Furniture Stereotypes Interrogated: Undertaking Design Research Yields Design Ideas

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Abstract: Whether looking at furniture retail stores or reading advice from interior design guide books, we can recognize that middle-class living rooms are normatively divided into sitting and dining zones, furnished by relevant furniture stereotypes, such as dining tables and chairs, display cabinets, couch and armchair sets, centre tables, etc. Even the focal point of the living room is pre-determined: a television or a fireplace. Professional actors such as designers and manufacturers require the user to undertake a set of generic activities like watching television, eating, hosting, relaxing. During my elective course, students were expected to undertake surveys for undermining how respondents conduct their everyday lives and which activities their respondents would like to perform in their living rooms. Research analysis presented a wide range of responses from unconventional ones which included defining new activities and abandonment of certain stereotypes to more conformist ones like complying with the current mass-market layouts.

1. Introduction

'Stereotype' is defined as "a fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality."[1] We can see the embodiment of this definition in the context of furniture stereotypes. Looking at the furniture industry and analysing retail furniture stores, or observing how people acquire their living room furniture, we confront some norms for defining living rooms and some stereotypes regarding its furnishing. Defining the living room by two main zones, such as dining and sitting (or lounge) zones, is a common norm consolidated by producers and designers. Furniture stereotypes are also determined for decorating these zones. Many users define and decorate their living rooms with this vocabulary. To provide a short historical perspective, dividing the living room into dining and lounging areas could be considered as having evolved from the parlour style (Attfield 2007, Sparke et al. 2009). In that style, there were two main front rooms: a reception room and a dining room (Attfield 2007). After the World Wars, with changing political and economic dynamics, the parlour style started to lose its power and dominance in Europe and the United States (Denby, 1944). With the arrival of the modern style, it became popular for middle-class homes to contain large, open-plan living rooms with two areas (one for dining and one for relaxation) instead of the two separate reception rooms (Attfield 2007). The intention of the modern model of the house in the twentieth century was to rationalize living patterns by providing the most economical and efficient spaces for everyday life (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga 1999: 20). Also, the intention was, ideally, to include minimal spaces for eating, cooking, resting, sleeping, bathing, socializing and leisure pursuits. Therefore, a combined living/dining room became the space for everyday household activities and hosting practices that would fit in the proposed ideal minimal home life (ibid.).

This modern setting and practice dominating domestic interiors also influenced Turkish middle-class homes through the westernization and modernization process (Bozdoğan 2001, Nasır et al. 2015). Many norms and conventions that had defined Turkish lifestyles were shifting in favour of western ones, starting from the Early Republican Era and being accelerated by the globalization flows of the 1980s. Through this transition, when the apartment became mostly a norm for middle-class dwelling, living rooms that combined dining and lounge areas were recognized as a spatial convention. Following that, living room furniture was designed and mediated by complying with the established zones: dining room furniture and sitting room furniture, including their stereotypes, in the context of the Turkish mass market of furniture.

In my elective course titled "Furniture Design and Everyday Life,"[2] which addressed industrial design sophomores, I initiated a "design research" phase. To evaluate the contributions of becoming more empathic with users and gaining insights about the relationship between the living room norms and the actual user experience, I assigned the students to conduct user research to interrogate the furniture stereotypes. Approaches of design thinking and the methods of user-focused design research could be considered as valuable educational objectives and learning outcomes as the normative nature of the living room dominates the furniture market. In this elective course, the stages are constructed in the following order:

1. Studying, depicting and reviewing living room norms in the furniture market
2. Questioning and criticizing the market norms
3. Analysing users' needs and desires in their living room context through surveys and
4. Redesigning living room zones and relevant products based on data retrieved from the inquiries.

This paper involves phase three regarding the design research process and the analysis of the data provided from the respondents with whom the students conducted surveys and made observations. Meanwhile, phase four, articulated in Nasır (2021), necessarily includes the design ideas for living room furniture and zones that the students developed.

