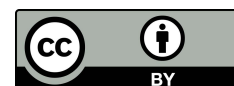# Qualitative Internet research on cultural and creative spillovers. A case study of Concordia Design Centre in Poznan, Poland

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present part of the research conducted by *Altum Foundation*, realised with full involvement of scholars affiliated to Institute of Cultural Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The research (Poprawski, Chojnacki, & Firych, 2015) formed part of an international project "Testing innovative methods to evaluate cultural and creative spillovers in Europe" initiated by *European Research Partnership* on *Cultural and Creative Spillovers* and coordinated by *European Centre for Creative Economy* (ECCE) in Dortmund. The general goal was to test *Concordia Design Centre* in Poznan (CDC) as a case study on the cultural and creative spillover phenomenon. The article withdraws the research's most relevant parts related to qualitative Internet research methods (specifically findings from Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) and semiotics) and outlines the mechanisms as well as fields of relevance of CDC's spillover effect in several different contexts. The paper concludes with methodological reflections.

Key words: cultural and creative spillovers, Internet research, creative industries

Introduction to the research project

The aim of the research team was to test the *Concordia Design Centre* in Poznan (CDC) as a case study on the cultural and creative spillover phenomenon. The term demands a precise definition in the first place. Within the project cultural and creative spillover was understood as "the process by which activity in the arts, culture and creative industries has a subsequent broader impact on places, society or the economy through the overflow of concepts, ideas, skills, knowledge and different types of capital" (Fleming, 2015).

The concept of spillover can be applied to any kind of creative or cultural initiative. In the case of the presented research it was *Concordia Design Centre* (www.concordiadesign.pl). It is a centre of creativity, design and business, operated by private owners, located in the renovated *Old Printing House* in the centre of Poznań. The project was initiated in 2010 with a grant for the renovation of the original 1890 building (co-funded from public grants). It is one of the first and

major design-thinking, creative approach labs in Poland. CDC is the conceptual and consulting headquarters for a privately owned cross-sectoral initiative called *Human Touch Group*, which, with its business and education activity, is focusing on the role of humanistic management (design-thinking, aesthetics, multi-sensory) methods in business and education. Its strongest identity components are: design management and design thinking consulting experts; co-office: the area of offices rented as headquarters of over 20 creative sector enterprises; the workshops lab space with rooms used for workshops, conferences and events; the digital printing industry workshop in the basement; conference, concert and cultural events venues, including the space for children's theatre productions and workshops; and last but not least the open space restaurant *Concordia Taste* with a very tailored menu adjusted to the Concordia creative approach.

The majority of the CDC activities' effects such us its social impact or spread of creative ideas are ungraspable and non-measurable through quantitative data collection. The effectiveness of the classical social sciences qualitative investigation methods is also limited in this matter. The *Testing Cultural* and *Creative Spillover* research method elaborated in this research project by the Polish team was a method that experimented at the cutting edge of qualitative and heuristics methods. The research team worked in a timeframe of 6 months, from June to November 2016 using the selected tools within the frame of qualitative methods, and extended this with several experimental components. The final outcome of the project was a summary of methodological reflections and recommendations for possible future use of the methods and tools tested in the project.

Table.1

Research timeline and the methodology overview

JUNE	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEM-BER	OCTOBER	NOVEM-BER	DECEM-BER
Research Tools set-up			Research Tools update and application			
Desk research						
Mediated Discourse Analysis data selection			Mediated Discourse Analysis, semiotics and VSM research			
	Spillover identification					
	Research sample and target groups representation					
			Individual in-depth interviews (with experimental methods)			
			Focus group interviews (with experimental methods)			
			Data analysis and elaboration of research findings, methodological reflection			

Source: Altum Foundation.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO INTERNET RESEARCH
WITHIN THE PROJECT

Conducting a research on the Internet is quite a challenge when it comes to approaching methodology. As the environment for the presented project is rather unusual, research methods need to be adopted and understood in a special way, where the specifics of the virtual settings are taken into account. Hine points out that the Internet offers a priceless set of tools for reaching different research subjects in a new way. At the same time, since these tools are new and, therefore, still not fully discovered, we can never be sure to what extent the heritage of research methodology applies to the online settings and what gaps there are in our understanding of it (Hine, 2005, p.11). For this reason, the aim of the following section is to specify and discuss the methodological frame within which the given topic was scrutinized.

