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# Navigating the sociocultural landscape in service design

*Laura Santamaria, Carolina Escobar-Tello and Tracy Ross*  
*[l.santamaria@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:l.santamaria@lboro.ac.uk)*  
*Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough LE11 3TU*

## Abstract

This paper reports on a case study where a service design approach was implemented to develop strategies for scaling-up a social enterprise, building on design as a meaning-making and framing practice.

Context deconstruction methods drawn from semiotics and cultural studies were introduced during user research. These methods facilitated exploration of global and local sociocultural trends, mapping business category themes and competing offers, and identifying potential user groups' cultural codes – i.e. expectations, aspirations and socio-symbolic aspects of consumption that influence users' value perception. Subsequently, insights translated into strategies and guidelines for reframing the service value proposition and touchpoints to appeal to a wider potential user range.

Results indicate that widening exploration from a user- to a context-centred approach enhances designers' strategic skills, building stronger capability to observe and interpret sociocultural needs and attitudes. In turn, this highlights the central role of the service designer in leveraging the acceptance and diffusion of innovations.

**KEYWORDS:** service design; scaling; meaning-making; context; cultural codes; semiotics

## 1. Introduction

Innovation uptake is largely dependent on the ability of the solution to improve users' quality of life through the offered (tangible or intangible) benefits (Norman & Verganti, 2014; Tukker, 2004). In a global consumer culture, goods and services establish a symbolic exchange through the meanings consumers attach to the brand name, logo, and product category, as they become part of the users' process of construction of their social identity and differentiation (Hamilton, 2010; Zurlo & Cautela, 2014). Designers leverage the uptake of the innovation, legitimising and positioning offers as aspirational, relevant and meaningful in its sociocultural context (du Gay et al., 2013). Thus, developing relevant and desirable innovations in a saturated market requires a sophisticated and deep understanding of users, and the sociocultural factors that influence choice.

Due to its user-centred approach to innovation, Service Design is rapidly expanding as an area of professional practice in User Experience Design. Service designers may be involved in concept generation, creating operational structures, touchpoint design and even roadmaps to implementation. These practices imply the creation of ‘symbolic’ or intangible value, which is created by framing innovations with certain sociocultural references and narratives that make the innovation appealing and meaningful to defined customer groups (Akaka, Vargo, & Schau, 2015; Clatworthy, 2011). However, it is argued that dealing with strategic and socio-symbolic aspects such as the formulation of value propositions, and its translation into meaningful user experiences stretches the traditional skills of the designer beyond the technical and organisational aspects (utility and usability) (Morelli, 2003; Valencia, Mugge, Schoormans, & Schifferstein, 2014), and designers need to develop capacities to deal with these new dimensions (Santamaria, 2017).

This paper reports a case study where methods from semiotics and cultural studies are used to support sociocultural context research, mapping symbolic meanings and innovation framing with the aim to make the service offer appealing to a wider customer base. Such methods are being increasingly adopted (e.g. in branding and product development) to enhance cultural resonance, overcome cultural barriers and facilitate market insertion and adoption (Maggio-Muller & Evans, 2008; Oswald, 2015; Rapaille, 2007).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Design innovation in context

Cultural context plays a considerable role in the perceived value of innovations. To be perceived as relevant and desirable, products and services need to be rooted in the context where they will operate (Wong, 2004). This implies that the designer should be able to navigate the sociocultural context, map existing offers, consider the user needs in light of such offers and identify what aspects of the user needs can be met, or improved by new innovation offers.

Clatworthy (2012) points out that to build desirability in services it is necessary to incorporate ‘details’ from the innovation’s context to the design: ‘details that the user can perceive as belonging to their lifestyle, are coherent with the user’s other lifestyle choices, the way they think and the things that express their identity and who they are’ (ibid, p. 85). Equally, Crilly et al. (2004) highlight the role that external visual references (or stimuli) play in influencing decision-making, paying attention to the personal, situational (contextual) and cultural factors that moderate user response. Therefore, appearance and experience are paramount when considering innovation adoption because they influence both *commercial success* and user’s *quality-of-life* or subjective well-being (Crilly et al., 2004; Kahneman, 2012). Furthermore, as ‘taste creators’ (Bourdieu, 2010), designers inevitably affect people’s orientation towards certain goods as legitimate, worthy and desirable, playing a substantial role in the adoption of radical innovation. Designers also bear responsibilities because the effects and consequences of artefacts are political (Zingale, 2016). On one hand, design outputs stimulate people’s imagination and satisfy wants and desires; on the other, people’s social attributes are reconstructed under the impact of these outputs. Therefore, understanding the sociocultural landscape of innovation draws attention to consider the *appeal* and *orientation* generated by design, but also enables more responsible practice by raising awareness of the consequences the innovation holds for users and context.

### 2.2 The sociocultural dimension in service design

Service design innovations are complex offerings whose design require the consideration of multiple aspects, such as technology, development actors, users and context (Morelli, 2002) – all equally involved in the definition of the final configuration. Morelli (2003) describes three

different aspects as complementary design domains: technical, organisational and sociocultural, which require different design capabilities and skills (Table 1).

| Domain                | Required capabilities/skills  |
|-----------------------|---|
| <i>Technical</i>      | To develop innovative aspects of the product or touchpoint design   |
| <i>Organisational</i> | To reorganise functions/actors around innovative system configurations  |
| <i>Sociocultural</i>  | To influence innovation processes and to determine the paradigmatic context (meaning) in which new products and services can be accepted or refused |

**Table 1 – Product-service system design practice domains (Morelli, 2003)**

Morelli argues that traditional design skills and capabilities are strongly projected upon the technical and the organisational domains. However, ensuring contextual insertion is a critical part that determines the innovation’s success (Norman & Verganti, 2014). Symbolic meaning (desirability, identity and legitimacy) is not just a financial value added to goods, but has material impact on financial markets themselves (Oswald, 2015). Therefore, an understanding of sociocultural referents is relevant to the development of service innovations because this often *enhances* or *limits* their potential acceptance and diffusion (Morelli, 2003; Zurlo & Cautela, 2014). Fulfilling this role successfully is highly dependent on the designer’s capability to observe and interpret cultures, social needs and attitudes. Although this is an intrinsic characteristic to the design activity, support and capacity to perform these tasks during the design process needs developing, because innovation framing is mostly conducted by designers in an intuitive manner (Kazmierczak, 2003).

### 2.3 Cultural deconstruction and framing

Designers construct symbolic value by ‘framing’ offerings – i.e. attributing identity and meanings to them by recalling on existing cultural references or ‘codes’ (du Gay et al., 2013). Considering that the way in which an offering is framed has great influence on how it is valued and experienced, even before use (Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008; Wolsko, Ariceaga, & Seiden, 2016) it is important for designers to understand which unconscious biases (previously acquired sociocultural associations and experiences) may affect their perception of value and decision making (Kahneman, 2012; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Critical methods such as applied semiotics and cultural analysis can support designers in ‘decoding’ or deconstructing the innovation context, and ‘encoding’ or framing offerings using the most favourable associations, so that offerings are perceived as desirable and relevant.

