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Evaluating in interaction: subjective-side and objective-side assessments in design review

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ABSTRACT

This study responds to ongoing calls to illuminate the interactional practices of design by examining design evaluation conversations. Through a microethnographic analysis of a recorded design review meeting between a designer and two clients who are also co-CEOs, the study investigates how participants evoke and navigate diverse opinions through verbal, vocal, and bodily practices, with particular attention to their use of subjective-side and objective-side assessments. The analysis reveals that participants' activation of objective-side and subjective-side perspectives gives rise to a dichotomy between practicality and aesthetics, resulting in diverging views. However, these formulations also enable participants to achieve agreement. The study highlights how a keen awareness of these distinctions can be strategically leveraged to support productive and relational evaluation activities.

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Client-designer communication; conversation analysis; design evaluation; design review; microethnography; subjective-/objective-side assessment

1. Introduction

Evaluative conversations are central to the shaping of design outcomes (Moeran and Christensen 2013; Oak 2000). They involve participants making decisions by 'trying to make sense of what is good or bad; what holds promise and what is a dead end; what "sparkles" and what "stinks"' (Moeran and Christensen 2013, 10). Rather than a purely objective science, design evaluation is a discursive and negotiated activity, where judgements emerge through interaction. In these conversations, participants draw on and coordinate multiple stances – professional, personal, affective – to determine the direction of the design process. This study explores how such negotiations unfold in real time, through a close analysis of audio- and video-recorded interactions between a designer and his client team composed of two co-CEOs. It examines how participants formulate and navigate diverging views and reach – or fail to reach – agreement through subtle but consequential verbal, vocal, and embodied practices. Special attention is given to a linguistic resource that distinguishes between evaluation framed as 'features of the world' ('objective-side') or 'as judgements of individuals' ('subjective-side') (Edwards and Potter 2017, 497–498). By analysing how design participants move between these two assessment types, the study sheds light on how designers and clients collaboratively construct what is meaningful, promising or problematic in a design, moment by moment, and in interaction.

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2. Subjectivity and objectivity in design evaluation

Design evaluation is a hybrid process, encompassing both subjective and objective dimensions, in which evaluators draw selectively on specific aspects, reasonings, and requirements (Christensen and Ball 2016; Dong, Garbuio, and Lovallo 2016; Whitham et al. 2019). They may offer feedback on both usability and affective response (Karlsson 2007), use irony and humour when judging design ethics (Miller 2025), and apply empathic techniques to consider design use from both their own and the users' perspectives (Hess and Fila 2016). Rather than relying solely on fixed criteria or measurable standards, evaluations often reflect an individual's practical, emotional, and rhetorical interpretations of a design.

In evaluation activities involving multiple actors, varying stances, perspective and opinions often emerge and intertwine, requiring ongoing negotiation. Design evaluation, then, is less about reaching a singular truth and more about navigating tensions between what is measurable and what is meaningful. Communicative skills are central to this 'political' process shaped by 'negotiations of "matters of concern"' rather than 'matters of fact' (Pedersen 2020, 63). Research has therefore explored various interactional tactics used by, and recommended for, designers to generate constructive design evaluation activity that supports professional design practice. For example, McDonnell (2016) examined how design students develop professional competencies through receiving assessments from instructors and producing their own evaluations, which helps them build skills in reasoning, defending, and justifying their design choices. Oak and Lloyd (2016) highlighted the delicacy of evaluative exchanges by focusing on the institutional nature of assessment in pedagogical design review sessions. Their work revealed the challenges students face in learning to critically evaluate design, particularly when instructor authority constrains dialogue or when students find it socially difficult to assess peers. Sonalkar et al. (2016) demonstrated how design evaluation blends objectivity and subjectivity through interactive patterns such as questioning, support, and humour. These behaviours help articulate professional vision, showing how shared standards and individual interpretations converge in design reviews. Collectively, these studies underscore that design evaluation is not a fixed measurement but a socially situated process, in which subjective and objective viewpoints are negotiated, contested, and aligned to shape evolving design outcomes (Oak 2000).