As Wormald (2010) indicates, teaching undergraduates about product design should involve directing students' interest in engaging with research on user-focused design. Wormald conducted an extensive study at England's Loughborough University that found that such research has influenced the education of design students. Reasons for including this type of research in undergraduate education programs are that exposure to such research results in improved data acquisition and analysis and in increased opportunities to apply the resulting knowledge. Delft University of Technology is one renowned school that exposes students to research on users throughout its undergraduate program (Stappers and Sleeswijk 2007). It makes sense to teach designers to take users into account, given that designs are intended to serve people (Wormald 2010). Indeed, the curricula of many of the industrial design departments in Turkey's educational institutions—including the university where I taught the elective course referred to earlier—include a course that covers design research (Medipol 2022). Design research methods taught in the required course "Design Research and Theory" provide students with an opportunity to integrate their design research knowledge and to understand what users need and want in their living room settings, and they give students a chance to explore the notion of "stereotype." However, the students were supervised while they undertook their research in the context of their design research process and analysis of the outcomes.

2. The Living Room Discourse from Interior Guide Books and Furniture Retail Store Showrooms

In the context of building and sustaining norms and standards, like in furniture stereotypes, I would like to refer to a concept, 'abstract space', developed by sociologist Henry Lefebvre. To Lefebvre (1991), 'abstract space' is the space of actors like designers, technicians, architects, engineers, manufacturers, politicians and governors. These actors are people other than users, who decide how users 'should' go through their daily practices in alignment with established production units and standards. In that sense, interior design guide books[3] were introduced to students, providing straightforward advices about how a living room *should* be decorated and which units *should* be placed in the determined zones. Chiara et al. (2001) indicates even more explicit affirmations about how users should build a living room. They (ibid.) provided information that is generally spread amongst an array of sources, such as manufacturers' catalogues, literature of a technical nature, books touching on historic styles, and papers and illustrations from different projects. Therefore, such guide books serve as a significant source to observe how a notion of *'abstract space'* is constructed. Chiara and Callender (2007) suggest typical furniture arrangements such as the conversation group (chairs, a sofa and a fireplace), the reading group (a chair, an ottoman, a lamp and a table), the writing or study group (a desk, a lamp, chairs and bookcases), the music group (a piano, a bench and storage space), the game group (a game table and four chairs) and the television group (a television set and seating for several people). They (ibid.) assume that two or three, or all, of the furnishing group units may be included depending on the household's available space and financial means. Irrespective of whether the dining area is a separate room or a designated zone in the living room, they (ibid.) indicate that dining areas must accommodate eating, sitting, serving and possible storage with the help of appropriate furniture. The furniture units that Chiara et al. (2001) list for a dining room or zone are dining tables and chairs, a sideboard, a buffet, a dresser, cupboards, china cabinets and servers. Although they elaborate on the schemes and typical furniture settings for mainly the dining and hosting functions, they also suggest that equipment for these dining functions may be adapted to meet other possible requirements for this space, providing such examples as studying and game playing. They suggest combined living-dining spaces as advantageous arrangements in which less space is used but more intensively.

Through this advice, we see the construction of a typical living room discourse. Stereotypes are placed as given. Generic dining tables or generic couches in more diagram-like drawing styles are illustrated (Chiara et al. 2001, p.59-61). In addition, they (ibid.) recommend that small and medium-size interior design and/or architectural firms use their standards book as a guide to building a quick reference library, consisting of data and specifics related to design. This highly referred book, as its aim is performed, contributes to the production and reproduction of furniture stereotypes. Likewise, Dodswoth and Anderson (2015) introduce a modern living room design, illustrating a sitting group composed of a three-piece suite placed around a central coffee table, oriented according to the positions of the television unit and the fireplace, justifying conventions. Therefore, these generic assumptions make living room furniture a fairly complicated product group. Although each item—whether it is a table or an armchair—is obviously a product (in the field of product design), it is difficult to ignore the fact that furniture units are mostly reproduced in compliance with the norms of interior design conventions. Considering the design process regarding living room furniture taking its references from established conventions and standards, the design of a couch is performed as a unit, which is supposed to find a place in the defined living room configuration, for instance, being one part of a 'three-piece suite'. This process is likely to influence the product design practice to *design* furniture, though gradually in the frame of presumed layouts.