As already stated, the internet research formed only one, initial stage of the overall project. The proposed methodological approach aimed to scrutinize the organization in Poznań as a representative of the creative industry by means of qualitative tools that have become available for new media communication analysis. A key emphasis here was on examining the Internet discourse related to *Concordia Design*. The most accurate research design to be applied in this context is a case study (Bryman, 2008, p. 52). Qualitative online communication analysis is supposed to bring additional, valid insights to the research. Making use of a qualitative research strategy is legitimate since it typically emphasizes content rather than quantifications in the data collection and its analysis process (Bryman, 2008, p. 22).

An especially valuable field for gathering data supporting the research was social media. The dynamically changing circumstances of the Internet create a great opportunity for a researcher to explore the nature of human beings from a different perspective. Therefore, looking at new media communication gave us a possibility of reaching a complex, in-depth understanding of *Concordia Design* and its impact on local society. The principle angle of the analysis was turned into official communication shared by the case study organisation on social media platforms and its reception within its audience. Tendencies that appear relevant in terms of issues frequently touched upon, as well as posts that generated intense reactions were sought and outlined. As a result, it was possible to obtain knowledge about the organization and the ways it is presented and perceived. The data analysis approach was founded on a mix of methods. To be more specific, the discussed analytical framework was primarily rooted in a *Mediated Discourse Analysis* (covering texts, videos, photos, and actions), known also as MDA (Scollon, & Scollon, 2001) and complemented by semiotics. The strongest argument for combining these methods was their complementarity. MDA differs from other discourse studies by focusing on the overall social actions, rather than solely on written text or language, as for example in the case of classical approach towards discourse analysis. As a consequence, the heart of analysis is moved towards a focus on the crucial social actions within the field of study related to the specific

problem (Larsen, 2008). Semiotics[8], on the other hand, due to its interpretative character may be found helpful in decoding the hidden meaning and symbols in the collected data. The core analytical objectives were understood as: diagnosis of the overall online communication connected to *Concordia Design* and its audience. This was integrated in VSM - *Virtual Settlements Map* (Where and how is the knowledge about *Concordia Design* generated and obtained?). Close examination of *Concordia Design's* official Facebook profile integrating the creative industry's online communities in Poznań in the context of the studied case was limited to an analysis of the communication during the period of 1.07.2015 – 30.06.2016 with approx. 450 Facebook posts analysed including their content and feedback.

Modern Internet discourse demands a broader analytical perspective. In the case of MDA the biggest issue arises when speaking of values. William Leiss et al. (2005) argue that "values cannot be picked off the surface of the message and easily arranged into categories. Recognising values depends on a process of interpretation and reintegration of the available information" (p. 166). That is where I see a need to introduce semiotics to the research as, following Alan Bryman, "semiotics is concerned to uncover the hidden meanings that reside in texts as broadly defined" (Bryman, 2008, p. 531). Here, semiotics may be found helpful in decoding the hidden meaning and symbols in the collected data due to its interpretivist character.

Detailed findings from *Mediated Discourse Analysis* (MDA) and semiotics tested as a tool for cultural and creative spillovers

In the examined mediated discourse *Concordia Design* (CDC) appears as a coherent, self-conscious and well-communicated brand. The term "brand" is not used here accidently. The strong brand-oriented thinking structures CDC's approach towards its audience and environment. The scope of the research is mostly local (city, regional and national) due to the fact that the communication attached to CDC is, with some exceptions, limited to the Polish language and, hence, is addressed to the Polish speaking receivers.

CDC's expansion over the Internet

The conducted research results in the core conclusion that *Concordia Design's* Internet expansion effect definitely exists and is based on systemic and consequent work that one could call a specific philosophy. What surprises, it is not generated by a grassroots movement or some kind of viral interest as it could have been predicted, but based on a solid, well-structured strategy.