To better understand how subjective and objective aspects of evaluation unfold in practice, it is useful to examine how participants construct evaluative statements – most commonly through assessments. As interactional studies have shown, assessments are not merely reflections of inner preferences or external truths; they are rhetorical acts situated within interaction (e.g. Heritage 2002; Oshima and Llewellyn 2023; Pomerantz 1984). Particularly relevant to this study is the distinction between subject-side (S-side) and object-side (O-side) assessments, developed in discursive psychology to highlight attitudes and evaluations as social phenomena (Edwards and Potter 2017; Potter, Hepburn, and Edwards 2020; Wiggins and Potter 2003). S-side assessments are typically first-person expressions (e.g. 'I like/dislike/love/hate/adore it') that individualise the evaluation, 'claiming personal experience of it, and rights to assess it, . . . but also to relativize the assessment, as a matter of personal opinion rather than something inherent in the object assessed' (Edwards and Potter 2017, 504). O-side assessments, in contrast, are 'predicated of an object' (497), using impersonal or declarative forms (e.g. 'it is good/bad/nice/awful'). They are 'built as intersubjective and shared, independent of the speaker . . . they do not restrict

judgment to the speaker' (511). While S-side assessments reflect the evaluator's personal ownership of the judgement, O-side assessments present the evaluation as an inherent attribute of the object, rather than merely the speaker's opinion.

Crucially, the S-side/O-side distinction is not an analytical imposition but a resource for participants themselves. For example, 'I love it' in response to 'It's good' can assert autonomous access and judgement rather than simple agreement, demonstrating perceived entitlement or authority (Edwards and Potter 2017). O-side assessments may be used to offer compliments that hold value beyond personal opinion or to challenge another's subjective evaluations (Wiggins and Potter 2003). S-side assessments, which limit the scope of evaluation, can soften critique, avoid sounding overly authoritative or express disagreement while maintaining social delicacy (Potter, Hepburn, and Edwards 2020), such as when rejecting an O-side evaluation ('It is a very nice wine') with a personal preference ('I don't like red wine') (Wiggins and Potter 2003). As such, the distinction offers a powerful lens into design evaluation, where the assessed object (a design) may not come with a mechanical set of criteria (such as whether a car engine works or a software program compiles without errors), but instead involves participants' feelings, vision, and values. Assessments in design conversations are not only about evaluating a design's qualities; they also negotiate personal authority, entitlement, taste, and relationships with the assessed object and each other. The current study builds on dynamic and rapidly evolving discussions regarding designing as social activity. It explores the moment-by-moment interactional practices through which design evaluations are achieved, focusing specifically on the role of S-side and O-side assessments. The central research questions are: how do review conversations between a designer and client group unfold? And in what ways do S-side and O-side assessments serve to evoke and negotiate participants' multiple evaluative expressions?

3. Methodology

The current study unpacks the emergence and navigation of diverse client opinions through a microethnographic analysis of a design review meeting. Using conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) – a method increasingly applied to the study of situated design practices (Heinemann, Landgrebe, and Matthews 2012; McDonnell 2012; Oak 2000) – this study explores how participants organise talk, physical movements, and interactions with materials to facilitate collaborative activities. This approach reveals how broader societal issues are manifested in subtle interactive actions, such as a shift in gaze (Goodwin 1980) or the insertion of verbal tokens like 'oh' (Heritage 2002). As such, the study responds to growing calls to investigate 'the micro-mechanisms through which design multiples are constituted, and linked, in design practice' (Pihkala and Karasti 2016, 24), and to explore 'the dynamics underlying design practices themselves' (Fischer, Östlund, and Peine 2021, 2) and 'more open, complex, dynamic and networked design problems' (Ball and Christensen 2018, 2) that designers encounter. This is achieved through 'using an ethnographic approach, particularly *in situ* observation and recording' (1) to examine the 'micro-dynamics' of 'real-world design practice' (Zhang and Ma 2024).

The microethnographic investigation followed the key processes of transcribing and the next-turn-proof-procedure. Transcribing 'provides the researcher with a way of noticing, even discovering, particular events, and helps focus analytic attention on their socio-interactional organization' (Heath and Luff 1993, 309). As transcription formed an integral

part of the analysis, the researcher carried it out personally and checked its accuracy through participant consultations and data sessions (Hepburn and Bolden 2012). This study uses Gail Jefferson's transcription system (see Table 1) to capture verbal and vocal actions, and transcriptionist comments in double parentheses (see Hepburn and Bolden 2012) to document nonvocal and bodily actions. Although time-consuming and meticulous, the transcribing process is essential for capturing 'not only what is said but also details of how something is said' (Hepburn and Bolden 2012, 57). For instance, the utterances 'I love it' and 'I lo:ve it' may appear similar but can perform markedly different interactional functions.

Once transcribed, an in-depth, sequential analysis was conducted using the 'next-turn-proof-procedure' (Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008), which uncovers how interactants display their understanding of each other's prior turns through verbal, vocal, and bodily actions – particularly relevant here in examining how evaluative utterances are responded to by others. This approach reveals design evaluation as the 'members' work' (Garfinkel 1996, 11), that is, an accomplishment by the participants rather than something assessed solely by the analyst. Accordingly, instances of S-side and O-side assessments are identified from the participants' perspectives, i.e. how they publicly use 'subjective terms index or foreground the subject; objective terms index or foreground the object' (Wiggins and Potter 2003, 516) rather than through the analyst's judgement of the statement's accuracy or factuality.