Applied or marketing semiotics is well-established as a powerful methodology to obtain consumer and market insights. In contrast to traditional market research, which gains insights mostly by consulting users directly (e.g. by means of interviews, focus groups and questionnaires), marketing semiotics draws insights from the study of *discourses* expressed via popular culture representations (media, advertising, music, film, etc.) by employing semiotic, cultural analysis and ethnographic methods (Oswald, 2012).

The methodology allows the elaboration of sophisticated cultural insights by identifying emergent cultural themes (e.g. values, aesthetics, practices and trends) that have a strong likelihood of spreading into the dominant or mainstream culture (Evans & Shivakumar, 2010). It is usually employed as a strategy for mainstream diffusion of innovations.

Table 2 summarises the most common semiotics operations applied to market insight.

| <b>Operation</b>                       | <b>Description</b>  | <b>Function</b>  |
|--|---|--|
| <i>Binary Oppositions</i>              | A pair of concepts that relate in direct opposition (i.e. clean/dirty)  | It breaks cultural and category codes into two opposite sets. Normally a good place to start the code-mapping process, see opportunities for innovation, resolve trade-offs and cultural contradictions.   |
| <i>Code Mapping (category)</i>         | A snapshot of the cultural landscape frozen in time, and the active codes present at that particular time   | Searches for key metaphors and themes present in the category by dividing it up. Good for locating developing themes, and cross-fertilisation with themes from other related categories.   |
| <i>Code Mapping RDE (trajectories)</i> | Residual, Dominant and Emergent codes   | Maps the cultural shift of values, meanings and cultural codes diachronically. Useful for observing how cultures evolve, spotting new ways of thinking. Identifying emergent codes which have potential to spread as mainstream trends.                  |
| <i>Semiotic Square</i>                 | Paired concepts analysis based on Jakobson's distinction between contradiction and contrariety  | Useful for accessing deep structures informing the communication and perception of meaning – i.e. the underlying connections with structures of power and logic.   |
| <i>Myth</i>                            | Express and serve to organise shared ways of conceptualising something within a culture   | Serve as process of naturalisations – i.e. they make dominant and historical cultural values seem 'normal', 'natural' and 'common sense'. They can serve to hide the ideological function of signs and codes because they appear as self-evident truths. |
| <i>Cultural Archetypes</i>             | Rooted symbols and cultural archetypes such as gold, America, home, work, family, etc. Received wisdom, 'what everyone knows' and 'goes without saying' | Useful for building narratives and associations with deep-rooted cultural values and traditions. Normally used in storytelling material, film, novels and popular culture.   |

**Table 2 – Most common semiotic operations applied to market insight**

The semiotic approach acknowledges the individual's beliefs, preferences and behaviours conform or confront 'implicit' socially agreed rules expressed through social signifiers to mark status and belonging, and so forming 'in' and 'out' groups. The analysis concentrates on uncovering 'naturalised' meanings which users are often unable to articulate, because these operate largely at subconscious level (Oswald, 2012).

Figure 1 illustrates the typical 'cultural landscape' or context that is normally analysed for these purposes.

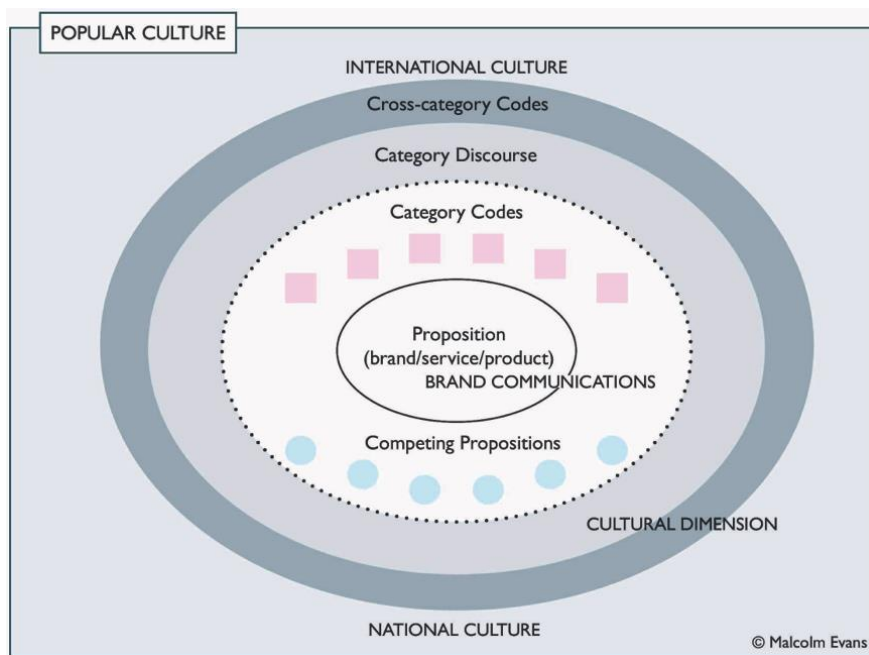


Figure 1 – Cultural context research landscape (Evans, 2014)

While these methods offer great potential to aid in the elaboration of symbolic value, they are normally implemented by professional semioticians and market researchers – not designers. Therefore, the capabilities and requirements for their integration to the service design process needed to be empirically investigated.

### 3. Method

The aim of the study discussed in this paper was to investigate the value of introducing cultural deconstruction methods to support deeper user research and identify business opportunities to reach a wider customer group.

#### 3.1 Case study selection

Crop Drop, a social enterprise that operates a vegetable box scheme in the London Borough of Haringey was identified as a good case study (Figure 2). The start-up is part of the Growing Communities Hackney, a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting local and sustainable food production and consumption. At the point of intervention, it had been operational for two years, therefore the owner (participant) was already quite knowledgeable of the local context, and had explored most other traditional methods to understand customers (e.g. surveys, focus groups and feedback questionnaires). This made her suitable to quickly judge the value of new approaches to reveal useful insights.



Figure 2 – Crop Drop. Local, non-profit social enterprise ([www.cropdrop.co.uk](http://www.cropdrop.co.uk))

### 3.2 Study design and research strategy

A participatory action research strategy was adopted where the researcher, acting as *design consultant*, collaborated with the participant in the joint elaboration of the plan, objectives and implementation of the design intervention, as well as evaluation and reflection on results. The study was conducted over a total period of nine months, with collaborative working sessions held on a once-a-week basis.

The study design followed Tripp's (2005) four-step model of action research cycle (Figure 3): *Plan* (familiarise and set intervention objectives), *Implement* (design intervention), *Evaluate* (assess results against objectives set) and *Reflect* (evidence learnings and change of practice).

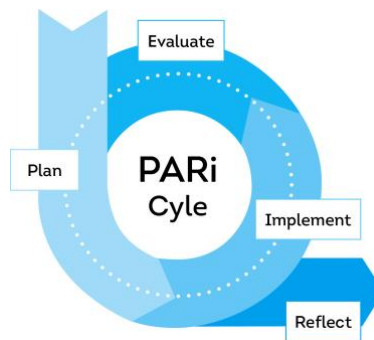


Figure 3 – Action research cycle

Further to the research methods described in detail Section 4, the researcher embarked on self-reflective practice, journaling records of the process undertaken while engaged with the participant as well as views and values, in order to learn by reflection in and on action (Schön, 1991). Journaling notes also captured the tools/methods being used, and reasons for their selection. All participatory sessions were captured in audio and photographic records. Transcripts of these sessions contributed to enrich the researcher's own journal accounts of the process. Furthermore, data was collected through a feedback questionnaire completed by the participant at the end of the cycle. Thematic analysis was used to analyse journal notes, feedback and transcripts of participatory sessions.

