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THE CONTROVERSIAL *JUICY SALIF* AS AN IDENTITY MARKER

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ABSTRACT

In order to provide insights into designers' ability to influence the construction of identity resonating with users on cultural and emotional levels, this study examines Phillippe Starck's *Juicy Salif*, the controversial lemon squeezer, exemplifying design objects as identity markers. Its primary and secondary functions were discussed in regard of the concept of value. From Baudrillard's perspective on the system of objects, this study highlights the strong connection between one's identity and objects of possession and display. It discusses *Juicy Salif* as reflecting not only personal preferences but also cultural values and narratives that play a pivotal role in shaping a unique and socially recognized identity within a consumer-driven society. It transcends mere functionality and symbolizes good design taste, social status, and cultural capital. It also attains an iconic status in the design realm, underscoring the role of design objects as indicators of prestige and reputation.

Keywords: *Design Objects, Construction of Identity, Identity Marker, Value.*

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, tasarımcıların, kullanıcılarda kültürel ve duygusal düzeyde yankı uyandıran nesneler aracılığıyla kimlik inşasını etkileme becerilerine dair içgörü sağlamak amacıyla, tasarım nesnelerini kimlik belirleyiciler olarak örnekleyen, Phillippe Starck'ın tartışmalı limon sıkacağı *Juicy Salif*'i incelemektedir. *Juicy Salif*'in birincil ve ikincil işlevleri değer kavramı bağlamında tartışılmıştır. Baudrillard'ın nesneler sistemi perspektifinden bakıldığında, bu çalışma, kişinin kimliği ile sahip olunan ve sergilenen nesneler arasındaki güçlü bağlantıyı vurgulamaktadır. *Juicy Salif*'in yalnızca kişisel tercihleri değil, aynı zamanda tüketim odaklı bir toplumda benzersiz ve sosyal olarak tanınan bir kimliğin şekillenmesinde önemli bir rol oynayan kültürel değerleri ve anlatıları yansıttığı tartışılmaktadır. *Juicy Salif*, salt işlevselliğin ötesine geçerek iyi tasarım zevkini, sosyal statüyü ve kültürel sermayeyi sembolize etmektedir. Aynı zamanda, tasarım alanında ikonik bir

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statüye sahiptir ve tasarım nesnelerinin prestij ve itibar göstergesi olarak oynadığı rolün altını çizmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Tasarım Nesneleri, Kimlik İnşası, Kimlik Belirleyici, Değer.*

Introduction

In Baudrillard's view, the objects we consume are not just utilitarian items but also powerful symbols that contribute to how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. These objects are part of the cultural fabric that informs our identities in a consumer-driven society. Design embodies meanings and values created by both the designer and the user, respectively or simultaneously, throughout the design process and during its lifetime in the market and within the society. Even though design is one of the key drivers in the market, a design object does not only have an exchange value, but is also emotionally, symbolically, and aesthetically appreciated by its users (Boradkar, 2010, 12). Its use value and social value are revealed through the user's relationship with the design object. In order to drive people to use and interact with it, it should communicate its value as well as its potential to be fulfilled by the user, which is its identity and influences the construction of the identity of the user. There are also human values, such as safety, privacy, identity, and equality, that should be served by design for an improved quality of life. It is the designer's responsibility to take these values into account during the whole design process, and to support, sustain, and enhance them along with its economic, environmental, and social implications on the society (Friedman & Kahn, 2013, 1178). This ethical stand of the design practice and theory towards values results in a social transition in time and puts the designer in the role of a social and cultural intermediary, which shows that design is not only concerned with the aesthetics but rather the social and ethical implications of design on the material and social environments of people, as well as on their psychologies, behaviors, and attitudes, that form a culture (Frascara, 1988, 20-21; Moles, 1988, 30-31; Norman, 2007, 4-5; Friedman & Kahn, 2013, 1180).

From this perspective and drawing upon Baudrillard's (1968, 10) system of objects, this study examines the controversial lemon squeezer, *Juicy Salif*, designed by Phillippe Starck for a renown Italian design company, *Alessi*, which exemplifies design objects as identity markers, acquiring symbolic and cultural significance and signaling their owners' identity traits and aspirations, such as status, aesthetic taste, and cultural capital.