The three excerpts analysed in this study are drawn from a series of video- and audio-recorded meetings between a freelance designer, Ethan, and his clients across three different companies, totalling approximately 15 hours of recordings. Consent was obtained from all participants prior to each consultation, and pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to ensure anonymity. This paper focuses on Ethan's work with one of the companies – a case involving two business co-founders, Bo and Jan, who hired him to redesign their company's website, starting with the home page. As previously discussed, assessments manifest interlocutors' varying stances and accesses to the assessed objects, and 'rights to evaluate states of affairs are indeed "ordinarily patrolled and defended" by individuals' (Heritage and Raymond 2005, 34). In this case, the two co-CEOs share institutional

Table 1. Transcription glossary.

Symbol	Used to indicate
<u>yes</u>	speaker emphasis
YES	noticeably louder than surrounding talk
°yes°	noticeably quieter than surrounding talk
u:	stretched sound
ca-	sharp cut-off of the prior sound
,	continuing intonation
.	falling intonation
=	latching between utterances
> <	noticeably quicker than surrounding talk
< >	noticeably slower than surrounding talk
↑	rising intonational shift
↓	falling intonational shift
·hh	hearable in-breath
hh	hearable out-breath
(.)	micropause (less than 0.2 seconds)
(0.5)	time gap in tenths of a second
[yes]	overlapping talk
[no:]	
()	presence of an unclear fragment
((nods))	descriptions of embodied actions including gestures, facial expressions, body posture, gaze shifts, nodding and the use of material objects

authority and entitlement, as well as ‘first-hand and immediate’ access (Raymond and Heritage 2006, 684) to the designs. In a previous meeting, Jan and Bo had shown Ethan their current website and discussed user and business needs to inform the redesign. A week later, they reconvened for a review session where Ethan presented three new design concepts on his laptop (see Figure 1). The 2.5-hour meeting began with Ethan spending the first hour presenting and explaining the designs. During this time, Jan and Bo offered several assessments of each concept. However, Ethan did not treat these as formal evaluations; he either did not respond or indicated that the review was only just beginning. Only after presenting all three designs did Ethan begin to engage with Bo and Jan’s evaluative comments. While the entire meeting was closely reviewed and noted, this study focuses analytically on three assessment sequences that occurred after the presentation phase – moments selected for their evaluative richness and relative to the research questions.

4. Analysis

In the following analysis, I examine three excerpts where designer Ethan (ETH in transcripts) and his clients, Jan and Bo, discuss and assess three design options (D1, D2, and D3) for their company website. These moments offer insight into how initial divergences are expressed (Excerpt 1), how individual likes are elaborated (Excerpt 2), and how partial agreements are reached (Excerpts 2 and 3). In light of the research questions, the analysis focuses on the roles of S-side and O-side assessments in shaping the interactional outcomes of each phase.

4.1. *From S-side disagreement to O-side agreement via the designer*

We begin with a brief excerpt that starts with Jan’s S-side assessment, followed by Ethan’s O-side assessment. This sequence occurs 1 hour into the meeting, immediately after the review of all three designs. Prior to this moment, Bo had expressed his fondness for the final design, D3, by saying, ‘I like that one’ and ‘I think it is good’, and showed

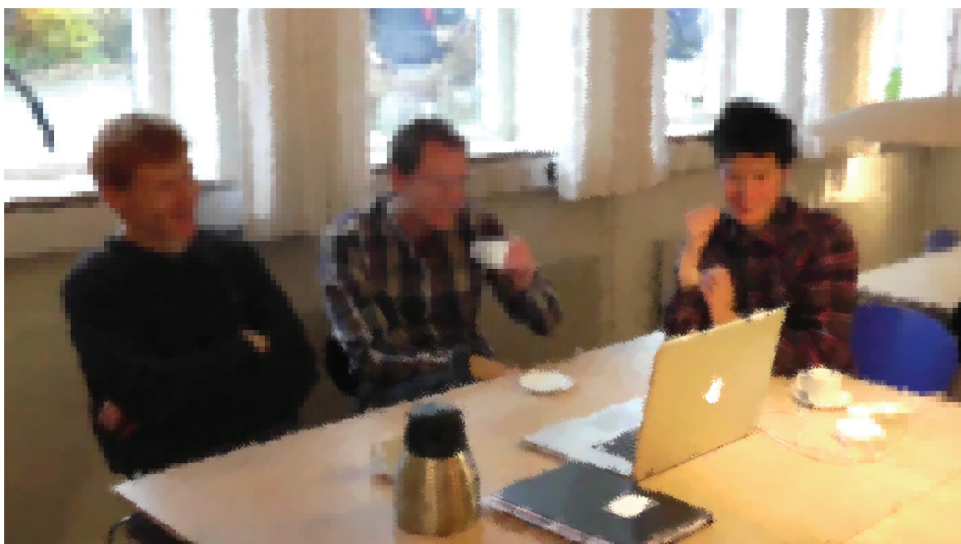


Figure 1. From left to right, Jan and Bo (the client team) and Ethan (the designer).

enthusiasm as they experimented with how D3 interacted with various photographic images. After a long pause, Jan interjects, stating that he likes all three designs.

