaning [10]. Seeing if a visual communication design is social in its content is often simple, as we just only need to see the text denotatively of connotatively. Context can be understood as circumstances on which the art or design is produced [10]. Seeing social as a context in visual communication is trickier than seeing its content, as the social context is often intertwined with other dimensions, such as economy, politics, etc. Social context or issues often motivate designers to create designs to respond to them, even if the design itself isn't social in content or form. Determining if a design is social or not based on its form, perhaps, is the trickiest and hardest challenge.

Design can be understood as an object, or as a verb [11]. As an object, design can be seen as an output, or also as a process; as a verb, design can be seen as an activity. When we view design as a process, or as an activity, we can further determine whether a design is social or not. This is done, by looking at the methodology of the design.

2.2. The Methodology of Social Visual Communication Design

One of the most widely known methodologies used for social design, and also applicable for visual communication design, is participatory design. Most people see participatory design as an approach that invites and engages various stakeholders into a design process to co-create [12, 13]. From a more academic perspective, participatory design can be seen as research [14], as participatory design uses various research methods iteratively to produce a design. As a research, participatory design studies of the user's tacit knowledge [14]. The pursuit of the user's tacit knowledge led the researchers (or designers) to allow users to 'participate' some parts of the research, hence suggesting that participatory design is a methodology that focuses on the user. This paradigm, which shows an emphasis on humans, led many to believe participatory design as a methodology for social design.

Another term that is closely related to participatory design is co-design. Some define co-design and participatory design as the same thing [15], while some define co-design as a larger body of knowledge, in which participatory design may be categorized within [16]. Another popular term mentioned briefly before, is the Human-centered design. The human-centered design promises that it can "impact the social sector" [17] if done right.

Whatever the term used to describe social design methodology, it all agrees on the same thing: when the activity of design is oriented towards people, it is called a social design methodology. The method may differ, as one method may let users participate, and another simply being asked for feedback. Users are an integral stakeholder in social design methods; and in visual communication design, collaboration with users or audiences is also necessary to ensure a social design approach.

3. METHODS

The goal of the research is to (re)define social visual communication design. To do so, several research methods had been made as seen below.
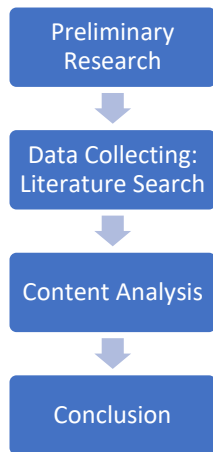
Figure 1 The Research Proces.

The preliminary is done through a literature review on papers and articles about social design and its methodologies. Other literature that is reviewed is about visual communication design. From the two types of literature, the author then formulated a framework for the remaining part of the research.

After the preliminary research, the author collects various literature as data for content analysis. The literature used for this study are conference papers on Seminar Nasional Desain Sosial (National Conference on Social Design) 2018 and 2019, and the first two issues on Jurnal Strategi Desain & Inovasi Sosial (Journal of Design Strategy and Social Innovation). The conference and journal are selected as both stated their focus on discussing social design, especially in the Indonesian design context. Both conferences and journals are also selected as they showcase projects that were published under the scope of social design. The earliest papers published were also from 2018, therefore the papers can be seen as recent papers that may be used to see how relevant social visual communication design is.