Construction of Identity Through Possession

Culture, which embodies tangible and intangible assets, is formed by values and shared knowledge, experience, religion, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. The relationship between design and culture is reciprocal due to the cultural and social values of design, its contribution to the material culture, and how it shapes and is shaped by the society. Culture has its roots in history, which is constantly going through transitions, e.g. political, ideological, technological, and environmental etc. It triggers changes in the behaviors and attitudes of the members of a society in time. These social and cultural

transitions in the society contribute to the developments in design, since it builds on the existing culture and knowledge through practice materially and/or immaterially. Each design presents a cultural output, which is influential on the behaviors and attitudes of people. Its great potential to transform people's perception of themselves, objects, and environments leads to the construction of identity. It can be the identity of a design object, designer, user, brand, society, or even a nation. Within this perspective, design is a strong entity, which acts as an embodiment of multiple layers of meanings and values, and it enables people to construct their own identities and a sense of self by possessing and valuing certain objects or living in certain places. This psychological tendency of people is utilized as a competitive advantage in the market through design (Sparke, 2013, 185).

Baudrillard (1970, 71; 1974, 75) believed that the driving force in capitalism is not production, but consumption, and argued that our needs are not inherent, but rather constructed by us. We purchase objects that are encoded with various meanings that we relate with ourselves. What we purchase reflects our deepest desires; therefore, consumption is related with the construction of self, since objects are a part of a language that creates a sense of self (Todd, 2012, 48). Throughout this construction process, consumers do not regard themselves as distinct individuals. They rather make a choice to tie themselves to a larger society that they want to belong to, either consciously or unconsciously, within the social structure. In that sense, consumers' desire to be different does not mean to be entirely different from the rest of the society that they live in, but rather to reflect their individual differences through social solidarity (Todd, 2012, 49-50). Regarding this, consumption implies a collective behavior and a system of social values. It is also "*a system of communication and exchange*" (Baudrillard, 1970, 93), a way of socialization and an order of giving meaning, similar to the language and system of kinship in primitive societies (Sağocak, 2007, 258). Within this context, consumption is "*one of our most creative and most restrictive practices*" (Todd, 2012, 48).

Value in The World of Design Objects

Baudrillard (1974, 30) argues that commodities should not be regarded as objects to be possessed and used, but rather as entities of production and purchase. They do not conform to our needs or adhere to a traditional order of the world, but rather, they are solely organized to facilitate production and promote ideological uniformity. Use and exchange values of objects are inadequate to explain the seductiveness of consumption, the rationale behind the obsession to buy and consume, and constantly establishing new relationships with new objects. In his book, *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard (1968, 200) discusses how consumer products are differentiated from each other and how the ways of this differentiation form the system of signs that are encoded in these objects. He applies semiotics, i.e. the study of signs, to objects and argues that our culture is aroused from the analysis of signs that signify relative status and meaning (Parsons, 2009, 27). It is a constantly evolving system and objects are the participants of this system, which reveals many reasons to consume and, in consideration of designers, to create. There are

certain statuses in social order and individuals participate in this order through their relationships with certain groups and through the relationships of these groups among themselves. Each group has its own distinctive sign that creates a hierarchy. These signs have their own systems and only when this hierarchy is accepted by individuals, this system of signs is internalized and becomes the main elements of a form of ultimate social order (Baudrillard, 1974, 68).

Roland Barthes is the first theorist, who apply semiotics to the consumer products, such as soap powder, Citroën DS, and toys in *Mythologies* in 1957. As Barthes (1957, 28) states:

“We shall therefore take language, discourse, speech etc., to mean any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual: a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something”.

Following Barthes, design theories often draw on semiotic theories and “*Baudrillard has been the most celebrated theorist working on the analysis of products as signs*” (Parsons, 2009, 32). He “*can be regarded as the actual founder of a semiotically grounded theory of design*” due to his analysis of the everyday (Bürdek, 2005, 236). He focuses on the consumer society and proposes that sign value is central to our urge to consume and that how much our needs are fulfilled by that specific product is not the priority. Within this perspective, he uses *sign value* to indicate the attribution of communicating prestige by possessing an object and *symbolic exchange* to describe the role of objects in terms of symbolizing a particular event or connection with its possessor (Baudrillard, 1974, 65). In that sense, his theory indicates that objects have communicative functions as well. Even though he is a critic of consumerism, his theory reveals that individuals’ motives to consume and possess can be used for understanding their complex taste and desires.