## 4. PAR Intervention process

The following sections describe the intervention process in four steps: Step 1 (plan) Familiarising and planning, Step 2 (Implement) design intervention, Step 3 (evaluation) and Step 4 (reflection on action).

### 4.1 Step 1 – Familiarising and planning

This consisted of a working session held with the participant to get to know each other and jointly elaborate research objectives. Conversations entailed reviewing business background and operations, publicity material, customer feedback, and existing business and marketing plans; and identifying ‘priority issues’ to tackle through design intervention.

The researcher first introduced the concept of service design and some commonly used tools – e.g. service blueprint, customer journey, stakeholders map and user personas. Secondly, cultural context analysis was presented as ‘a strategic approach to better understand users and business in context’, explaining how these methods differ from more conventional market research (e.g. surveys, focus groups) and what could be obtained (tacit sociocultural ‘clues’ that influence a customer’s choice).

As the participant’s interest was to attract new users, she expressed interest in conducting sociocultural context research to identify potential user groups, and their needs and aspirations, before embarking into touchpoint redesign.

Therefore, two objectives for design intervention were set:

| Objective  | How   |
|--|---|
| Spot opportunities and develop strategies for scaling up     | Conduct cultural context analysis                       |
| Adjust service touchpoints to appeal to wider customer group | Reframing value proposition and redesign of touchpoints |

### 4.2 Step 2 – Design Intervention

#### 4.2.1 Researching Sociocultural Context to Spot Business Opportunities

The aim was to identify and map the most relevant ‘cultural codes’ present in this context (implicit verbal and visual clues) with appeal to a wider user range than the current customer base. To this end, a ‘data set’ of materials related to the business sector (food) were gathered separately by the researcher and the participant (news clippings, photos, adverts, website screenshots, book covers, magazines images, billboard ads, pictures of products, packaging, delivery vans, etc.). These materials served as the research data used throughout a series of participatory activities, as follows:

#### Activity 1: Identifying macro societal change in trends, values and meanings

The analysis started by mapping global meanings – in this case, it meant analysing the food category at its broadest level to understand associations, myths, trends and generic assumptions related to food consumption as a social practice, and identifying the position of Crop Drop’s offer within this category.

To make ‘naturalised’ meanings and assumptions explicit, the data set was first analysed by asking: ‘*what is food about?*’. Two broad overarching themes emerged: *nutrition* and *pleasure*. By further analysing the materials, it was found that, at one end of the spectrum, food was represented as nutrition – its most *factual* level, as a necessity for human survival. However, at an emotional, visceral level, food is also associated with the *pleasure* derived from satisfying



that need. To understand how people might derive behavioural attitudes related to these conventions, a lens that considered ‘users as social beings’ was used. This lens prompted the observation that the ‘pleasure of eating’ can be enjoyed *alone*, or *together* with others, further breaking down the category in more specific ‘subcategories’ or themes.

These four concepts (nutrition–pleasure, together–alone) were used to form an axis based on Greimas (1989) Semiotic Square to uncover naturalised myths and cultural dilemmas by building on four logical relations. Next, stereotypical representations (relevant to the UK) were placed in each quadrant to illustrate the notions between the quadrant polarities – i.e. ‘*nutrition–alone*’, ‘*nutrition–together*’, ‘*pleasure–alone*’ and ‘*pleasure–together*’. Guided by the stereotypical representations, and asking ‘*it feels like . . .*’ each quadrant was labelled. The label concepts were further elaborated into more detailed descriptions of the characteristics associated with each concept (Figure 4).



Figure 4 – Broad Category analysis axis, including Crop Drop’s position

Lastly, Crop Drop was positioned within the Broad Category Map axis, to consider its perception from the point of view of potential customers in relation to other market offers. It clearly emerged that Crop Drop was positioning itself as a convenient way to access ‘wholesome’ foods. As this was a Broad Category analysis, it was necessary to break it down further by considering these aspects more closely.

## Activity 2: Mapping local take on global trends and meanings

In globalised society, it becomes relevant to observe how global discourses are represented at local level. Crop Drop promoted being a local supplier as one of its benefits. It was therefore interesting to make explicit the ‘global’ expressions against which Crop Drop differentiated itself. To do this, the ‘wholesome’ category was mapped on a spectrum ranging from the global (widespread or mainstream) to the local, adding some visual references (representations of offerings) at each end of the spectrum (Figure 5). Analysing the representations under each polarity evidenced that the *global* offered ‘ease of access’ and ‘convenience’; while the *local* offered ‘speciality’, ‘crafted’ and ‘artisan’ (quality and personalisation) – an opposition to assert differentiation.



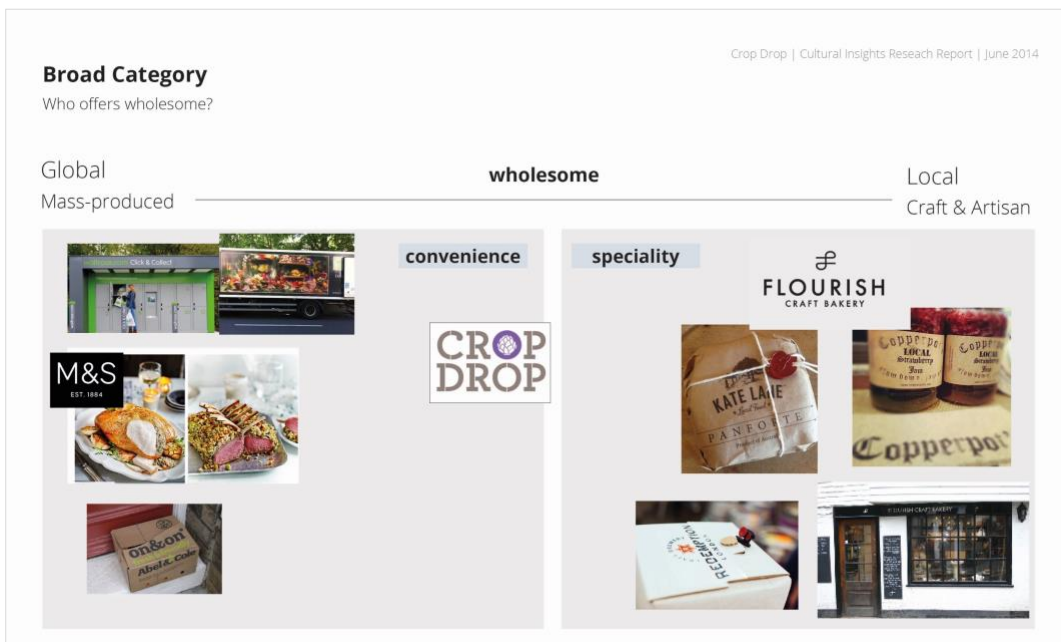


Figure 5 – Mapping the global-local expressions of *wholesome* as value propositions, including Crop Drop’s position

### Activity 3: Defining the ‘Local’ paradigm

Next, the global–local paradigms were explored by applying a ‘binary opposition’ semiotic operation. This method places the polarities at the top, and deconstructs the ‘implied, tacit and naturalised’ meanings – a network of associations that people may have acquired through past experiences, word of mouth and the media – by listing them under each paradigmatic overarching theme (Figure 6). It was important to make these connections evident because these associations are triggered instantly and mostly unconsciously by sensorial stimuli.

