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Audience Matters: Participatory Exploration of Speculative Design and Chinese Wedding Culture Interaction

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Users play an essential role in the process of designing new products and services. At the same time, culture also acts as a resource for design practice through user research and co-creation. Meanwhile, the behavior of designed products via their use and users result in culture becoming an outcome of design. With this in mind, speculative design promises to comment upon culture mainly through building futuristic scenarios via design exhibitions and similar provocative public space interactions. Without products acting as a central focus of novelty which eventually become part of users' everyday lives, as is the case in product design or other more tangible design fields, this paper examines instead the interaction between speculative design and culture. This paper explores the impact of participatory activities on the interaction of speculative design and culture using a Research through Design approach, in which a set of speculative design concepts are formulated within the context of Chinese wedding culture. By conducting several participatory activities and analyzing collected data, this paper proposes that speculative design which reshapes material culture could attract public attention towards immateriality.

Keywords: participatory activities; design and culture; speculative design; Chinese wedding culture

1   Introduction

Design is to nudge and change the current situation to a preferred one through new products, systems and services (Simon, 1996). In order to ensure more predictable success with new product launches, designers conduct a series of user research using anthropological methodologies, or as Clarke suggests, "design anthropology", to identify real user needs (Clarke, 2010). Participatory design is one of the more well-known research methods which invites users to participate in the product/design development process to better interpret their demands into design language and product functions. There have been many studies on the value of co-design and co-creation in multiple design disciplines (e.g. Trischler, Pervan, Kelly & Scott, 2017, Mitchell, Ross, May, Sims & Parker, 2015). Design and culture are innately linked through user research and the co-design process. When products are mass produced and used in people's daily lives, culture is reproduced by changing user behavior with through design. In this way, culture is both a resource and an outcome of design practice (Balsamo, 2010).

Proposed by Dunne and Raby (2013), speculative design is conceptualized to reveal social problems and comment upon culture. It focuses on possible political and cultural issues in the future. Instead of conducting research and getting users involved in the production process, the impact of designed products draws more attention. Since there are usually no products available in real life which can represent the design concepts, speculative designers mainly use provocative images and multimedia scenarios to express their cultural perspectives. Users are engaged as an audience by reading and imaging the designers' expressions. However, DiSalvo (2012) argues that although speculative design exhibition "can spark a curiosity that might be pursued, it failed to rouse to action" (p.119). Elsden et al. (2017) proposes the term Speculative Enactment, an experience-centered approach to speculative practice, where people can interact with and experience speculation. It works by making speculation matter to the participants, making their actions and non-actions meaningful in the designed future scenarios. Lyckvi, Roto, Buie and Wu (2018) also work on the overview of the combined participatory design / design fiction process. These studies shed a light on the intersection of both participatory design method and speculative design practice.

This paper aims at exploring the impact of participatory activities in speculative design and cultural interaction in terms of designer-audience communication. A set of speculative design concepts related to Chinese wedding culture was formed, followed by three participatory activities including group discussions and a co-design workshop. It is proposed that participatory activities, as communication methods, provide the audience with an opportunity to deeply reflect on the current issues and co-create the future.

2   Speculative design in practice

2.1   Cultural context

The ritual of marriage is recognized as one of the most significant family events throughout in nearly all cultures across the globe, and China is no exception. The wedding ceremony in particular is the most important part of the ritual, with members of both couples' families and friends all playing some role, be it formal or informal. The couples, especially the brides spend a huge amount of money on their dresses on the wedding day to show their tastes and social status. Tiger Hill Bridal City in Suzhou is one of the largest wedding market in China, attracting both domestic and international customers to buy their wedding dresses there. The price of one dress can range from 40 RMB to 400,000 RMB with varying levels of quality of materials and details.

Despite geographical differences and climates, the Chinese wedding ritual generally involves three parts: pick up, ceremony and banquet. Pick up is when the groom escorts the bride from her family to his. It often takes place in the morning. The bride sits on the bed while the bridesmaids challenge the groom with some games at the door. Only when the groom and his team pass all the game tests can they enter the room and meet the bride. The wedding ceremony is held before the banquet when the couple stands on a stage in front of all the guests and shares their love stories. There is usually a professional master of ceremonies who hosts this session (similar to priest in the western wedding but without the same legal linguistic powers). Then the couple and their parents toast to each table during the banquet.