Excerpt 1: Assessing all designs (00:58:10–00:58:30)

1 BO: ((leans back in his chair)) okay

2 Ps: (6.0)((everyone's looking at the screen, BO and ETH covering mouth))

3 JAN: tsk °hh I actually like all three designs so it's=

4 BO: =[HEH HEH [HEH HEH HEH (.) hh hh
((BO reaches his coffee cup))

5 JAN: =[a- hh hh [hh hh hh hh hh hh hh

6 ETH: [hhhhhhhh (.) hh hh hh (.) °hhh
((ETH winces and looks at JAN))((ETH shifts gaze away from JAN
and shifts posture))

7 Ps: (0.3)((Bo picks up his coffee; Ethan looks at the screen))

8 ETH: that's a-um, (0.3) that's a good predicament (.) I °thi[nk °
((ETH looks at JAN)) ((ETH shifts his gaze to the screen; BO takes a sip))

9 JAN: [(yea-jo:)

10 BO: [mm-huh,
((BO brings cup down))

11 Ps: (1.5)((BO swallows his drink))

12 BO: ((tsk)) yea, (.) definitely
((BO nods and puts down the cup))

13 ETH: >you want see some of the other ones?<

After a 6-second pause (line 2), Jan initiates a new sequence with an S-side assessment (line 3). This positive evaluation serves as a compliment to the designer, but also as an acknowledgement of the problematic aspect of liking all three designs. The word ‘actually’ can do ‘counterinformings’ (Clift 2001), marking Jan’s assessment as differentiating from previous statements. Jan may be contrasting his view with Bo’s previously displayed fondness for D3 and/or highlighting the difficulty of choosing one design. Either way, the combination of S-side, ‘like’ and ‘actually’ evokes ‘multi-subjectivity’ (Potter, Hepburn, and Edwards 2020) and emphasises the personal and individual nature of Jan’s assessment.

Bo neither agrees nor disagrees with Jan's assessment and responds with laughter (line 4). This laughter may address the difference in opinions on the designs, as shared laughter can ease potential awkwardness during disagreements (Raclaw and Ford 2017). Bo's laughter indeed prompts shared laughter among the group (lines 4–6). As soon as Bo starts laughing, he reaches his coffee cup (line 4), projecting that he will be drinking coffee rather than verbally responding to Jan's assessment. Ethan then responds to Jan's assessment by acknowledging both the positive and problematic aspects of Jan's evaluation, referring to the situation as a 'good predicament' (line 8). While Ethan does not specify the nature of the predicament or contrast, his O-side assessment shifts the focus from the differing stances expressed by Bo and Jan to the 'qualities of the world' (Potter, Hepburn, and Edwards 2020, 350), namely, the positively problematic situation they are in. Jan

Potter 2017, 505).

4.2. Collaborative shift from divergent S-side to shared O-side

a new assessment sequence (line 4).

Excerpt 2: Assessing D3 (00:59:23–1:00:00)

```

1 ETH: °look at that before making decisions°=
                      |         |
                      +-----+
                    ((ETH looks at JAN/BO))

2 JAN: =yea,

3 Ps: (0.7) ((ETH nods 3 times; JAN continues to make small nods;
             BO continues to gaze at the screen))

4 BO: °hh I like the, the, the::: (.) third one,
           |          |       |
           +----+     +---+   |
        ((BO points to the screen)) ((BO re-points the screen))
               |              |
               +-----+      |
            ((ETH looks at BO)) ((ETH shifts gaze to the screen))

5 Ps: (0.4) ((ETH moves his hand to the computer))

6 BO: °hh mm if you take,(.) choose the (.) >third one becase=um<
    |
((ETH starts navigating the keyboard to bring up the third design;
 BO rests his hand on his chin))

7 BO: I think it's-

8 Ps: (0.6)

9 Bo: tsk it's eas-, (.) no:
    |                |
    +-----+
    ((BO moves his hand toward the screen, with his pen pointing
    towards it))

10 Ps: (0.6)
```