Regarding the communicative functions of objects, Baudrillard mentions about their primary and secondary functions (Baudrillard, 1968, 191). Primary functions of an object indicate its practical uses, whereas secondary functions are related to non-material functions, i.e. the functions of the object not in and of itself, but rather of the object in use. Therefore, every object comes to existence with and through a story. The meaning of the object to its user, how it is perceived by its surrounding, and the image it imbues are ever more important. Therefore, objects, both in their singularity and entirety, act within a context, in which they are surrounded by stories. What is enticing for the consumer is to have a sense of ownership of these stories the moment they make a purchase. In that sense, selling stories is of great importance in the consumer society and design is the medium to create these stories through signs (Koppelman, 1998 cited in Bürdek, 2005, 288). Bearing these in mind, design becomes prominent in the consumer society. Its relationship with objects is often considered as *adding value* to an object. However, this consideration implies design as optional, rather than needed. It is, in fact, not only adding, but also *creating value*. In order to understand how it functions within the world

of objects, it should be understood how the concept of value is related with objects, as well as with people, and how design takes on its role in this relationship.

As previously mentioned, Baudrillard (1974, 66) speaks of *sign* value and *symbolic exchange* value in addition to *use* and *exchange* values of an object. These are the four basic ways of value-making. Very briefly:

- *Use value* is the functional/instrumental purpose of an object.
- *Exchange value* is the economic value of an object in the market.
- *Symbolic exchange value* is the value of an object in relation to another or to its owner; symbolizing an event, and idea, or a situation.
- *Sign value* is the value of an object within a system of objects.

The latter is the implication of an object's communicative functions. Whereas symbolic exchange value is a way of mere symbolization and does not reflect any emotions, sign value signifies the prestige, the social circle etc. of the owner. Therefore, it has an emotion and meaning that transcends that of the previous ones and it is what makes an object a consumer object, freed from all of its psychological, instrumental, and commercial definitions. For instance, silverware is regarded as one of the special things in families. Considering a silver tea set, it has a use value in serving tea to guests in special occasions, such as family dinners, celebrations etc., and staying in cabinets for the rest of the time. Its exchange value, on the other hand, is being a fixed asset for the owner, since its monetary value is more stable than cash in the market. It also has symbolic exchange value in reinforcing kinship through being used as a gift and heirloom. Finally, it has sign value that represents the cultural taste of its owner (Julier, 2014, 88).

From this viewpoint, *Juicy Salif*, the lemon squeezer designed by Phillippe Starck for *Alessi* is examined within the framework of Baudrillard's theory in this study.

Examination of Alessi's Controversial Juicy Salif

Drawing upon Baudrillard's perspective on value-making and the system of objects, this study examines Phillippe Starck's *Juicy Salif*, the controversial lemon squeezer designed for *Alessi*, exemplifying design objects as identity markers, acquiring symbolic and cultural significance and signaling their owners' identity traits and aspirations. The visual analysis conducted in this study is based on a qualitative content analysis of publicly available images of Juicy Salif retrieved from online retail sites, design archives, and cultural media platforms. The images were selected using purposive sampling to capture the diverse representations of the object in commercial, utilitarian, artistic, and cultural contexts. These include standard product shots, curated promotional displays, museum exhibitions, user-generated content, and limited-edition variations. Each image was examined for its compositional elements, context of presentation, and semiotic implications using Barthesian visual semiotics as an interpretive framework. Through

these images, the primary and secondary functions of Juicy Salif were discussed in regard of the concept of value.