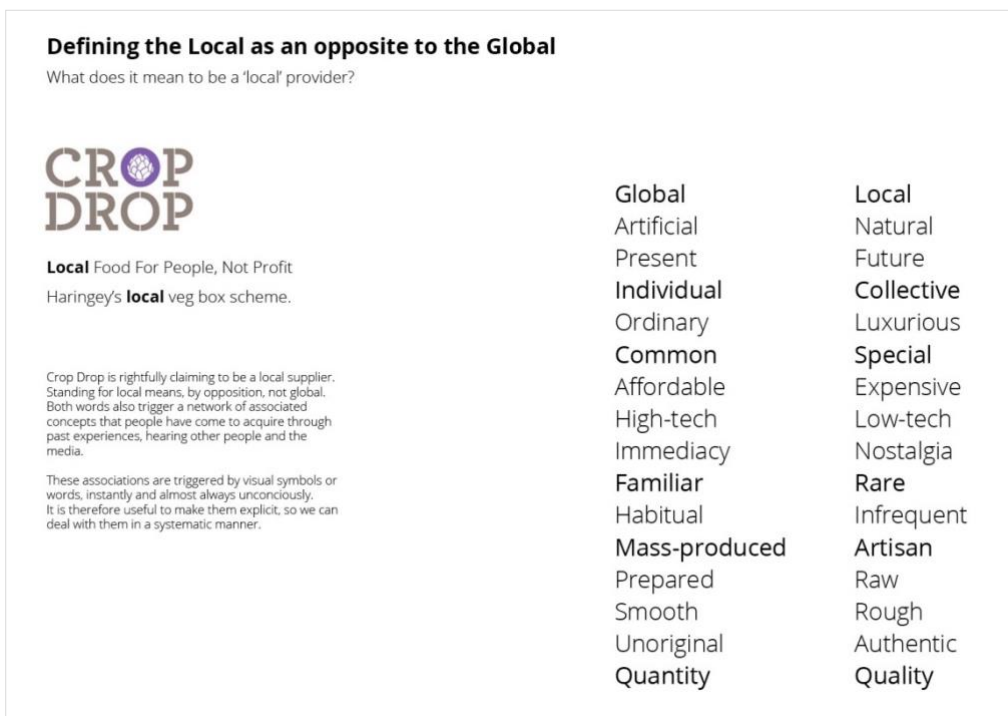


Figure 6 – Paradigmatic associations

#### Activity 4: Mapping positioning against category competitors

Four 'factors' that shape this category were used to map positions in an axis (Figure 7):

*Limited Choice vs Wide Choice* – Due to its proposition as a local produce supplier, Crop Drop offered quite a limited offering compared with competitors, i.e. brands offering organic.

*Speciality vs Convenience* – However, if it is assumed that people need other groceries besides vegetables, this weakness could be turned around by 'elevating' the perception of the offer from 'limited' to 'a special selection of quality vegetables'. To do that, it becomes necessary to reposition the brand away from the 'convenience' space (where it currently competes badly with the global offers), and towards the 'speciality' end of the spectrum.



Figure 7 – Category competitors mapping

Meanings are not fixed entities, and as cultures are always in flux; discursive frames and representations of values are constantly evolved and transformed by producers and users. Consequently, residual, dominant and emergent forms coexist as varied expressions within any cultural moment (Williams, 1977). Hence the concept of what is considered 'contemporary' or 'old-fashioned'.

Aspirational brands are positioned in the speciality space. They appeal to customers' senses and emotions by using certain aesthetic associations that communicate trust, inspire and elevate people's everyday ordinary experiences. It is the *symbolic value* of the brand as expressed through semio-aesthetic associations that makes them aspirational. Therefore, people are willing to pay more for products, which are perceived not as *ordinary*, but *extraordinary*.

Start-ups that position themselves as aspirational have much greater chance of expanding rapidly, because they are perceived as the 'cool' thing to do or have. Although, Crop Drop was already expressing these values, it became necessary to reframe the service offer and its representations to fit the user group's expectations and ideals of 'quality' and 'speciality' more closely.

#### Activity 5: Exploring related categories' codes

In general terms, people make coherent choices within different areas of their lives, guided by the values they hold (Wolsko et al., 2016). Consequently, eating wholesome, local and

speciality vegetables expresses values in just one aspect of their consumption practices – i.e. it is only ‘a piece of the puzzle’ that ‘fits’ among many other pieces (brands, practices) to form a person’s lifestyle and identity. The aim of exploring related categories is to gain a wider understanding of the interconnected pieces and see ‘the puzzle’s picture’. Its purpose was twofold: first, to identify the discourses and representations that others in the same ‘space’ (especially the successful ones) are using, in order to map favourable codes (associations) that could be useful to potentially enhance Crop Drop’s value proposition. Secondly, the exercise could help in spotting partnership and collaboration opportunities with like-minded organisations that might not have been obvious before.

### Activity 6: Identifying potential user groups

Secondary research was conducted to gain insight into the neighbourhood population, trying to identify which households are willing to eat veg on a more regular basis, but also open to accept a seasonal, unconventional range, as this implies being resourceful and creative with cooking.

Borough statistics were consulted and four customer types were profiled, using statistical figures and illustrative ‘persona’ stereotypes (Figure 8). The ‘Young Progressive Families’ were considered a good match to Crop Drop’s value proposition, as this group represented a ‘natural progression’ of the current predominant customer group, the ‘Singles and Young Couples’.