Bo's S-side assessment (line 4) is produced as a dispreferred turn shape: a turn design that signals the speaker's orientation to their action as potentially socially problematic (Pomerantz 1984). He audibly inhales before speaking, and the phrase 'the third one' is delayed. He subsequently begins to account for his fondness for D3 (lines 6–9), which similarly displays his sensitivity to possible issues with his own actions (Raevaara 2011). This orientation to the action as potentially problematic may stem from the sequential context: 1) Jan had previously stated (in Excerpt 1) that he liked all three designs, undermining Bo's earlier praise of D3; and 2) Ethan had encouraged the group to take their time deciding beyond the current meeting. As Bo begins his explanation, Ethan attempts to display the design in question (lines 5–8), but selects the wrong one, prompting Bo's correction ('no' in line 9). Ethan then re-displays the correct design, D3 (lines 11–12), which enables Bo's O-side assessment to proceed.

- 11 ETH: [this one
|
((ETH retracts his hand from the computer))
- 12 BO: [thAt One, yea,=
|
((BO sharply points to the screen))
- 13 ETH: =°mm-huh,°
|
((ETH rubs his nose))
- 14 BO: because that- i- i- (.) it's (0.4) it might be easier for us to:
| | |
((BO points pen to. (BO rests pen against (BO pen-draws a circle
the screen)) his forehead)) towards the screen))
- 15 Ps: (1.4) ((BO scratches his forehead with pen))
- 16 BO: to work with
|
((BO makes another circular motion towards screen with pen and
looks at JAN))
- 17 Ps: (0.2) ((BO continues to rotate his pen and look at JAN))
- 18 ETH: hm, ((ETH keeps looking at the screen, remaining still))
- 19 Ps: (0.4) ((BO stops moving the pen, still looking at JAN))
- 20 JAN: mm-huh,
|
((BO brings pen to the forehead and looks back at the screen))
- 21 Ps: (3.0) ((everyone remains still))

Having confirmed the correct design on the screen through emphatic speech ('thAt One') and pointing (line 12), Bo completes his explanation with an O-side assessment (lines 14–16, 'It's, it might be easier for us to work with'). As Potter, Hepburn, and Edwards (2020) note, the shift from an S-side to an O-side assessment can signal sensitivity to possible disagreement. Bo's delivery further marks this turn as socially problematic, as evidenced by his pauses, cut-offs, a repair and head scratching (Pomerantz 1984). In this sense, Bo's S-O assessment sequence functions as what Potter, Hepburn, and Edwards (2020) describe as a 'contrastive headline for further disagreement' (350), projecting a potential divergence between his and Jan's preferences.

Indeed, what follows is a noticeable absence of agreement or any responsive action. Bo's formulation (lines 14–16) includes opportunities for Jan to respond, for instance, during the

After several attempts, Bo finally receives a response from Jan (line 20). However, Jan's minimal 'mm-huh' serves as a weak agreement (Gardner 1997). This weak response halts the progression of the sequence, evident from the long pause that follows (line 21). After the pause, Ethan intervenes to move the sequence forward (line 22).

```

22 ETH: and you do h[ave a lot of space for the
23 BO: [but it's also (.) the most, (0.7)
      |_____|
      ((BO points pen to the screen))
24 Bo: boring, hh hehe he he [(.) he=
      |_____| |_____|
      ((BO looks at JAN &)) ((BO looks back at the screen &
        keeps his pen pointed retracts his hand))
        at the screen))
25 JAN: [tsk
26 ETH: =[hh-hm,
27 JAN: =[it's the most (.) ehh, (0.5) sort of=
      |_____|
      ((JAN opens his palm towards the screen))
      |_____|
      ((ETH glances at JAN))
28 BO: =>traditional<
      |_____|
      ((BO temporarily moves his hand off the mouth))
29 JAN: yea,=
      |_____|
      ((JAN nods and retracts his hand))
30 BO: =y[ou can say
31 ETH: [yeah,
      |_____|
      ((ETH nods))
32 Ps: (0.3) ((JAN rests his hand on his forehead))
33 JAN: >yea<
34 Ps: (0.6)
35 ETH: but the colors are not traditi[onal
      |_____|
      ((ETH looks at JAN/BO))

```

After a 3-second pause (line 21), Ethan self-selects a turn (line 22) and uses ‘and’ to build on Bo’s previous assessment regarding the feasibility of D3. Bo, however, maintains the exclusive interactional focus between himself and Jan, dismissing Ethan’s turn. Bo interrupts Ethan by post-expanding his own earlier turn with a ‘but’ (line 23), likely seeking further engagement from Jan. Bo then delivers another O-side assessment in the form of a ‘fusion assessment’, which blends the O-side format with a subjective state, such as depressing and exciting (Edwards and Potter 2017) – and in this case, ‘boring’ (line 24). Edwards and Potter (2017) note that such assessments provide ‘a way of doing completeness, of having S-side and O-side as the same thing . . . proposing *for* the object a general, universal subjective response’ (511, emphasis original). Bo’s assessment, locally, therefore highlights his personal view of D3, while implying that this view is shared, or at least aligned with Jan, as the assessment is directed specifically at him. This move elicits stronger agreement from Jan. Sequentially, the assessment reveals Bo’s cognitive distinction of S-side and O-side: subjectively, he feels that D3 is boring, and objectively, he values its practical feasibility. (Bo’s orientation to this separation will become further visible in Excerpt 3.)

