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INNOVATE, EMPOWER, SUSTAIN: A DESIGN THINKING APPROACH TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Romita Swarup¹ and Dr. Payal G Mehta²

¹Director of R & D, Designiversity, Ahmedabad 380009, India

²Faculty of Law, GLS University, Ahmedabad 380009, India

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*Corresponding author: Romita Swarup,

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a transformative journey at the intersection of innovation, empowerment, and sustainability within the realm of entrepreneurship. In a world grappling with complex environmental and social challenges, this initiative advocates for a novel perspective – the integration of design thinking principles into entrepreneurial endeavours. The narrative unfolds as entrepreneurs embark on a mission to create impactful solutions by prioritizing empathy, collaboration, and iterative problem-solving. The paper delves into the core beliefs of design thinking and their application in sustainable entrepreneurship. Through case study, it showcases how this approach fosters a deep understanding of stakeholder needs, promotes environmentally conscious practices, and engenders solutions that positively impact society. The collaborative nature of design thinking is explored that transcends traditional boundaries, involving diverse stakeholders in co-creating ventures that balance profit with purpose. Also highlights the importance of user-centered design in the development of products and services that align with sustainability goals. By employing a holistic system thinking approach, entrepreneurs pave the way for comprehensive and enduring solutions. The narrative emphasizes the iterative and adaptive nature of both design thinking and sustainable entrepreneurship, portraying them as mutually reinforcing cycles of innovation and improvement. As entrepreneurs navigate this dynamic landscape, the paper concludes by underscoring the potential for sustainable entrepreneurship to not only redefine business success but also contribute meaningfully to a more sustainable and equitable future. "Innovate, Empower, Sustain" encapsulates a compelling narrative of creativity, collaboration, and resilience in the pursuit of entrepreneurial ventures that leave a lasting positive impact on the world.

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INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship today operates within a landscape shaped by global environmental pressures, social inequities, and rapid technological change. Conventional business models, often focused on financial outcomes alone, struggle to address these multidimensional challenges. This creates an urgent need for approaches that integrate economic viability with ecological and social responsibility. Design thinking provides a valuable framework to meet this need. Grounded in empathy, collaboration, and iterative problem-solving, it enables entrepreneurs to reframe challenges, integrate diverse stakeholder perspectives, and co-create innovative solutions. Its emphasis on prototyping, feedback, and adaptability closely aligns with the principles of sustainable entrepreneurship, helping ventures generate outcomes that are both user-centered and socially responsible. By combining design thinking with sustainable entrepreneurship, businesses gain a structured yet flexible pathway to innovation. This integration not only supports ventures in balancing profit with purpose but also positions entrepreneurship as a catalyst for resilience, inclusivity, and meaningful global change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Design thinking, once linked primarily to architectural inquiry (Rowe, 1987), gained prominence in business and management studies in the late 20th century. (T, 2008) framed it as a discipline that matches human needs with technological feasibility and viable business strategy, while (R, 2009) emphasized its blend of intuitive and analytical thinking. Together, these perspectives highlight its evolution from a design practice to a recognized approach for innovation in business. At its core, design thinking combines a mindset and a toolkit. It draws on methods such as ethnographic research, visualization, prototyping, and rapid experimentation applied flexibly depending on project needs (J, 2015) and (Magistretti, 2021). This adaptability explains its growing appeal across industries, where it has been used to generate products, services, and processes refined through user feedback. Overall, design thinking is best understood as a human-centered innovation process that emphasizes observation, collaboration, and iterative problem-solving, making it a valuable tool for entrepreneurial practice.

User-centered design and its impact on entrepreneurial ventures:

(B, 1979) described design thinking as a distinct cognitive approach, separate from scientific thinking but effective for specific problem types. (T, 2008) later emphasized its role in delivering innovative solutions by reframing problems through the perspectives of end-users, illustrating the evolution from theory to practical application. IDEO's 3I's model Inspiration, Ideation, and Implementation demonstrates how design thinking fosters creative problem-solving, while Kolb's experiential learning framework highlights the importance of learning through doing. Together, they underscore how human-centered approaches support entrepreneurs in developing solutions that are both innovative and grounded in real-world user needs. By focusing on user perspectives and iterative experimentation, design thinking strengthens entrepreneurial ventures' ability to create products, services, and processes that are relevant, adaptable, and sustainable.