It is common for a Chinese bride to wear three, four or even five dresses on her wedding day. Brides wear different dresses to fit different ritual events. For instance, the bride often wears a floor-length dress during the pick up session. The bride sits and spreads her dress on the

bed, and may sprinkle some red 'shuang xi' (means double happiness in Chinese) on the white dress to create a beautiful scene (see figure 1). At the ceremony, Chinese bride prefers a western-style dress with long train to suit their wedding stage, demonstrating their social status (see figure 2). At the banquet toast, the bride changes into a dress that is more convenient for walking, which may be Chinese traditional clothing or knee-length dress, generally in red (see figure 3). The bride only wears each dress for one to two hours. No matter rented or bought, after the wedding day those dresses will not be worn again (see table 1). It thus is reasonable to argue that the relationship of the bride and her wedding dresses is weak by the time factor alone. This relationship without or with little (true) relation is claimed as alienation (Jaeggi, 2014, Rosa & Henning, 2017). Originally identified by Karl Marx (1988), alienation theory has attracted interest from research coming from multiple different angles. After the 1950s, alienation was interpreted as the outcome of consumption and scholarly work focused on the alienated behavior of consumers (Xue, Manuel-Navarrete & Buzinde, 2014). Alienated consumers continuously and easily consume products they do not really need and thus hold a weak relationship with after purchase.

Figure 1, the bride was sitting on the bed waiting for her husband

Figure 2, the couple was walking on the stage of their wedding ceremony

Figure 3, picture of the bride (fourth from left) and some guests after the banquet

Table 1 The prices, wearing scenarios and durations of the three dresses on the wedding day

	Price	Wearing Scenario	Wearing Time	Wearing Duration
Dress 1	1300RMB in total, rented	Pick up	10am-12pm	2 hours
Dress 2		Ceremony	5:30-7pm	1.5 hours
Dress 3	400RMB, bought	Banquet toast	7-10pm	3 hours

2.2 Design concepts

The background of the speculative design concept acts as a response to the relationship between the bride and her dresses. With the assumption that the relationship will become weaker in the future, the speculative design concept is formed as a water resolvable wedding dress which will totally disappear when washing after the wedding day. On the contrary, another design concept is a wedding dress that is tailored from a daily dress of the bride using water resolvable material. The wedding dress is able to change back to the original one after washing. Under this circumstance, the relationship is strengthened since the bride shares more stories with the dress both before and after the wedding day.

3 Participatory activities and results

3.1 Activity 1&2: Online and offline group discussions

The two design concepts were discussed with unmarried and married females through an offline and an online discussion respectively (see figure 4 and 5). Their discussions followed

the same structure with deeper and deeper descriptions of the concepts step by step. The discussion was divided into the following four parts. Participants freely exchanged their opinions in each step.

1. The design concept was described as a magic dress which totally disappears after wearing once. The unmarried participants were curious about why and how the dress disappears and they discussed several possibilities. The married group did not mind as long as they were not the only one whose wedding dress disappears. They discussed more about their own wedding experience. "My wedding dresses were rent so I do not care if they disappeared or not. I would feel ominous if only my dress disappeared bizarrely. But it would be fine if others' dress also disappeared", said one participant.

2. The water soluble fabric was introduced to the participants. The unmarried participants worried about the functions of the new dress such as what if the wedding day is a rainy day, while the married group did not treat it as a problem - they all had their weddings indoors. One unmarried participant mentioned the possible user behavior change with this concept. "Maybe when I buy the dress I want it to disappear after wearing. But after my wedding I change my mind and want to keep it. In this case I will need to store it in a special way", said her. The married group all agreed that if the price is acceptable they would like this dress.

3. The tailored partly water dissolvable dress was described for them to compare. The unmarried group all preferred this concept. One participant described it as "special story for me and my husband". The remained part of the dress fitted their imagination that brides like keeping the wedding dress as a memento. They also mentioned there might be special rituals on the wedding ceremony because of the new dress. Surprisingly, almost all participants in the married group said they would not choose the partly resolvable dress since they thought they did not own a suitable dress to tailor. Only one participant thought the idea is creative and might be attractive to those who loves to try newest fashion.

4. The design theory behind the practice was explained. The unmarried group thought it as a great design concept but could not share more opinions. The married group also did not care about the design theory. They only cared about the shape and price of the dress.

Figure 4, offline group discussion with unmarried females

Figure 5, online group discussion with married females

The participants of both online and offline discussions tend to judge the new design concept under the current cultural context. They focused more on the functions and value for money of the dress. Their perspectives were mainly considering whether they would buy the dress for their wedding.