As the author had collected the literature from the conference and journal, the author then conducted a content analysis to identify whether the literature presents social visual communication design. Content analysis is a qualitative research method that describes data systematically [18]. The author conducted a content analysis by categorizing the papers based on their design discipline. From 138 papers, only 43 papers are further studied as only 43 papers focus on visual communication design. The remaining 43 papers are then categorized into two categories: The first types are paper that discusses design project that claimed to be a social visual communication design, which will be called 'design project' papers. The second type is papers that analyze social issues or researches that haven't reach its design phase yet, which will be called 'design analysis/research' papers. Each paper is then identified based on the form, content, and context aspect.
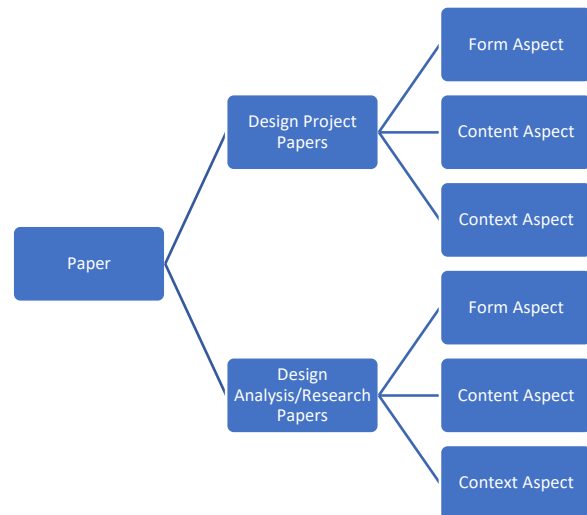

Figure 2 Diagram Showing The Categorizing Steps of Content Analysis.

4. RESULTS

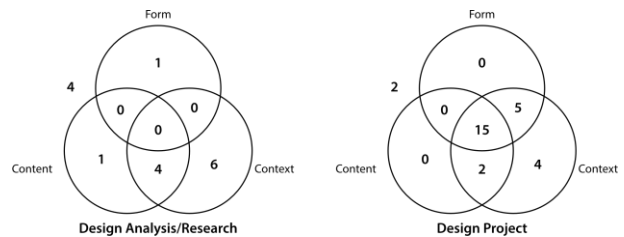The result of each type of paper that had been content analyzed and categorized can be seen in Figure 3 as seen below.

Figure 3 Venn Diagram Showing The Number of Papers on Each Type Showing Social Aspects on Its Form, Content, and Context.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Based on the results shown above, when we see the Design Analysis/Research papers, most of the papers discuss social as its context. As previously stated, context is often found as many designers or researchers that publish on the conference and journal must've to frame their paper on a social perspective. The second aspect that is most-found is content, in which social content discussion is closely related to the context. The social aspect in design form is the lowest, with only one paper showing social design methodology compared to 20 papers that show social design methodology in Design Project papers.

On the Design Project papers, the most aspect shown on the papers is still context. However, the second aspect discussed is the form aspect, with the content aspect having three papers less in number. The increase of social in design form on Design Projects may be attributed to

the assumption that participatory design is a design method. However, as previously stated, participatory design is also research. Implementing some methods from participatory design for analysis is possible, though there might be adjustments necessary.

This research had attempted to collect various literature as a source for content analysis. With this is literary research, this research had identified various papers that can be further classified as visual communication design from the Seminar Nasional Desain Sosial and Jurnal Strategi Desain & Inovasi Sosial. This identification is then used to see define social visual communication, especially through their form, content, and context aspects.

As the author had limited the scope of Indonesian Social Desing publications in the last three years, the author acknowledges that further studies need to be done to further conclude the research. Other researchers should be able to utilize how this paper conducts the content analysis to further categorize other literature to see if social visual communication design is found in other publications other than social design-themed conferences or journals.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study concluded by defining that social visual communication design is a form of visual communication design that had social qualities or properties embedded. Indicators that may serve as limits and boundaries of social visual communication design definitions are: the social qualities may be embedded as a **content** of the communication, or as a background **context** that prompted the visual communication, or as a **form** of methodology in design. Hence, in this paper, the author determines three aspects that can be used to see social visual communication design: its form, content, and context. Having more aspects shows social qualities do not necessarily make a project or research 'more' social than others that had fewer aspects showing social qualities.

From the two types of paper discussed, it is shown that social visual communication design is often found if we know where and what to look. While most Design Analysis may focus more on discussing social in content or context aspects, Design Projects shows more implementation of social design form rather than its content. As visual social communication design can be identified in some publications from the last three years, the author concluded that social visual communication design is still relevant more than ever.

From this study, the author hoped to show and provide an initial foundation on discussing social visual communication design. As more social design can be seen soon, visual communication design will nevertheless be 'dragged' on the trend.

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