As already stated, in the case of *Concordia Design* we can definitely see and discuss its spillover effect, which appears to be strong but unconventional. Among

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8   The study of signs and sign-using behaviour was the concept introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. The original meaning of semiotics has evolved into a method that is used today in the study of meaning – of both language and non-linguistic sign systems.

CDC's environment, there is a visible, large need to be attached to its brand (to collaborate with / be a member of its network). It applies to all: representatives of creative and cultural sector, design professionals, business and finally - individual people. Yet it creates a sensation that its offer even if communicated to a broad audience ('CDC open to everybody'), in fact it is addressed to a certain social group, which is genuinely interested and fully engaged. Therefore, it might be seen exclusive. The overall communication attached to CDC, is mostly driven by design market participants. This is a strong phenomenon especially on social media, where the most active profiles related to CDC belong to professionals.
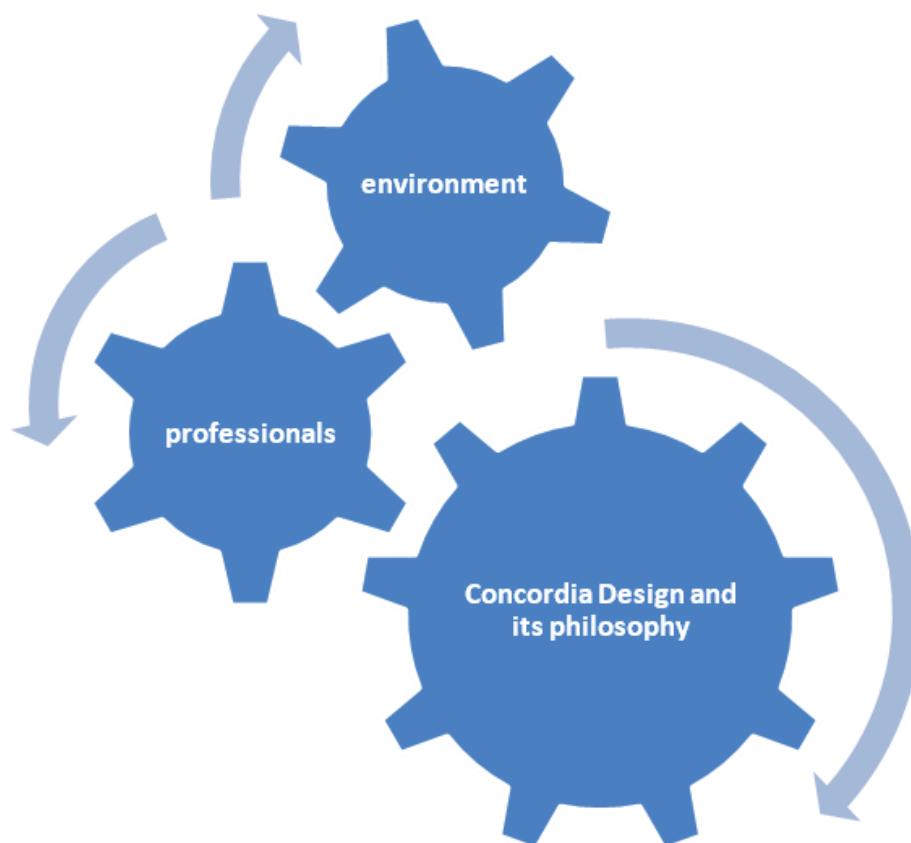

Fig. 1. Concordia Design and its systemic expansion.
Source: Altum Foundation.

SPILLOVER FOUNDED ON NETWORKING

The CDC's success seems to be related to its outstanding skills to integrate design-related communities. For those, CDC centre plays a role of a platform for integration. It creates good conditions for a feeling that 'It's good to be around'. This effect of synergy starts from the capital hold by *Human Touch Group*. It uses the potential of all group members and associated organizations to share the creativity, experience, material and intellectual capital within each other as well