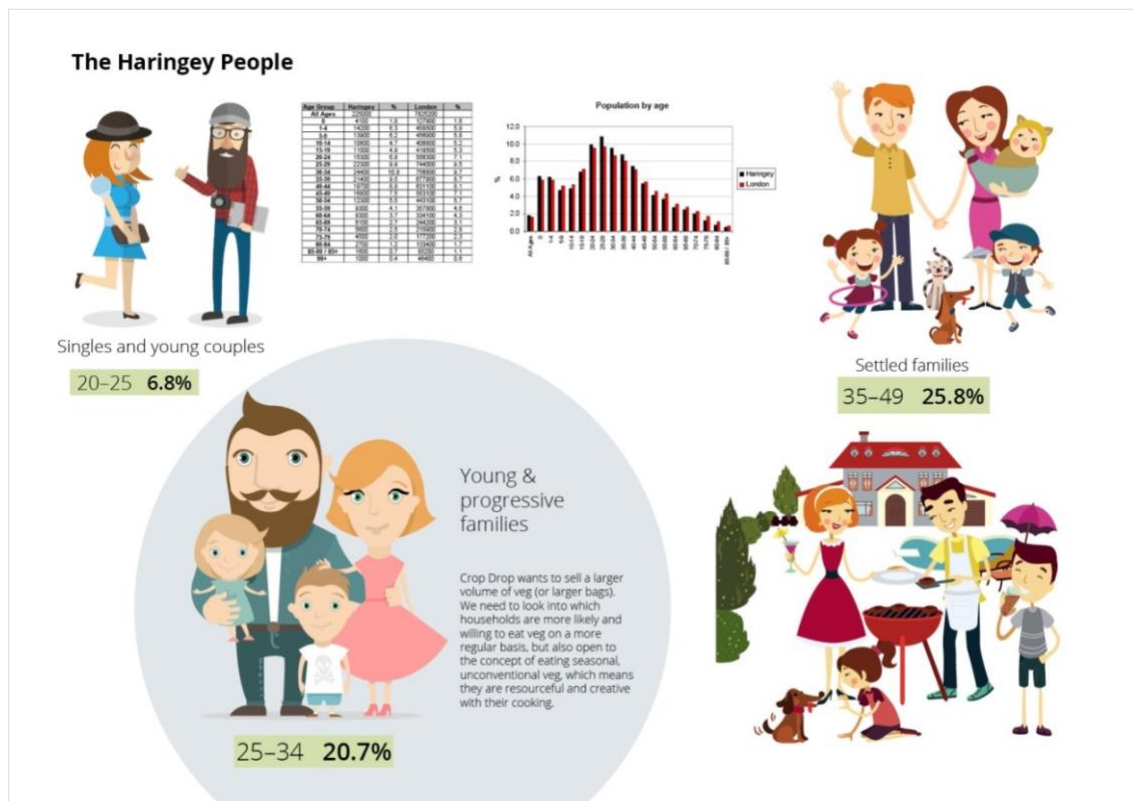


Figure 8 – Potential user group stereotypes

### Activity 7: Mapping the target group codes

Stereotypes are widely used both in marketing (customer profile) and service design (user persona). Personas are descriptive examples of typical target groups who have similar aims, motivations and behaviours, and can be elaborated at different levels of complexity (Massanari, 2010). They are a good tool for human-centred approaches where the user is the focus and empathy is key to understanding their needs (Brown, 2009).

Based on the persona profile, lifestyle choices that are popular within this target user group were mapped – i.e. brands and social practices that users have incorporated into their lifestyles – because these carry the symbolic meanings that define this specific group’s social identity. To be perceived as relevant, any innovation intended to appeal to this group must be perceived as ‘fitting’ within other choices, and meet this user group’s semio-aesthetic expectations.

Figure 9 illustrates the case. The collection of images on the right are ‘signifiers’ of this customer group’s cultural codes – which bind them together and as a social group, but also apart from other groups by means of a differentiated **aesthetics**, **values** and **practices** expressed in these representations (Bourdieu, 2010).

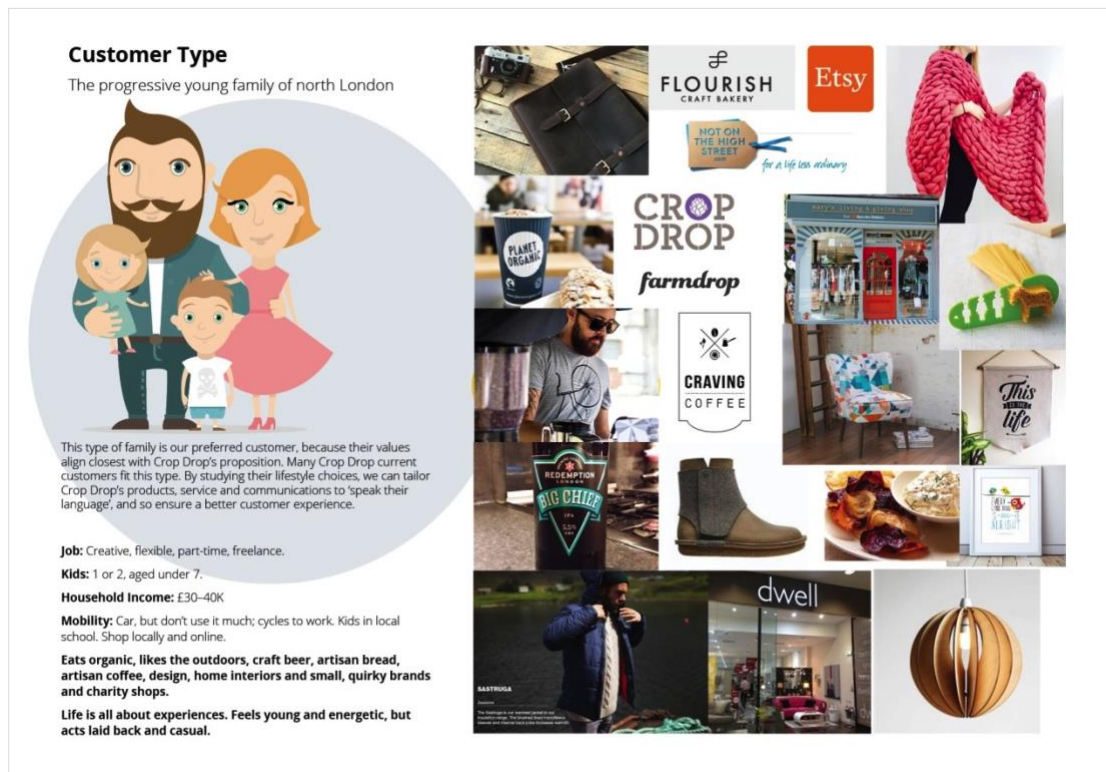


Figure 9 – Visual mapping of lifestyle choices

By understanding these codes, it was possible to begin drawing some strategies to frame Crop Drop’s offering to fit more closely to the user group’s expectations and aspirations.

### Activity 8: Producing a reference ‘Contextual Code Map’

The visual references mapped in the previous step were analysed, deconstructing them and classifying them into three groups: *Aesthetic Codes* related to matters of style and taste, *Valued Lifestyle Practices* related to what is normal and enjoyable to do for people in this group and *Appreciated Values* related to the underlying values associated with quality of life. From the analysis of each group, themes of signifiers (representations) emerged, and these are illustrated with explicit examples so that they can serve as reminders of how each ‘theme’ was manifested in its particular context (Figure 10).