Alessi is an Italian design company, producing household products. It had manufactured anonymous designs until 1980s and has incorporated designer products into its catalogue since then. This shift in the company's direction is related to its Tea and Coffee Piazza project (Figure 1) that was completed with eleven famous architects, such as Michael Graves and Charles A. Jencks, in 1983. They were asked to design a tea set and each of them were produced as a limited edition; 99 pieces of each. *Alessi* published these architects' individual records of their own processes, including sketches, photographs, and technical drawings etc., in an edited book (Alessi, 2023). This project was one of the milestones of *Alessi*, since it totally changed the brand image of the company. Since then, *Alessi* is known as being honest, sincere, and committed to high production (Julier, 2014, 93). Today, each product is presented in its website with a brief explanation of the product, often followed by its story, the name and photograph of its designer, and sometimes a quote from its designer. Designer signature, therefore, has become quite important and owning an *Alessi* product – together with the name of the designer – has become very prestigious, such as Phillippe Starck's *Juicy Salif*.

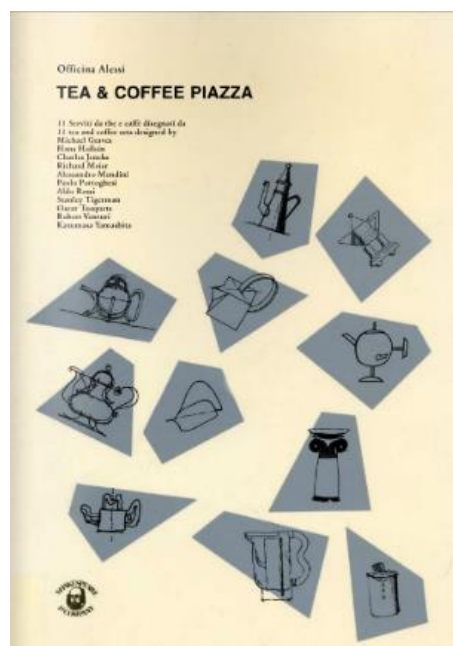


Figure 1. Alessi Tea & Coffee Piazza (Amazon, 2023).

Juicy Salif (Design Propaganda, 2023) is a lemon squeezer, designed by Starck and produced by *Alessi* in 1990, that shatters the rules of being a lemon squeezer and is still the most enticing one among others (Figure 2). Even though the primary function of *Juicy Salif* is expected to serve for its utilitarian purpose as a lemon squeezer, it does not fully serve for the purpose. Lemons can be squeezed with a lot of effort, leaving a mess on the kitchen countertop behind its use as well as pips and piths in the lemon juice. It is not ergonomic, since the user needs to stabilize the squeezer from its one thin and long leg with one hand as you try to twist the lemon on top. It is accessible from the *Alessi* website

with its short story and instructions as any other products. However, it is surprising to see the warning that the squeezer may be oxidized by the acid and lose its shininess and the first juice should not be used because of its bad taste due to the chemical reaction of the aluminum and the squeezer. It shows that even the material selection and the areas of use are not compatible with the lemon it needs to be in contact with.



Figure 2. *Juicy Salif* designed by Phillippe Starck (Design Propaganda, 2023).

However, this lemon squeezer is still enticing, seductive, and the bestseller of the company and prompts everyone to question and talk about its attitude somehow. Starck manifests that he does not belong to a *mechanical* world, but rather a philosophical one, and concerns with human values, regardless of any cultural baggage or personal/professional style, but rather incorporates a different logic and a different way of thinking to his designs (Gauert, 2018), and that this product's function is not to squeeze lemons but start conversations (Starck, n.d. quoted in Norman, 2004, 114).

Regarding the concept of value, *Juicy Salif* has use value in squeezing lemons and the exchange value of an ordinary *Juicy Salif* – there are limited edition versions as well – is worth €79 (Alessi, 2023). It has almost the same exchange value with that of the silver tea set. However, in consideration of low-cost material (aluminum) and production (casting), in addition to its use value, it is disproportionately overpriced compared to other squeezers in the market. Its symbolic exchange value also coincides with gift-giving, since it is one of the main considerations of Starck as he designed it. Starck (quoted in Lloyd Morgan, 1999, 9) states that:

“This is not a very good lemon squeezer: but that’s not its only function. I had this idea that when a couple get married it’s the sort of thing they would get as a wedding present. So, the new husband’s parents come round, he and his father sit in the living room with a beer, watching television, and the new bride and mother-in-law sit in the kitchen to get to know each other better. ‘Look what we got as a present’, the daughter-in-law will say”.