as with the external partners and environment. The hubs support each other and contribute to the group in many ways, e.g. *Da Vinci / SWPS* does it with its potential in the field of education, *VOX* – finance and well-designed furniture, *Concordia Taste* restaurant – space for events and extraordinary catering. This synergy boosts CDC's power to impact others and to a large extent multiplies the spillover effect.
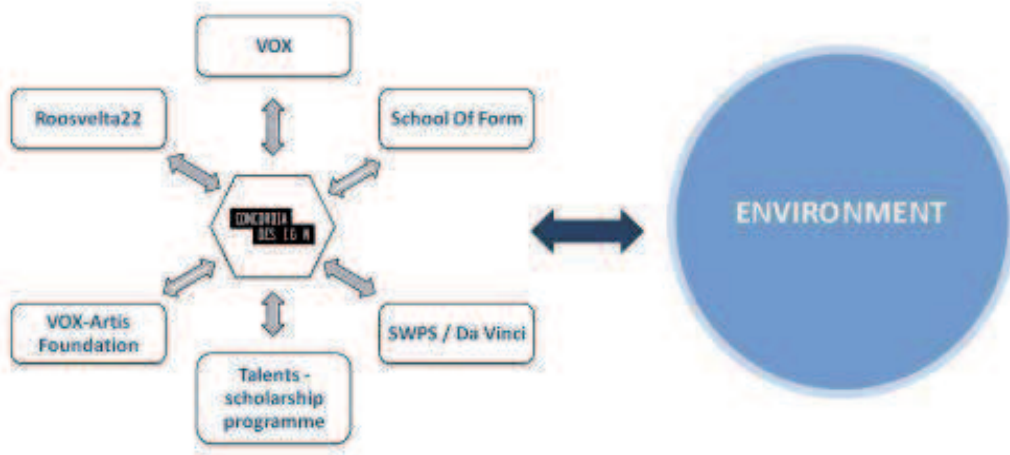

Fig. 2. The Internet expansion based on the synergy of the capital group.
Source: Altum Foundation.

Concordia Design can be compared to a recognized impresario, a prestigious cultural centre or a concert hall that hosts visiting plays and artists - offering space for organizations to realize their projects under or with CDC brand. The collaboration is based on vast promotion of events taking place in the building. The cooperation with others is very dynamic; the network expands by developing internal and external activities. A good example of such mechanism is the idea of residency at the *Concordia Taste* restaurant – the concept taken from art galleries where the cook is treated as curator. The cook-resident creates a special menu that is offered by CDC's restaurant.

DESIGN ROOTED IN THE PROCESS OF CREATION

Among the associated entities there is a vast range of disciplines that they represent. This is due to the fact that *Concordia Design* defines design as a broad concept having at the centre of its definition the process of creation. This concept can be easily applied to many fields, e.g. food, teaching, products, services, innovations, management or event organization. Also the methods of dealing with networking and partnership are numerous: personal engagement, being present on national and international fairs, co-creating of events within several cultural festivals or organizing networking events.

Fig. 3. Concordia Design's environmental expansion in Internet.
Source: Altum Foundation.

BUSINESS-ORIENTED THINKING

What clearly distinguishes *Concordia Design* from many other organizations focused on design and creativity is its strong economic motivation. Rooted in business, its goal observed throughout the research seems to deal with transmission between creative idea and profit (i.e. *VOX* furniture industry - a part of the same business family *HTG Group* - is gaining visibility and new dimension of their impact on the market). Human Touch emphasizes this also in the mission published online: "Human Touch – common DNA of business and education" (www. humantouchgroup.com). Here again, it is interesting to see this through the filter of synergy generated by the collaboration between its members. Among some good examples there is the *Cinema on beds* project within Transatlantyk movie festival, the idea developed by *Concordia Design* with the usage of furniture provided by *VOX* Company or the temporary decorations at the *Concordia Taste* restaurant designed by students of *School Of Form*.

The described business-oriented thinking is visible in most if not each of the projects hosted in Concordia Design and is not omitted in the events addressed to children. The creativity of the youngest generated within of the workshops resulted in a painting contest supported by *BZ WBK Bank*. The most impressive drawings were used as covers of credit cards produced by the bank. CDC encourages companies to join the circular workshops for children. The idea that stands behind that is to allow the interested firms to test and develop their products at the early stage of creation.

Fig. 4. Business-oriented thinking.
Source: Altum Foundation.