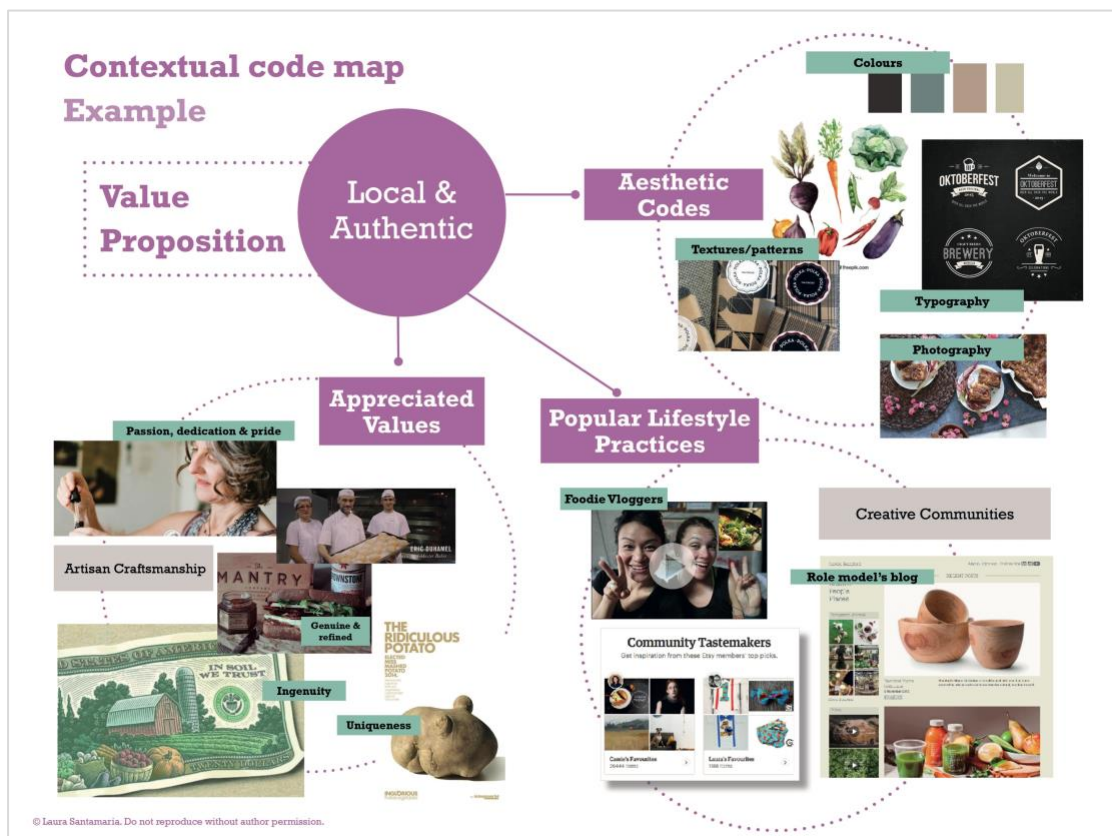


Figure 10 – Aesthetic codes mood board showing sample signifiers

A summary was produced with recommendations for the prototyping phase (Figure 11).

Crop Drop | Cultural Insights Research Report | June 2014

### Summary

**Local is good**  
But to make it feel special, it is best to lean towards craft and artisan, and away from 'farm', rough and raw.  
Codes: Elegance, nostalgia, rarity.

Introduce some 'gourmet' feel to the brand to convey 'premium and quality' aspects. Look at artisan bread, coffee, beer and chocolate brands for references.  
Codes: black, craft paper, beige and red/orange, mustard yellow, retro/vintage-style typefaces.

Be emotional and evocative rather than factual.  
Appeal to the senses, make it tempting, delicious, fun, wholesome but special.

Watch trends in vegetarian restaurant images and communications. Show a balance of cooked and raw.

Promote intrinsic values  
Reinforce relationships over health and environment.  
It's not about a box of veg, it's about the experience of learning new ways of being together.

Figure 11 – Summary recommendations

## 4.2.2 Reframing the value proposition

In product-service system offers, the form of the items, the branding and communications and the experience of the service all interfere with each other in terms of how the innovation's value is perceived (Ceschin, Vezzoli, & Zingale, 2014). In order to improve the service visibility, credibility and appeal, the researcher proceeded to 'reframe' certain touchpoints using the favourable codes identified throughout the analysis activities. Prototypes were based on the touchpoints within the 'Aware' and 'Join' customer journey steps – i.e. publicity materials (a poster and flyer) and the website interface (Figure 12).

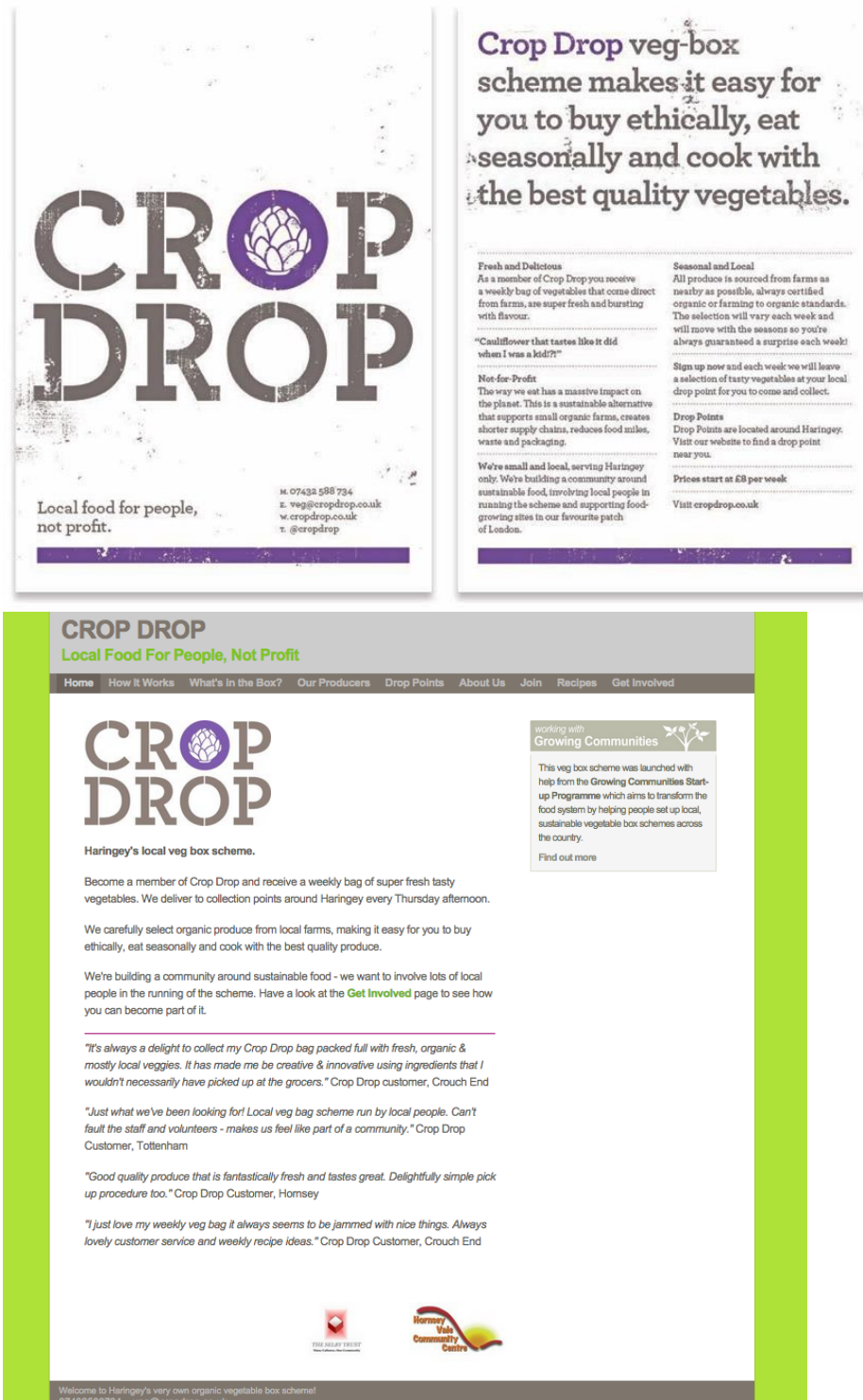


Figure 12 – Existing publicity material and website

Existing materials and distribution strategies were analysed as follows:

*Poster:* Seemed a valid and effective strategy for brand awareness and presence in the local area.