3.2 Activity 3: co-design workshop and interviews

A design workshop was held with nine participants from both design and other backgrounds. Participants were divided into three mix-background groups (see figure 6). They were encouraged to imagine what the Chinese wedding ceremony would be like in the future based on the two wedding dress design concepts. Each group made a wedding dress collage and a ceremony scenario paper prototype to explain their imagination and design. All the participants were interviewed after the workshop.

Figure 6, co-design workshop with nine participants in three groups

The design of group A was inspired by baptism from the western Christian religious concept. In their future wedding ceremony, the bride would wear a white dress with super long water soluble train. She would be baptized by passing through a river from the entrance to the main stage of the wedding hall, where the dress train would resolve and her dress would become a floor-length train (see figure 7). Group B designed a ceremony in martial arts style and created new rituals for the couple in response to the water resolvable clothing. Similar to the wedding dress by group A, their bride would wear a dress with super long train. The guests attending the wedding would pour their wine and drinks onto the long dress train to express their best wishes. Afterwards the bride would take off her long train and put it into a huge wine glass with wine, to make it resolve together with the groom's cloak made of the same material (see figure 8). The imagined wedding ceremony of group C would take place in the space. In their scenario, the couple would first meet and fall in love with each other at a barren planet where looks like desert. The bride would wear in tights at this moment. Then the couple would go through a waterfall door and arrive at a lively planet, representing their new life after marriage. When walking through the waterfall, the tights would disappear and a tutu inside would show up (see figure 9).
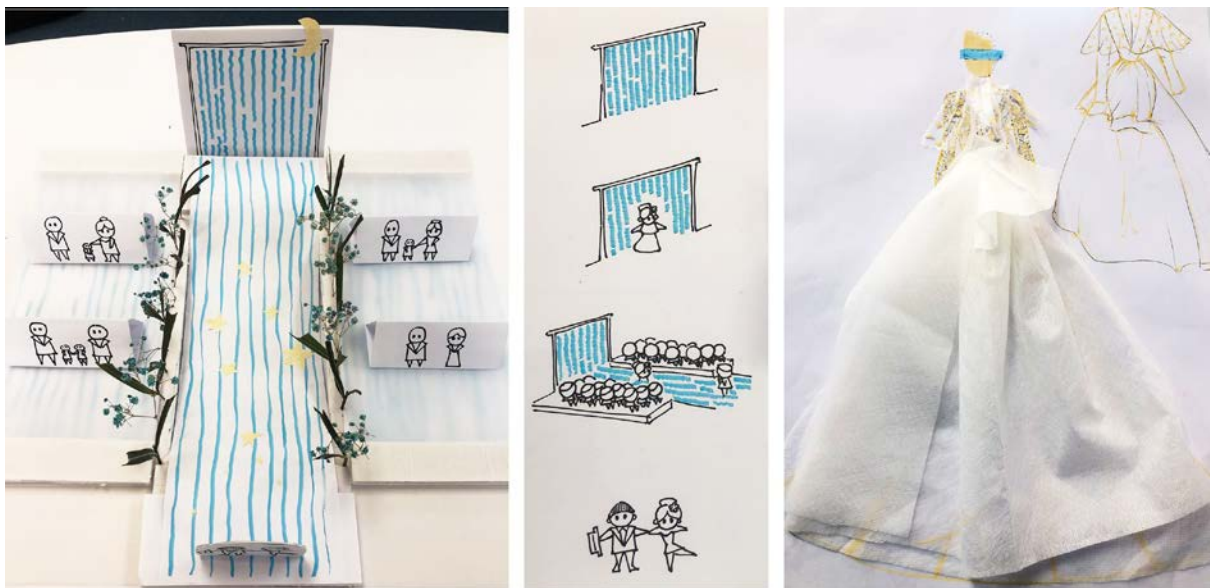

