“Why Don’t You Just Adopt?”
A Theoretical Exploration of the Dynamics of Everyday Appropriation and its Implications for Product Design

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ABSTRACT
This article introduces two theoretical perspectives on users’ creative appropriations of new products which underline that product adoption goes beyond the moment of buying a product. It points out that successful and sustainable product adoption arises from enabling users’ concrete action to creatively adopt and integrate a product into existing or emergent practices. Within the discipline of design, users’ everyday life has been acknowledged to be full of hacks and workarounds. Everyday life has been recognized as a highly variable and complex unit of analysis which, according to some sociologists, gets continuously shaped and re-shaped by materials, images and skills within the boundary of what is called ‘a practice’. This paper will elaborate on two perspectives – design in-use and practice theory – to articulate an extended view on product adoption that could take into account the dynamics and the relevance of users’ creative efforts in their everyday lives. It will suggest some guidelines for innovation managers, product developers and others who deal with issues related to product adoption.

Keywords: Actor Network Theory, Design-In-Use, Design Guidelines, Design Process, Everyday Life, Practice Theory, Product Adoption, Technological Innovation

1. INTRODUCTION
At the beginning of the 21st century industrialized countries have to deal with increased globalization in terms of market and production. At the same time, they struggle with an erosion of the economic basis of their welfare system, caused by unemployment, an aging population and new cultural patterns, as well as an exhaustion of natural resources (Morelli, 2007, p. 5). This new situation demands new perspectives, and thus increases the political pressure to think ahead and mobilize for different ways of a creative exploration of new solutions. Governments in industrialized countries spend progressively more money on programs that foster design thinking and

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innovation in e.g., education (universities, schools) and public services. A substantial amount of financial resources is allocated to design and innovation experts to come up with new ideas, design and develop new products and services that are expected to be potentially adopted by consumers and serve their intended purposes. However, a 2005 Business Week issue estimated that the success rate of such innovation initiatives meeting their financial objectives is as low as 4% (Denning & Dunham, 2006, p. 3).

One question arises. Why don’t consumers simply adopt what professional innovators present to them? To answer this question, it might be beneficial, instead of asking why, to take a look at how consumers actually integrate, or fail to integrate, products into their everyday lives and participate in the shaping of new practices; to take a look at how current thinking in innovation management conceptualizes consumers’ role in the adoption process and how other research fields underline or contrast this conceptualization.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING THE ROLE OF CONSUMER’S CREATIVE EFFORTS IN PRODUCT ADOPTION

Mainstream product development literature (e.g., on designing and managing innovative products and services) places the concept of “creativity” either within the fuzzy-front end of new product development (NPD) where strategy is laid out, concepts are generated and their feasibility is assessed; or within the attributes of the creative artifact itself. In recent years, however, this very limited vision has been questioned at various ends. In the area of design research, for instance, a product is seen as a material that is adopted only in so much as it is adapted to prevailing circumstances and “ecologies” (Ehn, 2008; Redström, 2008). These ecologies include a constellation of other materials and human beings each having a place that changes continuously in space and time. As an example, one can think of a book that is being read by a father, that is being used as a toy in a theatre play by a child, that is being used as a heavy item to hold in place loose papers on the desk, or that is being placed in the family’s library as a memorable antique from the 19th century. A book is not simply a book, in this case, but it can take different roles and shape a family’s life in different ways; it can be highly practical or become an archival artifact, thus being endowed with different meanings in certain situations. The book (product) can easily become these different things. To some, it is one of the greatest inventions that never seem to have completely faltered despite technological advances. It is a product design that, for instance, incorporates each of the three important features of “good design”, namely “usefulness, usability and desirability” (“triangle of doom” in Buchanan, 2004), while leaving it up to the user to define the weighing of each of these features. Almost any form of creative appropriation can readily happen through its simplicity, transparency, and versatility, amongst others. People can invest in their skills and create meaning with the help of a product, which is thus integrated into existing or new forms of practices (Shove et al., 2012; Suchman et al., 1999).