Another window through which we can observe professional actors directing users on how to construct a living room is the furniture mass market. Furniture designers, manufacturers and marketing experts mostly shape the current living room settings and contribute to the common living room discourse. Store showrooms and their web sites are ideal places to observe the ever-lasting furniture stereotypes. An observation of several examples of large-scale furniture retailing manufacturing sites in Turkish cities[4] again demonstrates certain forms of living room furniture stereotypes and spatial conventions. For instance, taking two big-scale furniture sites, Modoko[5] and Masko[6], and the 1128 stores comprising them, addressing middle and upper-middle-class consumers, in regards to what they suggest for constructing a living room, we see mostly the dining zone and sitting zone division as a spatial standard. We also see that the furniture stereotypes of the dining zone are maintained with the main standard of a dining table accommodating several chairs around it, although the number of dining chairs may differ in different stores. Accompanying storage and display units are also presented. Similar normative configurations are presented in the context of sitting zones as well. Sitting zones are generally presented as having a layout including couches, coffee tables and television units. Even the placement of couches is defined by standards, such as the need for three-piece units, which means including modules of one, two and three units. Television units are usually situated as focal points for seated individuals in the household. Finally, the

dining zone similarly includes its stereotypical units and sitting zone.

Interior guide books and mass market showrooms promote and construct the 'standards' for living room space and furniture. Existing and persisting furniture stereotypes inform us about the standards and conventions of the market and manufacturers. Referring to Lefebvre's (1991) notion of 'abstract space' in the context of living room and furniture designs, all these standardized configurations can be considered 'abstract living rooms' of the professional actors in the furniture market. Nevertheless, the critiques geared towards design practices that barely consider users' everyday life through a top-down viewpoint in the agendas of everyday studies. The authoritarian approaches that aim to change and control everyday life practices have been contested in this field. Everyday life studies commonly focus on the core concepts of everyday life and investigate the capitalist discourse that leverages the everyday practices of people (Lefebvre 1991, Certau 1984). In conventional living room visual culture, the everyday lives of people are considered addressing a set of activities such as sitting, relaxing, watching television, eating, dining and hosting. While the rooted standards function as the repeating units of the furniture stereotypes throughout the capitalist production and consumption cycles, user practices are defined with a limited range. But is it possible to put every single household's everyday life into normative packages?

3. Undertaking a User-Focused Design Research

After discussing the notion of stereotypes and the established conventions of living rooms, students were informed about current living room settings. But the aim of the course was not taking the stereotypes for granted. A stereotypical understanding of furniture was preventing the design students from thinking outside of the box and creating genuine designs. Before altering stereotypes, a discussion was held regarding how these conventions were founded and how they became common elements that define a living room.

After this stage, it was important to introduce the students to the relationship and the possible contradictions or struggles between the established living norms and the related thoughts and actual experience of the users. In this way, the students were able to gain an awareness of the difference between the *abstract space* of the living rooms and the *lived space* as perceived by the users. This meant students would conduct user-focused design research, which, as has been noted, Wormald (2010) suggested is an essential component of undergraduate design education. We see that Lopes (2008), Lofthouse (2008), and Rodgers and Anusas (2008) also describe having design students conduct research focused on users. According to Lofthouse (2008), even first-year students should conduct such research by observing consumers and identifying problems as part of their process for developing a design project. Wormard (2010) categorizes these activities as a way to quickly gather ethnographic data. The required course "Design Research and Theory," already mentioned, supported this direction. The course aims to raise awareness of the basic principles of research and to explore the primary methods used in research intended to solve design problems (Medipol 2022). The course content considers the whys and wherefores of design research and examines the methods researchers use to have designers incorporate their findings into the design process (Medipol 2022). After having learned fundamental research methods in "Design Research and Theory," students would be able to draw on those methods when conducting design research for my elective course. After analysing the furniture market suggestions

regarding how to build up a living room and becoming aware of the persisting norms and furniture stereotypes, students started to make inquiries in order to question the existence, validity and conflicts (if any) at the user side.