*Flyer:* Was not found as an effective vehicle to reinforce brand values and positioning. The fact that they are handed out in the street, or pushed through letterboxes, coupled with the format (A5) and lightweight paper stock, caused this piece of publicity to be perceived as lacking value and worth discarding. This is mostly ineffective as far as legitimising the service as ‘special’ and ‘authentic’ is concerned.

*Website:* this was perhaps the most misaligned touchpoint with users’ expectations and signifiers. A crucial one as it was the only means for users to join the service, it did a poor job of legitimising the service qualities.

*Language framing*

Firstly, the wording was adjusted using a well-being rather than an environmental discourse. Table 3 summarises the changes introduced.

|                     | <b>Existing proposition</b>   | <b>Reframed proposition</b>                                |
|---------------------|---|--|
| <i>Strapline</i>    | ‘Local food for people, not profit’   | ‘Live the seasons’   |
| <i>Main message</i> | Crop Drop   | Hello Winter   |
| <i>Sub text</i>     | Crop Drop veg-box scheme makes it easy for you to buy ethically, eat seasonally and cook with the best quality vegetables | Eat in tune with the season. Feel stronger, be the change. |
| <i>Main text</i>    |   | Big changes can start with small steps                     |
| <i>Highlight</i>    |   | Winter’s local best  |

**Table 3 – Changes in language to bring framing in line with new positioning**

Crop Drop’s original strapline is ‘Local food for people, not profit’. Due to its campaigning tone, it could be argued that this statement proposes a specific ideology – that food supplying must not be a ‘profitable’ activity, a stance and assumption which might resonate with certain audiences whose values align to the socio-political implications of this ideology. This, in turn, might exclude other user groups whose interests, for example, could be to start incorporating seasonal and local ingredients into their diet for health-related reasons. On one hand, it adds value by proposing a ‘non-corporate’ approach to food retailing; on the other, it subtracts value by implying a certain ‘amateur’ approach. However, if that same statement is framed with an aesthetic that is in line with other ‘reputable referents’ – i.e. aligned to the user group’s lifestyle choices, then the value proposition of Crop Drop appears much more appealing and trustworthy.

It is worth clarifying that there is no right or wrong statement – framing should correlate with the objectives to accomplish (Wolsko et al., 2016). However, because framing predisposes the user, affecting their perception of value, receptivity and appreciation, it is paramount to be aware of the effects and implications of choosing certain framing options over others.

*Design framing*

Based on the code-mapping exercise, some of the most favourable codes were selected and incorporated into the design outcome. The resulting design evokes crops and ‘land’ using warm and emotional references. Figure 13 illustrates some of the codes selected and how they were used.



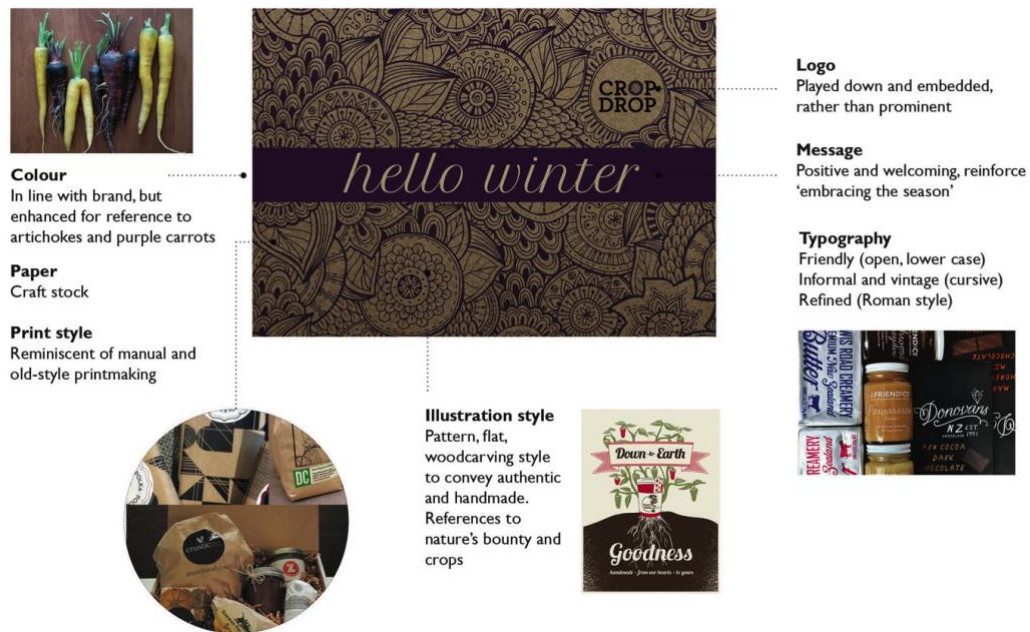


Figure 13 – Example of codes incorporated into publicity design

The website redesign (Figure 14) incorporated the *aesthetic* codes, but also allowed us to work with codes related to the users' *appreciated values* and *practices*. The most salient are:

- Ample display of visual imagery of fresh produce and tantalising, cooked meals
- Homepage company video incorporating a short presentation of the company, to communicate company values at an emotional level
- Featuring the owner prominently, to make the experience feel much more personal and welcoming but also to reinforce a sense of 'dedication, passion and love' – characteristics of small business owners and craftsmanship
- Featuring suppliers more prominently, to communicate transparency and collaboration
- Blog and social media feeds provide a sense of community, participation, openness, and keep adding to the site fresh and relevant content
- A Recipe section, where recipes are tagged by season and type of produce, so that users can easily find inspiration