Education based on the MASTER-FOLLOWER model

At many levels of its communication, *Concordia Design* emphasises the importance of education. It is treated as a crucial component of all actions taken by the centre. In the offer and the programme there are different consulting services, workshops, meetings, festivals. Education is addressed to different social groups: from children to professionals.

However, one of the key observations (gained through MDA and confirmed through IDI interviews with key case study organisation clients and co-operators) is that the education is not distributed horizontally but rather vertically. It means that in this model one shares knowledge that has a certain value. Even if the process stays interactive one has to 'pay' the other for the knowledge transfer. It is therefore based on the Master–Follower model.

Here again one is able to distinguish business-oriented thinking where education cannot function as a common good. In such case a co-working hub, where everybody is equal would not allow CDC to remind an expert in the field of design and creativity. This hierarchic model is needed and plays a strategic role in generating profit. CDC is closer to private teacher than an experienced and wise friend one has and can ask for advice.

In the Internet communication *Concordia Design* creates an image of a representative of some sort of modern lifestyle whose message could be articulated as 'You can be like us'. A significant number of events at the restaurant have an educational aspect, e.g. meeting with a sommelier or the one dedicated to production of goat's cheese (sponsored by its producer), the workshops where everybody can feel like a designer and change something is his own house, etc. In other words CDC stands for a certain status, which is worth following.

In order to keep the mentioned status, CDC needs to be constantly active and prove its position. This is achieved by active participation in national and international design forums, debates, contests, festivals, getting in partnerships with professionals, and finally: exposing its employees as experts. The strongest components of CDC's position are personal brands. Ewa Voelkel (CEO), Zuzanna Skalska or Anna Wróblewska is frequently presented as specialists, trend watchers and experts. They are therefore exposed in media and broadly presented on photos and films from workshops, expert panels, conferences, etc.

THE CDC'S PARADOX – EGALITARIAN AND ELITIST AT THE SAME TIME

Interestingly, communication attached to *Concordia Design* is based on the duality of values: egalitarian-elitist. At first sign, CDC's approach towards its environment is well-defined: to be open to everybody. CDC addresses its offer to kids or 'everyone' on one hand, business to another (www.concordiadesign.pl). However, the deeper we go, the more we see that the target groups are rather specific.

Potential individuals interested in what CDC have to offer are probably intellectuals and well-educated people with aspirations. The offer is certainly not addressed to e.g. excluded social groups. Arguments for this hypothesis can be well supported with empirical findings. Most of the materials shared online present experts, elites, celebrities rather than ordinary people. In the offer CDC emphasizes one's uniqueness. For many, taking part in CDC's activities may stand for following its values and expressing individual's status or aspirations. For example, *Concordia Taste* in its offer for private events provides its guests with red carpet and hired paparazzi. Even the Christmas Fair organized in CDC each December presents wares produced by professional designers, hence, the ones that not everybody can afford and has common access to.

CDC's philosophical framework could be concluded in the following statement: there is no creativity left alone. By stating that, it is to say that CDC cares in detail for professional effects of anything it is involved in. Even if amateurs do initial work, when it is presented it must be previously visually boosted, re-made and prepared to be seen by a larger audience.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

MDA research verified positively following spillover types as being interactively communicated and bringing the public social resonance:
- *Industry Spillover 1:* Improved business culture and boosting entrepreneurship
- *Knowledge Spillover 4*: Increase employability and skills development in society
  There is evidence from the social media of the strong public response and the quality appreciation of offered open workshops, seminars, and training in the field of entrepreneurial, teamwork, leadership and creative skills, including workshops for selected creative professions. Bringing the well--shared education offers to the core business of this private institution and locating it pragmatically within well-defined creative ideas bringing the magnetic attraction effect. The data collected through MDA and CDC social media analysis shows that it convinces participants of being able to improve and capitalize their careers, professional appeal and well-designed relations.
- *Knowledge Spillover 5 (partially)*: Strengthening cross-sector collaborations
  This is well seen through the network synergy and internal spillover (a type of spillover mentioned by Jonathan Vickery in *To be debated. Creative*

Spillover, ECCE 2015 within the family of enterprises - *Human Touch Group* that CDC is a part of. The broad, well calibrated networking, strong CDC brand, and attractive location is helping in accessing all leading festival events in the city and region – having them as partners makes CDC visible through all the year on the festival city 'stage'. The media coverage and social media feedback of workshops on urban, city issues, interest and future of city and district inhabitants, their quality of life is building a strong, trustworthy and transparent position of CDC when related to public cultural institutions, city hall, regional government and civic organisations.

