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Social Approaches – A Means for Designers to Foster Sustainable Behaviour

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To meet sustainability objectives, designers have primarily relied upon technological considerations such as the selection of raw material and processes in the design of products. While such considerations have delivered more efficient products, the associated use-behaviour also plays an important role in deciding the impact product has on environment. Designers make 'strategic use' of design to induce a positive change in behaviour towards usage of the product. This is done through design of products and their interactions, wherein the product informs and (or) guides the user towards adoption of more sustainable actions while using the product.

While the design-led approaches have been quite useful in encouraging efficient usage of the products, Social approaches emerging from the field of social psychology and sociology have also been quite effective in fostering sustainable behaviour. These approaches consider that human behaviour is socially grounded, thus the behaviour and actions take place under the influence of the context. And, the surrounding influences i.e. the social group or the community plays an important role in influencing the choices made by an individual. Therefore, in order to bring a change in behaviour, social approaches target the entire social group surrounding an individual. A number of different solutions have emerged through these Social approaches, which have been quite effective in encouraging adoption of more sustainable action and behaviour among consumers.

The paper reviews a diverse set of successfully implemented solutions derived from these social approaches that have been effective in influencing behaviour of a particular social group. Through the review of these examples, the paper attempts to highlight the effectiveness, scope and importance of Social approaches. It further provides a comparison between the design-led and social approaches through various perspectives, and highlights the key differences. It attempts to draw attention on the social approaches, and proposes that in order to bring a change in behaviour and actions, designers should also go beyond the conventional design-led and product-dependent approaches and take into account the social context as well.

Furthermore, the paper highlights the role 'design' can play in facilitating such socially engaging solutions and recommends the need for a structured framework for designers to conceptualize such solutions. A framework which consists of a set of guidelines from social psychology, and which can provide the appropriate method of application based on the study of successful cases. It should also provide possible traits, techniques which can be used by designers to conceptualize product-service-mix Systems for motivating a particular social group or community.