In any case, Bo’s fusion assessment prompts a response from Jan, reinforced by Bo’s gaze shift towards him (line 24). Bo extends his turn by laughing and keeping his pen pointed at the screen (line 24) until Jan signals his upcoming response with ‘tsk’ (line 25). Here, no one joins Bo’s laughter nor agree with Bo’s assessment. Instead, Jan initiates a repair (Wiggins and Potter 2003) of Bo’s prior assessment. He reuses Bo’s phrase (‘It’s the most’, line 27) and searches for words (‘ehh, (0.5) sort of’, line 27), identifying the trouble needing to be fixed: ‘boring’. Seeing this, Bo quickly self-repairs, substituting ‘boring’ with ‘traditional’ (line 28). This new term not only shifts the assessment from a negative to a more positive and objective stance but also renders it safer and more agreeable. This is evidenced by what happens next: the revised assessment is accepted by all parties (lines 29–33). With consensus achieved, Ethan advances the discussion by building on the revised assessment (line 35), leading to further exploration of various aspects of D3.

In sum, this sequence revealed a clear contrast between Bo and Jan’s evaluations of the designs, with their disagreement intensified by the way Bo built on his S-side assessment (‘I like the third one’) through an O-side justification (‘It’s easy to work with’). However, the tension was partially diffused when Bo and Jan collaboratively formulated a shared O-side assessment (‘It’s the most traditional’). In contrast to Excerpt 1, Ethan remained outside the immediate participation framework during this negotiation, only re-entering the interaction in line 31 as the recipient of the clients’ jointly produced assessment. As a result, the designer did not publicly register or respond to the differing stances previously displayed by his clients.

4.3. Shared S-side for disaffiliative agreement

Whereas in Excerpts 1 and 2 S-side assessments highlighted contrasts between the clients’ preferences, in the final excerpt they are used to display shared feelings towards D2. Yet, this agreement does not culminate in a fully shared stance, instead further

materialising the differing positions of Bo and Jan. Occuring approximately 15 minutes after Excerpt 2, the sequence begins when Jan requests a return to D2. He expresses his appreciation for the design, noting that ‘this is certainly the design you don’t see very often’. The group then discusses potential modifications and additions to D2, and we rejoin the conversation as they explore possible changes to its colours.

Excerpt 3: Assessing D2 (01:14:27–01:18:35)

```

1 ETH: but yeah this is definitely warmer colors, (0.3) um, ·hh
2 Ps: (1.2)
3 BO: ·hh[h yes
4 ETH: [it can be even warmer than that (.) as well.
5 Ps: (6.1) ((at the 5th second mark, Ethan glances towards Jan and/or Bo))
6 BO: ((clicks the button on his pen and opens his mouth as he leans back))
7 Ps: (1.4) ((Bo leans back and brings his left hand to his head;
           Ethan shifts gaze from the screen to Jan (& Bo?)))
8 ETH: so a lo[t to think about
      └─((Bo starts scratching his forehead))
9 BO:      [I think, (.) the other two is better but,
           └──────────────────────────────────┘
           ((Bo points to the screen))
           └──────────────────────────────────┘
           ((Bo scratches his forehead and then starts brushing his hair with hand))
           └──────────────────────────────────┘
           ((Ethan shifts his gaze towards Bo, and then to the screen))
10 Ps: (0.4) ((Bo looks at and gestures towards Jan with one hand, while
              brushing his hair with the other hand))
11 BO: hahahaha[hahahaha (but)
      └──────────────────┘
      ((Bo runs his fingers through his hair))
12 ETH:      [hhhahahaha [hahhah ha
           └──────────────────┘
           ((Ethan looks at Jan))