Another factor that warrants attention is the propensity of the squeezer to have a rule-breaking attitude, as indicated by its sign value. This statement demonstrates a confrontation with the entirety of existence. This entity possesses characteristics that

might be deemed both advantageous and disadvantageous, useful and useless, meaningful and meaningless, significant and insignificant, feminine and masculine, retro and futuristic. The object possesses an aesthetically pleasing sculptural quality, even though it exhibits a lack of utilitarian strength. It is an anomalous object that exceeds the binary divide and holds a particular interest and/or disgust, drawing on Lévi-Strauss' argument that "*we structure our world around binary opposites as a universal sense-making process, hence male/female, culture/nature, domesticated/wild*" (Julier, 2014: 89). Moreover, due to these traits, the image of *Juicy Salif* has been used in comics, posters, even as tattoos, etc., communicating different messages and symbolizing various context, such as retro, sci-fi, and erotic, as well (Cogo, 2015).

These representations further highlight the object's transformation from a domestic tool into a cultural symbol, expanding its value beyond functionality and aesthetics. On the 25th anniversary of *Juicy Salif*, a cast bronze version of the squeezer was produced as a limited edition of 299 pieces in 2015, further reinforcing its iconic status. (Figure 3). Each piece was individually numbered and featured the designer's signature, presented in a sculptural display box alongside a certificate signed by Alberto Alessi. This version, intentionally devoid of practical usability, due to its material, underscores the object's transition into an art piece and a collectible artifact. Such limited editions, along with curated photographic representations, like *Juicy Salif* posed beside classical busts or featured in marble form on the cover of *Alessi's* catalogue, amplify the sign value of the object and place it within a visual discourse akin to high art. These practices resonate with Duchamp's readymades and Warhol's serial pop representations, suggesting *Juicy Salif* operates at the intersection of design, art, and commodity culture. Its sign value becomes more prominent through its visual representation and the designer's signature on the product. The increased prestigious representation of the squeezer increases its exchange value, as well, up to €1.000. Considering these, it is possible to recall Duchamp's Fountain and Warhol's artworks and consider *Juicy Salif* as an example of the intersection of these two in the design world. It is also described as "an excellent example of Alessi's role as artistic mediator in the most turbulent areas of Creative Potential", having an unconventional use and generating discussions about its meaning and design (Alessi, 2023).



Figure 3. Cast bronze *Juicy Salif* for the 25th anniversary (PicClick, 2023).

The emphasis on its artistic stance has become much more prominent in time and it has started to be represented as a mere artwork, such as through the photograph of *Juicy Salif* next to busts, as mentioned above, and through its marble replication on the cover of *Alessi* magazine with the title of “Alessi. Italian art everyday” (Figure 4 and 5).



Figure 4. Sculptural display of cast bronze *Juicy Salif* (David Jones, 2023).



Figure 5. Marble replication (FormAdore, 2023).

The provocative and daring features of *Juicy Salif* has led it to achieve museum status as well. It has been a design classic, surpassing its historical context, and displayed in various museums around the world, such the Museum of Modern Art, Centre Georges Pompidou, Museum of Iran University of Science & Technology, Stedelijk Museum, and Thessaloniki Design Museum. Its inclusion in world-renowned museums confirms its institutional validation. Notably, these museums typically reserve space for furniture and industrial classics, whereas *Juicy Salif*, despite its questionable utility, achieves this status purely through its symbolic capital. This is one of the great successes that the squeezer

has achieved, since being a design classic often privileges certain functional products over others, such as chairs and chaises longues, so that many consumer products cannot achieve this status because of being obsolete by the rapid development of technologies even though they provide the best functional or aesthetic solution to a certain problem at their time (Julier, 2014, 91).

Alessi's retail strategies also mirror museological presentation techniques. (Figure 6). This is, again, related with the brand image. It signifies the prestigiousness, uniqueness, and preciousness of *Alessi* products, by displaying them in such a way that museums do, such as within a family of products or a single product in a glass showcase or on a shelf.