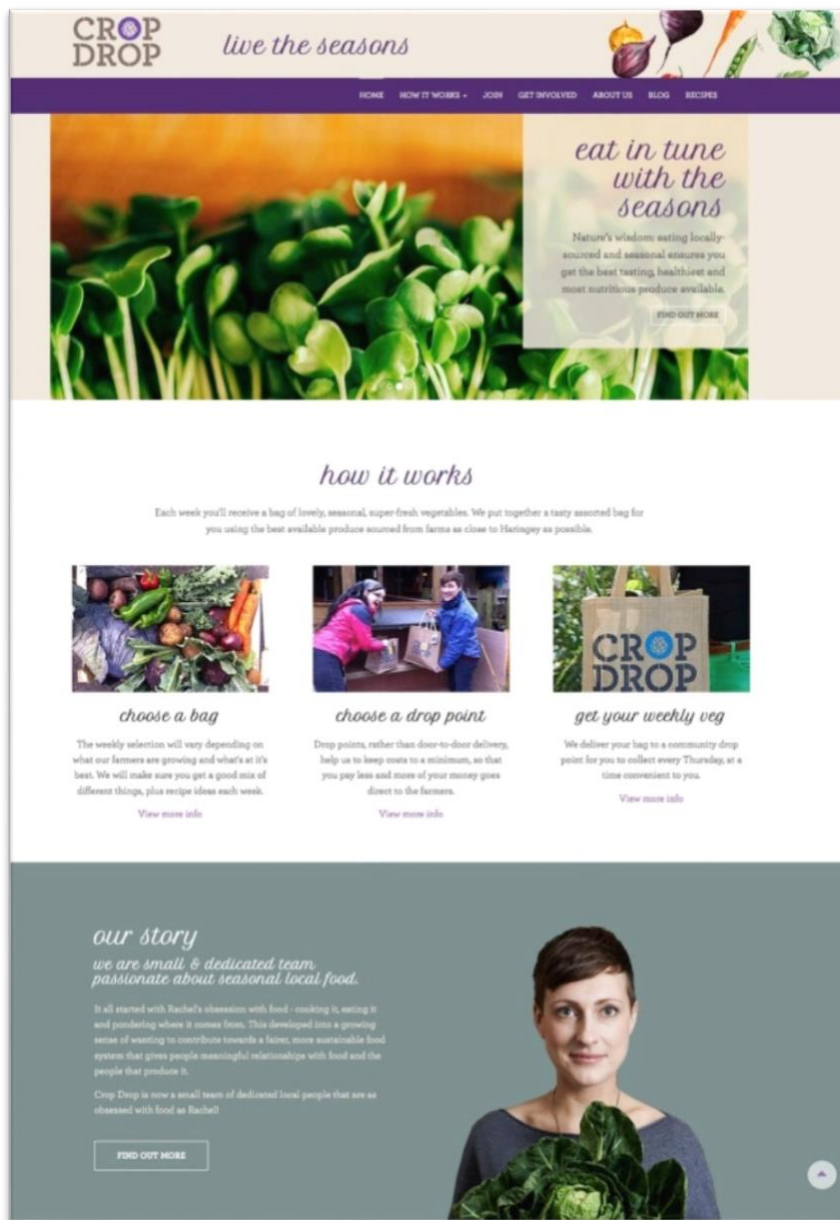


Figure 14 – Redesigned website ([www.cropdrop.co.uk](http://www.cropdrop.co.uk))

### 4.3 Step 3 – Evaluate

In this step, the results of the intervention were evaluated against the objectives set in Step 1, Plan (section 4.1):

Widening target user exploration from a user- to a context-centred approach, enabled the designer to elaborate richer insights. The most salient benefits were:

- Cultural context deconstruction research expanded the focus on ‘user needs’ (which tends to focus on users as individuals) and reinforced an understanding of what binds user groups together – i.e. the social construction of value and meaning.
- It enabled drawing a richer picture of users as ‘members of communities’ by providing a method to observe and interpret sociocultural needs and attitudes.
- Mapping user group lifestyle choices was key for understanding how this user group constructs their social identity through consumption and constituted the ‘data set’ of analysis for extracting the codes that regulate this particular group. Therefore, the advantage of mapping the users’ lifestyles visually, beyond being useful for

understanding what these users are interested in, is how the choices they make are represented and how these symbolic meanings are constructed through aesthetic and other codes.

- The designer used methods from semiotics and cultural studies, which provided adequate support to tackle meaning-making aspects more methodically. These integrated well with existing design methods and processes, adding support to deal with the sociocultural dimension of service design.
- The Code Map (Figure 10) and Summary Recommendations (Figure 11) served as clear guidelines to follow as ‘design constraints’ in the design of the prototypes. These helped to keep the conversations on touchpoint design focused on the user, rather than assumptions or personal taste and preferences.
- It is worth noting that the design trials were based on the contextual research findings, and these were not complemented with insights obtained through other user research methods which could have helped to obtain a more rounded picture of the target group’s aspirations and preferences. This is necessary because perceived value and meanings of artefacts are co-created, so the users’ response to these initial prototypes was, therefore, a missing part.

#### 4.4. Step 3 – Reflect

The intervention evidenced how sociocultural insights can methodically inform the framing process of design artefacts. Although on the outside it may appear to have done ‘just a redesign’, by focusing on *process* – rather than outcomes – throughout the intervention, the ‘naturalised’ practices of framing and meaning-making became self-evident and conscious, rather than intuitive and unconscious.

The use of critical methods prompted self-reflection and learning that impacts future practice by making both the researcher and participant more aware of how assumptions, biases and values affect the way that the service framing is constructed. It made evident how values and perceptions can be identified during the research process and negotiated through design.

Researcher’s journal note:

*‘Before the intervention, my practice was intuitive, and my confidence was based on heuristics and assumptions. Having to follow a framework and methods made me design in a different way, making me conscious of how my practice is conducted and what it is actually that I do, and why.’*

Participant feedback

*‘I now feel better equipped to understand potential customers aspirations and expectations. This exercise has opened my eyes, especially in terms of communicating benefits that are more relevant to them, rather than relying solely on communicating the product and service features.’*

## 5. Discussion

As standard practice in service design, target users are explored through user-centred methods to draw insights and ensure that the value proposition fulfils users’ real needs, and touchpoints provide a good user experience. User research is conducted employing qualitative and ethnographic methods (interviews, shadowing, direct and indirect observation, cultural probes). However, while existing methods work well to understand users’ needs that are directly observable and/or verbalised by users, the tacit aspects that influence people’s decisions – framing biases, symbolic, identity and sociocultural codes – are much more difficult to capture by these means. Research of this nature, although fundamental to understand the socio-symbolic aspects that influence users’ perceived value

is seldom considered or conducted by designers, due to a lack of knowledge of the benefits or the lack of methods to do so.

The cultural deconstruction methods used in this study supported the designer in mapping of socio-symbolic aspects of innovation that influence users' preferences, and impact upon users' perception and value judgement of the service. The insights generated helped realigning the service to the needs of a wider range of customers, improve competitive advantage by sharpening the value proposition and elaborating clear guidelines for better touchpoint design.

At the development stage of this social enterprise, repositioning the service offer and 'reframing' some service touchpoints proved beneficial in that it opened new areas of business opportunity. Therefore, this lens proved highly valuable for devising strategies based on a better understanding of users.

On the other hand, it is worth highlighting that addressing perceived value (reframing brand and communications and some touchpoints) without necessarily implementing changes to the offer and operations might be ineffective for delivering deep customer satisfaction and retention. If only the perceived value is aligned with customer expectations, there is bound to be disappointment if the service cannot deliver what the customer has perceived to be an appealing offer (Conner & Patterson, 1982). The user might be persuaded but fails to commit. This effect can be perceived as deceiving, negatively impacting the user's experience and engagement with the service.

Therefore, results of sociocultural and contextual research might imply a readjustment of the business model, the value proposition and service core operations, in order to truly fulfil user's expectations. These managerial decisions carry significant consequences in terms of service restructuring with their due financial resource allocation to which the provider may be hesitant or reluctant to commit. Therefore, introducing this kind of research prior to launch (e.g. at prototype stage) can save valuable time and resources, and avoid the emergence of ill-defined services or start-ups that struggle to attract a critical mass of customers and be self-sustainable.

## 5. Conclusions

The aim of the study discussed in this paper was to investigate how sociocultural context deconstruction methods applied in service design could support designers to identify business opportunities and develop more strategic design practice.

In that, this study contributed a useful sociocultural lens through which to make sense of the relationship between the value proposition, users and the culture(s) they are immersed in (Oswald, 2015). In turn, by building stronger skills in designers to observe and interpret sociocultural needs and attitudes, designers are enabled to adopt a more strategic approach to creating services that bear greater resonance and meaning with users.

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