• *Knowledge Spillover 7:* Facilitating knowledge exchange and culture-led innovation
  The knowledge transfer is confirmed, but as indicated in the MDA analysis above, it is much more vertical than horizontal (master – apprentice / student).

• *Network Spillover 3:* Creating an attractive ecosystem and creative milieu, city branding and case place making
  CDC is a very strong brand and represents the certain status and style of life, the most evidence for that is seen in the egalitarian-elitist dilemma describe in the analysis above.

• *Network Spillover 4:* Stimulating urban development, regeneration and Infrastructure

This last evident spillover type is seen in the whole perception of the new infrastructural development in the closest neighbourhood of the case location, inspired by the CDC founders and integrated with their strategy – Roosvelt22 plot brings a new dimension of visible communication through media channels that bring again CDC on the surface, including the story of what will integrate old building with the new one – the plaza for open space cultural activities. This spillover in the city space is seen recently, as the content most preferred to become a shared viral content.

Conclusion and final critical remarks

The vast part of today's communication processes such as building and maintaining human relations and interactions are done via the mediated, Internet-based means. In order to track the creative spillover effect in these particular communication settings the research team decided to apply Media Discourse Analysis as well as semiotics with expectations to capture the dynamics of creativity spread.

Within the presented sequence of research activities, MDA and VSM were executed on several different levels. The first was when talking about the aspects of the communication in which the organization fully controls the message (PR and marketing tools). Here it was highly important to consider the role of promo narratives (range: self-promotion, relation building process, networking, sha-

ring, involving other parties with events and projects) in the phase of identifying the scope and types of stakeholders and partners involved in the case study organization activities. Another context was when mapping internet media communication (including words and visual representations) where it was crutial to see how and to what extent it impacts the image of the case study organisation, e.g. in terms of distributing information and managing response. The final focus was on the part of communication that has very limited organizational control. In the latter context the relevant part of data was represented by digital social interaction such as likes, shares, attached visuals, comments and other viral behaviour.

The presented research approach should be seen as synthetic. In principle, the internet-oriented part of the research meant to bring different kinds of findings from those delivered through the analytical approach of other research methods used within the project (e.g. FGI). The integrated approach towards the methods applied to Internet explained spillover effects through electronic, digitally mediated communication. Synthetic methods were treated as complementary cognitive paths. It is to say that the MDA methods collected particular communications and assigned them to cognitive categories related to spillover effects. At this point it is imporant to mention that MDA was also an introductory component to the initial research phase that gave a complex background for the further in-deapth problem exploration. Genealogy, selected to be the initial contact question, is based on the reconstruction of facts, stories, opinions regarding the foundation actions, motivations, impacts, etc. of the organisation. This was collected through critical discourse analysis and verified in interviews with founders and process facilitators who are familiar with the case study organisation's origins.

Qualitative internet research in the presented research served as a fully valid academic tool. However, one needs to bear in mind some disadvantages of introducing it into qualitative research strategy. By using this kind of approach a researcher always takes a risk that the collected data will be interpreted more subjectively than it would have been by using a quantitative research strategy (Bryman, 2008, p. 366). This is undeniably a negative characteristic attached to a qualitative internet research, but at the same time something that stays in harmony with the constructivist standpoint. On the other hand, analysis of the social media communications may lead to misinterpretations, which signify that it is essential to be especially careful when making conclusions. In this sense, the biggest value of this kind of research is when it is treated as a supportive methodological tool to a complex research strategy. Complementary methods do not only broaden one's view, but also allow verification of respective results. Looking at the discussed methods used within the presented reseach one might see that they apear to have no limitations with regard to case study objects in the MDA and internet transmitted content analysis. Furthermore, it is important to underline that this particular approach and set of tools that can be easily adapted and developed further.

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