Figure 7, wedding ceremony prototype, storyboard and dress collage of Group A

Figure 8, wedding ceremony prototype, storyboard and dress collage of Group B
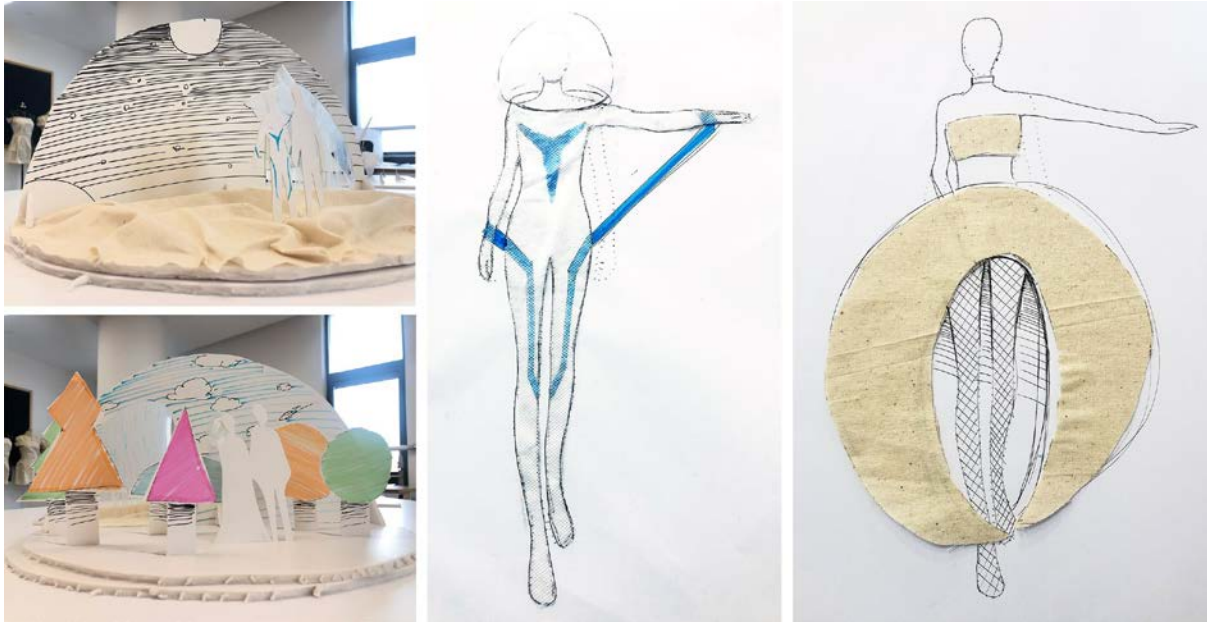
Figure 9, wedding ceremony prototype, and dress collage of Group C

All the participants imagined more possibilities about Chinese wedding culture during the workshop no matter they were conscious or not. Their thoughts during the workshop were critical and reflective, while most of them did not pay attention to wedding culture before. All the participants have attended some wedding ceremonies of their friends and relatives, and two of the participants (they are a couple) had their wedding in 2016. They all recalled their wedding experiences during the workshop. When talking about what did they gain from the workshop, one girl said "maybe it will change my decisions on my own wedding". It is reasonable to argue that they will also recall their workshop experiences in wedding related scenarios in the future. Only one participant had some considerations about wedding culture before the workshop, such as the differences of Chinese and western wedding and the future wedding forms. The workshop provided her with an opportunity to communicate her former thinking with other participants. "It enriched my former imagination of future wedding. I am very happy to express my ideas using design language", said her. The design task in the workshop pushed the participants to pay more attention to the cultural ritual in the future instead of the functions of the dress compared to the group discussions. The wedding ceremonies they designed are towards a preferred future. They all endued the wedding stories positive endings, while in the group discussions participants imagined more accidents during the wedding.

4   Conclusion

There is no doubt that involving a public audience is essential to speculative design and culture interaction. The provocative images and scenarios that speculative design produced make it possible to arise public attention. The material culture (in this case, the wedding dress) has been reshaped to new concepts in the speculative designing process. However, when exposed to new concepts only or as a central focus, users tend to judge the functions, costs and prices, usability and practicality at first glance, ignoring deeper potential experiences and impact on personal practice. Nevertheless, group discussion activities encouraged more opinion exchanges when compared to visiting an exhibition, or other more passive forms of interaction with prospective new concepts or ideas related to weddings. Co-design activities after speculative designing process provided participants with a platform to

reflect more on cultural practices. The hands-on, participatory nature of the activities allowed the participants to enact a sense of tangibility to the abstract ideas of "culture" and "weddings", and at the same time, enabled a sense of reflection through both activities and their respective discussions. Participants were allowed to create future scenarios, which enables them to take immateriality (wedding culture) into consideration based on the change of material culture (new design concept of wedding dresses). The co-design activities act as catalysts in speculative design and culture interaction. Although the activities are short-term and participants' reflection is limited during the activities, the experience has the potential to have continuous influence on participants in the future. Engaging with speculative design through the use of participatory design activities provides a significant platform for creativity and reflection via materiality, which will in turn act in a kind of reciprocal manner with regards to the creation and acceptance of new cultural ideas and norms.

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