```

After discussing colours (lines 1–4), they pause for 6 seconds while looking at D2 (line 5). Bo then exhibits bodily moves (lines 6–7) that suggest he is about to speak but is also hesitant: opening his mouth, leaning back and forward, and scratching his head. These nonvocal behaviours might indicate that his forthcoming utterance is a dispreferred action (Pomerantz 1984). Ethan picks up on Bo’s hesitation, acknowledging the difficulty in making decisions (line 8). Yet, Ethan’s turn is dismissed by Bo, who interrupts to finally express his thoughts (line 9). The sensitive nature of Bo’s utterance is evident in his pause and self-grooming behaviour (lines 9–10). Bo also emphasises ‘I’ at the beginning of his turn and concludes with ‘but’ (line 9), gesturing towards Jan (line 10). This serves to individuate the assessment and contrast his preference for D1 and D3 with Jan’s

preference for D2. Although Bo's utterance strongly embodies S-side elements, it is not a solid S-side assessment (e.g. he could have said, 'I like the other two better'). Instead, Bo frames his argument as an O-side assessment, 'the other two is better' (line 9), which possibly is less open to disagreement due to the nature of O-side assessments as intersubjective and shared (Edwards and Potter 2017). Indeed, when Jan begins his response in line 13 (see below), it starts with agreement. Bo then laughs (line 11) – possibly to ease any tension – and Ethan joins in (line 12). Jan, however, does not. Let us now observe how Jan's response unfolds.

- 13 JAN: [yea, (0.3) probably in the end, t-
 ((Jan makes an open-palm gesture away from himself
 with his eyebrows up, and then scratches his hand))
- 14 JAN: just to sort of a[m, (I mean)
 ((Jan gestures outward, and then scratches his hand))
 └((Ethan inhales, looking at Jan))
- 15 BO: [yea[:h
- 16 ETH: [yeah they are more, (.) ↑they are
- 17 ETH: mo[re, (.) they're more (for-)
 ((Ethan shakes his right hand vertically))
- 18 JAN: [fo-, for our purpose bu- but,
- 19 JAN: uh- I still l[ike that one.
- 20 BO: [I LIKE that on[e.
 ((Bo shrugs))
- 21 ETH: [um-hm.=
 ((Ethan nods))
- 22 BO: =that could go (fo-) to: (0.6) •hh XXXXXXXXXX* maybehhhh=
 ((Bo gestures his left hand, open-palm, towards the screen))
 ((Bo looks at Jan, moving his head toward Jan))

Drew 2008). First, he includes a shrug, which can ‘convey the obviousness of a state of affairs, based on facts observable by everyone’ (Debras and Cienki 2012, 936). Bo also emphasises ‘like’, contrasting this assessment with his earlier one in line 9: he ‘likes’ D2, but he ‘thinks’ the other two are better. This suggests that Bo places more weight on the O-side, possibly viewing the S-side-based judgement as less valid in this context. This move contrasts with Jan’s emphasis on his S-side assessment. Bo’s disaffiliative action is followed by a joke that D2 could be used for another business they share (line 22), reaffirming his stance that D2 is not suitable for the current company’s website. Although Bo clearly directs the joke towards Jan and invites him to join in the laughter (lines 22–23), only Ethan shares the laughter (line 25), while Jan minimally acknowledges it (line 24). The sequence concludes without a shared agreement. After a 3-second of pause (line 26), Ethan acknowledges their differing opinions and suggests taking time to show the designs around and experimenting with them (lines 27–36).

5. Discussion

The micro-analysis of three excerpts revealed how multiple client opinions emerged and were managed through S-side and O-side assessments, highlighting the impact of awareness of these distinctions on the evaluation process and on designers’ practice. In Excerpts 1 and 2, clients began with S-side assessments (Jan’s ‘I actually like all three’ in Excerpt 1; Bo’s ‘I like the third one’ in Excerpt 2), reflecting subjective and individual preferences. These gradually transformed into O-side assessments, enabling participants to find common ground (that ‘it is a good predicament’ in Excerpt 1, and that D3 is ‘traditional’ in Excerpt 2). The intersubjective nature of O-side assessments (Edwards and Potter 2017) helped locally unify participant stances.

Excerpt 3, by contrast, ended without consensus. When the designer offered an O-side assessment (‘They’re [D1 and D3] more . . .’), clients interrupted with S-side assessments, expressing a shared fondness for D2 (Jan’s ‘I still like that one’; Bo’s ‘I like that one’). However, their assessments carried different implications. Jan’s S-side assessment ‘relativize[d] the assessment, as a matter of personal opinion rather than something inherent in the object assessed’ (Edwards and Potter 2017, 504), while Bo’s challenged Jan’s stance. On the surface, Bo’s response resembled typical S-side assessments – those that ‘sidestep[s] the specific issue [. . .], reverting to the world they agree on and the shared feelings they have about that world [. . .] fitted to maintaining affiliation’ (Potter, Hepburn, and Edwards 2020, 347). Yet, in this case, Bo used shared feelings to disaffiliate, marking disagreement over whether personal fondness or practical value should take priority. Wiggins and Potter (2003) noted the persuasive function of O-side assessments in ‘countering subjective evaluations’ (526). While Bo used O-side assessments this way earlier, here he countered Jan’s subjective view using an S-side assessment.