Design thinking for societal challenges: Design thinking is increasingly applied to complex, "wicked" problems and grand challenges, where solutions are uncertain and stakeholder needs are diverse (R B. , 1992) and (W, 2012). By reframing problems and exploring multiple perspectives, it enables innovative approaches that extend beyond traditional business solutions. Engaging a wide range of stakeholders through co-design and participatory processes ensures inclusivity and ownership of solutions (Bowen, 2016) and (Hyysalo, 2019). Methods such as crowd sourcing and collaborative ideation further expand the reach of design thinking, making it a valuable tool for addressing societal and environmental challenges. This approach also informs public policy development, highlighting how design thinking can support participatory governance and the reshaping of social institutions (Howlett, 2015) and (Mintrom, 2016).

Collaborative innovation and Ecosystems: Collaborative innovation for sustainability involves cross-sector partnerships that bring together businesses, governments, non-profits, and communities to address environmental and societal challenges. By leveraging diverse expertise and resources, these collaborations foster holistic, enduring solutions that prioritize both social responsibility and environmental stewardship. In sustainable entrepreneurship, such ecosystems enable stakeholders to share knowledge, co-create innovations, and align efforts toward common goals. Cross-sector partnerships, in particular, facilitate systemic approaches to sustainable innovation, ensuring that solutions are inclusive, impactful, and economically viable.

User-centered design for sustainability: Sustainability in design goes beyond long-term endurance it requires integrating ecological and social responsibility into every stage of product, service, or process development. Designers must consider environmental impact, ethical implications, and user engagement to create solutions that promote responsible consumption and well-being. Human- or user-centered strategies focus on understanding how people interact with products and shaping design to influence behaviour toward sustainable outcomes. By aligning products with actual usage patterns, designers can reduce waste, eliminate redundant features, and enhance the overall user experience. Integrating sustainability into user-centered design ensures that innovations are not only functional and user-friendly but also socially responsible and environmentally conscious, supporting long-term positive impact.

Exploratory Qualitative study: Explorra Consulting, situated in Ahmedabad, India, recently conducted a series of workshops for a multinational automobile company based in India. This company stands out as India's leading two-wheeler manufacturer, having successfully sold over 100 million two-wheelers to date. Positioned in New Delhi, the company places innovation at the core of its philosophy and has consistently been a trailblazer in designing and developing cutting-edge technology. With a steadfast commitment to innovation and an expanding ecosystem, the company is poised to revolutionize electric mobility under its new brand. Pledging to uphold Sustainability and Diversity & Inclusion values, the company aspires to shape a greener, safer, and more equitable future—a commitment vividly reflected in its actions.

Case-Study by Explorra Consulting: Qualitative Findings

Objective of Case Study and Research: To take action to retain its iron grip on the domestic two-wheeler market and keep its fierce competitors at bay through a tactful plan. Ambition to grow continually, this automobile brand has created an Innovation Program for its employees i.e. creating startups within the organization to promote innovation and disruptive thinking. Startups are praised for their agility and innovation which are often disruptive in nature. Large-sized companies often find it difficult to maneuver during challenging times which could lead to a fall in the competitive edge. Thus, the program aims to foster innovative products, services, systems-processes from within the organization. The core focus of the program was to help the participants for establishing a start up in the two-wheeler space around the concepts i.e. electric vehicles, service stations of future, shared mobility etc. Design Clinic Were Conducted Two workshops were carried throughout this research. The stages of Design Thinking process were applied. Conclusion Three level interventions were proposed, and then implemented at Company, whereby the following was one of the interventions:

Internal Accelerator – whereby the company could compete with startups and disruptions in automobile sector by themselves nurturing startups from within their employees. Resulted into, solutions that were sustainable, technologically feasible, business wise viable and there was a need of the user.

1. Electric Vehicles
2. Shared Mobility
3. Convertible 2-Wheeler to 3-Wheeler for Rural India

Problems/Possibilities

- Instilling ownership of work
- Lack of vigorous strategies
- Increasing stakeholder collaboration
- Gaining competitive edge

Challenges

- With the advent of an era of 'intelligent' systems, processes, manufacturing, products & services the gap between learning and application is becoming critical. 'First to launch, first to capitalize and first to change' - this cyclic process is in a hyperloop.
- The 'Stakeholder Centric' focus is putting the stakeholder at the center of the innovation process a change that has not only become imperative for growth but influences the very survival of organizations.
- Launch of new business, product, service models that are based on deep insights of diverse markets and specific user needs in a super charged competitive space and fast transforming sectoral needs.
- Instilling Innovation in the DNA of the organization so as to bring agility and dynamism.