Figure 6. Alessi store in NY (Kaufman, 2013).

Moreover, just as the miniatures of some artworks are sold as souvenirs in museum shops, the miniatures of *Juicy Salif* are produced and sold (Figure 7) (Julier, 2014, 93). Therefore, it adds upon the symbolic exchange value of the squeezer as well, since these miniatures are to be exchanged as gifts, as Starck has intended when designing the squeezer. It is obvious that the product even transcends itself and leads to the existence of other products in themselves. In that sense, even though *Juicy Salif* is an affordable prestigious high-design, its smaller replications take on a different role other than being a replica and become a design object themselves.



Figure 7. Miniature *Juicy Salif* and other Alessi products (NOTCOT, 2003).

The squeezer is also produced as a sculpture-like object in human-scale to be used in photoshoots and special events (Figure 8). It loses all its use-value and transforms into a mere signifier of the *Alessi*'s brand image, which is desired to be possessed by the consumers. These design strategies and public receptions show how Juicy Salif transcends its origin as a citrus squeezer and becomes a vessel of layered cultural meanings. It illustrates how design artifacts can shift from functional objects to identity-laden symbols within the value-laden system of consumer culture.



Figure 8. Human-scale *Juicy Salif* (AFP, 2019).

Conclusion

In Baudrillard's view, identity becomes increasingly intertwined with the objects one consumes and is surrounded with. The objects people choose to own and display reflect not just their personal tastes but also the cultural values and narratives they identify with. This process contributes to the construction of a unique and socially recognized identity in the consumer society. Thus, it is imperative for designers to possess a comprehensive understanding of the societal values, needs, and desires. It both informs the design process and ensures that design objects resonate with their users on a cultural and emotional level. Designers should also possess the ability to critically assess the ways in which these cultural assets influence the construction of identities. This highlights the designer's role not only as a creator of functional artifacts but as a cultural intermediary, shaping how individuals project themselves into society through objects. As this study demonstrates, the designer's choices-form, material, narrative-can contribute significantly to the symbolic and sign values of a product, thereby embedding it within broader systems of meaning.

Regarding Baudrillard's perspectives on the consumer society, system of objects, and value-making, *Alessi* and *Juicy Salif* fit well in exemplifying the role of design on the cultural and symbolic aspects of consumer objects through creating value both in objects and the brand. Starck's lemon squeezer is an object of desire and owning a *Juicy Salif* says much more than we may realize. It is a sign of having a good taste for design and opens up a place for you in the society, sharing the same taste. Being regarded as a design icon, it holds a significant status in the realm of design, particularly for designers of high

repute and prestige. This exemplifies how design objects serve as status symbols and markers of cultural capital.

Moreover, this research points toward a broader cultural transformation wherein everyday objects-particularly those designated as "design classics"- gain museum value and operate in the blurred zone between utility, art, and ideology. Juicy Salif's iconic status, its presence in global design museums, and its diverse reinterpretations indicate a shift in how consumption practices can be both personal and performative. Within this perspective, design is a way of value-making in the system of objects – different symbolic and sign values for designers and consumers – and functions in this system through creating stories imbued in these objects, making them more than just utilitarian items. These stories become part of the consumer's own narrative and contribute to their sense of self.

Despite the meaningful findings, this study, which is based on secondary research, is mostly limited to the use of internet resources in the examination of *Juicy Salif*, and supporting the study with in-depth interviews to be conducted with the people who own the product subject to the research will benefit the diversification of the findings obtained. Future research could extend this work by exploring cross-cultural differences in the symbolic interpretations of design objects, or by comparing similar icons across product categories. Moreover, a more systematic analysis of users' narratives-via ethnographic interviews or autoethnography-could enrich the understanding of how sign and symbolic value are internalized and mobilized in everyday life. Exploring the multifaceted relationship between design objects and the construction of value and identity through the example of how design icons, such as *Juicy Salif*, acquire symbolic and cultural significance, this study is a significant resource that offers researchers and designers valuable insights into the design objects' properties of being identity markers. It is also an important academic work in the fields of design, marketing, and cultural studies in terms of offering implications that can be useful for both theory and practice.

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