The analysis showed that the participants’ use of O-side and S-side assessments gave rise to a dichotomy of practicality and aesthetics. Bo and Jan publicly aligned on both objective and subjective evaluations: they both liked D2 and described D3 as ‘boring’/‘traditional’. They used O-side assessments to highlight the practicality of D3, and S-side assessments to express their emotional fondness for D2. However, they differed in how much weight they placed on these two types of assessments. While existing literature

often emphasises the divide between designers and clients as living in ‘different design worlds’ (Cornish et al. 2015, 177), and the gaps between stakeholder groups, this study shows how multiple worlds can also emerge within a single client group. This suggests that the designers may play a role in bridging internal differences, which becomes more feasible when they attend to how clients phrase their evaluations, particularly through their use of S-side/O-side assessments. Such attentiveness can support clearer negotiation of what is at stake.

Designers themselves can strategically use S-side and O-side to ask follow up questions to facilitate constructive discussions. For example, when clients express varying subjective reactions, the designer can use an O-side question to focus on external, shared, or institutional criteria. Such a tactic can frame disagreements as negotiable within shared values, rather than personal conflicts. Alternatively, designers can leverage the subjectivity of their varying responses, publicly acknowledging the individuality of these responses and each speaker’s entitlement to produce such responses. By validating both perspectives as legitimate, designers can demonstrate that S-side assessments as a natural part of collaborative design, and by voicing that recognition explicitly, designers can support open and reflective design conversations. As shown in Oak and Lloyd’s study (2016), design evaluation involves relational work, such as considering other’s ‘face’, and the strategic use of S-side and O-side formulations can help manage participants’ ‘face’.

Designers can also navigate power dynamics through distinctive use of S-side and O-side assessments in design reviews. Studies highlight the challenge of designer-client communication, where designers often balance being authoritative experts, thus confident decision-makers, and caring service-providers who listens and adapts (Glock 2009; McDonnell 2009; McDonnell and Lloyd 2014; Oak 2009). Thus, effective collaboration depends not only on considering client input but also on designers’ demonstrated authority – skills that are vital at the time of facing multiple client voices. Recognising the client’s S-side and O-side formulations can help designers to identify when feedback is negotiable, and when it is framed as non-negotiable. They can advocate for their design choices more confidently by identifying the evaluative stance of the speaker. Designers themselves can strategically choose between S-side and O-side assessments to balance their roles, e.g. use S-side assessments when they want to express openness or invite discussion, or O-side assessments when they want to anchor the evaluation in shared criteria or assert authority. They may blend both moves to negotiate evaluation diplomatically and effectively.

While the conversation analytic approach used in this study provides deep insight into moment-to-moment evaluations, it does not account for broader institutional or cultural factors – unless they are publicly made relevant by the participants during interaction. For instance, the relational history or prior knowledge shared between the co-CEOs may have influenced how their evaluations and participation unfolded. Nevertheless, by focusing on what participants make observable and actionable in the moment, the study offers a grounded understanding of how evaluative stances and roles are negotiated in situ. This microanalytic insight complements broader perspectives and can inform design practitioners seeking to navigate live, multi-party interactions with greater communicative awareness.

Finally, future research could further explore the discursive nature of participation frameworks (Goffman 1981) in design contexts involving multiple client parties. While

prior studies have shown how participation arrangements influence design outcome across actors, spaces, and times (e.g. Fischer, Östlund, and Peine 2021), there remains a need to examine how design actors locally manage participation on a moment-by-moment basis. The current study, which focused on a single material context and participation set, revealed that the participation framework was fluid, shifting between all three individuals and, at times, excluding the designer entirely. For instance, the designer was a solid recipient of Jan's S-side assessment in Excerpt 1 (responding with his laughter and O-side assessment) but refrained from receiving Bo's assessments in Excerpt 2. In Excerpt 3, the designer's attempts to participate were overlooked, placing him momentarily outside the participation framework. These findings raise important questions for future work: how do designers navigate and negotiate shifting participation roles when clients offer divergent views? When might it be effective for designers to withhold recipient-ship – deliberately positioning themselves outside the interaction – to allow clients to work through their differences without prematurely soliciting agreement? Understanding this interactional work has practical implications, especially in preventing designers from having to register and work with contradictory client feedback.

In conclusion, this study underscores the significant impact of seemingly 'small' actions – such as the choice between using 'I' or 'It' in evaluative statements, or the timing of a nod – in shaping and navigating constructive design evaluations. By attending closely to these micro-level interactions, we gain valuable insights into the social dynamics of co-design processes and highlight how design participants can be empowered through subtle, moment-to-moment contributions.

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