Areas of Intervention: The program was created as a Level I design thinking program that used hands-on learning by doing (experiential) for human-centric problem-solving approach engaging specific stages and using specific tools and techniques for each stage. This shall entail awareness and sensitization towards

- Design thinking methodology using principles of lean, agile, SCRUM contextual to automobile manufacturer
- Need for Design thinking global best practices contextual to local cultural centric creativity
- Customized Design thinking stages and comparison models for start-ups.
- Tools and techniques, methods and process for each stage through assignments & mini-projects.

- Mentoring for entrepreneurial mindset.
- Expert sessions to engage with respect to the domain knowledge.
- Management inputs for enriching business understanding.

Impact Outcome

- Ten managers successfully created two start-ups in 3 months.
- The 2 start-ups got funded by the organization for pilot testing their business models and minimum viable products/services
- The corporate accelerator program has become a much sort after program amongst employees of the organization thus creating a culture for innovation initiative.
- The two start-ups of past year have got funded for launching their businesses. They were successful at pilot stage.
- The organization has formalized this program, and has increased both the scale and size of the program.

Challenges and future directions: Integrating design thinking into sustainable entrepreneurship faces several challenges. Traditional business models may clash with its iterative, user-focused approach, requiring a culture that embraces experimentation and learning from failure. Sustained collaboration among diverse stakeholders' environmental experts, social activists, and business leaders demands effective communication and shared knowledge platforms. Resource constraints and perceived higher costs of sustainable practices can hinder adoption, highlighting the need to demonstrate long-term benefits and explore innovative funding models. Regulatory complexities and varying sustainability standards further complicate implementation, making engagement with policymakers essential. Additionally, ensuring inclusivity and addressing the needs of all stakeholders, including marginalized communities, requires a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. By addressing these challenges, entrepreneurs can enhance the impact of design thinking in fostering sustainable, socially responsible innovation.

Emerging trends and future directions in the field: Design thinking and sustainable entrepreneurship are evolving with several key trends shaping innovation and social impact:

- **Circular Economy:** Designing products and services for reuse, recycling, and waste minimization.
- **Technology Integration:** Leveraging AI, IoT, and other technologies to create user-friendly, environmentally sustainable solutions.
- **Regenerative Design:** Moving beyond minimizing harm to actively contributing to ecosystems and communities.
- **Inclusive Design Thinking:** Addressing the needs of diverse communities, fostering equity and accessibility.
- **Data-Driven Sustainability:** Using analytics to measure and enhance environmental and social impact.
- **Global Collaboration:** Cross-border and cross-sector partnerships advancing sustainability goals, including the UN SDGs.
- **Sustainable Finance:** Impact investment and finance models supporting scalable, sustainable ventures.
- **Education and Skills:** Expanding design thinking and sustainability training to cultivate skilled innovators.

- **Consumer Awareness:** Rising demand for sustainable solutions influencing business strategies.
- **Policy and Standards:** Clearer regulations, incentives, and frameworks to support sustainable entrepreneurship.
- **Resilient Supply Chains:** Applying design thinking to maintain sustainability amidst disruptions.

These trends indicate a future where entrepreneurship increasingly balances innovation, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship.

CONCLUSION

Approach to Entrepreneurship highlights the transformative power of design thinking in fostering innovation, empowerment, and sustainability. The application of human-centric methodologies has proven instrumental in reshaping problem-solving paradigms and driving entrepreneurial success. By placing the needs, experiences, and aspirations of end-users at the forefront, design thinking emerges as a catalyst for meaningful innovation. The empowerment aspect underscores the collaborative and inclusive nature of this approach, bringing together diverse perspectives to create solutions that resonate with communities. Furthermore, sustainability emphasizes the responsibility to address societal and environmental challenges, paving the way for enduring, ethically grounded ventures. As we navigate the dynamic landscape of entrepreneurship, the design thinking ethos stands out as a versatile and potent tool, guiding ventures towards not only innovation and success but also social responsibility and enduring impact.

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