Table 1. Occupation and age ranges of the respondents
(R stands for respondent)
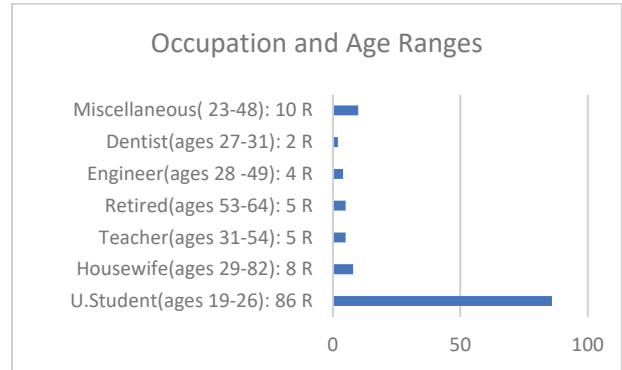
The students were assigned to collect data in order to gain insights into the respondents' everyday practices and the current composition of their living room units. The user research phase was designated in such a way that students[7] were supposed to conduct their interviews with 15 respondents. Students were supposed to provide demographic data from the respondents, such as the respondents' ages and occupations and where they lived. It was important for the students to develop an awareness of the different life stages, occupational levels and work schedules of the respondents in relation to their home routines and the configurations of their living rooms. Because the respondents comprised individuals from the inner social circle of the students, which they could easily access, we reached a sample consisting mostly of Istanbulite university students (Table 1). 91/120 respondents were based in İstanbul, while the rest were from smaller cities like Eskişehir, Kırklareli, İzmit, etc. This type of demographic data would be useful in interpreting the feedback given by different profiles having various dynamics. A university student living with his/her parents and a middle-aged dentist could have different dynamics, demands and preferences for decorating and experiencing their living rooms. Thus, it would make more sense to process any data framed with the comprehensive knowledge of the personal context (age, occupation, etc.) of the given sample.

In the main stage of research, each of the eight students conducted interviews with 15 respondents to gain an understanding of their demands and needs in the context of their current living rooms. The students were mostly autonomous and developed their questionnaires independently. Yet once the finalized questionnaires were collated, we saw that the questions that the students brought in were more or less similar. Therefore, it could be affirmed that the students developed an almost common survey template composed of open-ended questions like the following:

- Which units do the respondents have in their living rooms?
- Which activities are performed in the living rooms of respondents?
- What kind of activities are desired to be performed if there were means in the living rooms?
- Which kind(s) of object(s)/product(s) do the users desire to have in their living rooms?

In addition to the common inquiries, a couple of students also questioned the validity of the current stereotypes, asking if there were any units that the respondents found redundant and

would prefer to discard from their current settings, which is explained in the section: Furniture Stereotypes of Abandonment.

3.1. DATA ANALYSIS

We began the data analysis by processing the responses obtained from common questions that all eight students responded to. Relying on the survey analysis, conducted with a total of 120 respondents, the students presented their data in the following class. Each student shared his/her data and fieldwork notes with the whole class, so we created a large pool of data about respondents' aspirations. This enabled each student to see the bigger picture of the subject. As seen in Table 2, respondents presented us with different levels and qualities of desire for change. In total, 39/120 respondents defined a new activity or object as desired other than their current living room practice. Meanwhile, 16/120 respondents pointed to a *missing stereotype* as a desire. Some respondents addressed more unconventional activities like swimming, while some were content with small scale-improvements. Moreover, 30/120 respondents desired no change regarding their living room configurations. Through this phase, the variety of user demands and needs inside and outside the established norms was contemplated.

Table 2. Categories of respondents' desires
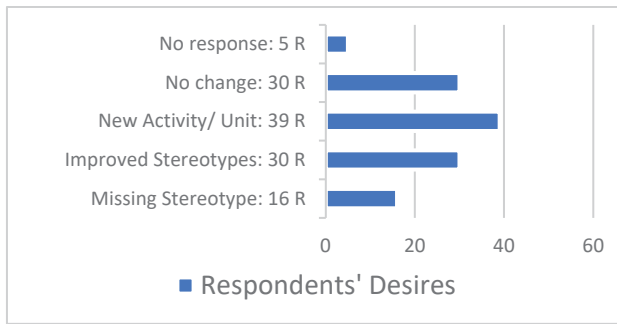
3.1.1. Desire for a New Unit/Activity Out of Respondents' Current Setting

In the context of analysing the activities that the respondents desire, but that are out of the respondents' current setting, we found that 39 respondents defined several everyday activities to take place in their living rooms.

As illustrated in Table 3, through the variety of the desires of different activites, while 13 respondents mentioned having yoga and exercise practices, four respondents visualized swimming in their living rooms. Such activities suggested by respondents are collated and analyzed under such subtitles as "Studying," "Exercising," "Dancing," and "Other performances," which are considered as repeating patterns and frequently referred-to themes throughout the data pool.

Table 3. Respondents' desires for performing new activities in living rooms
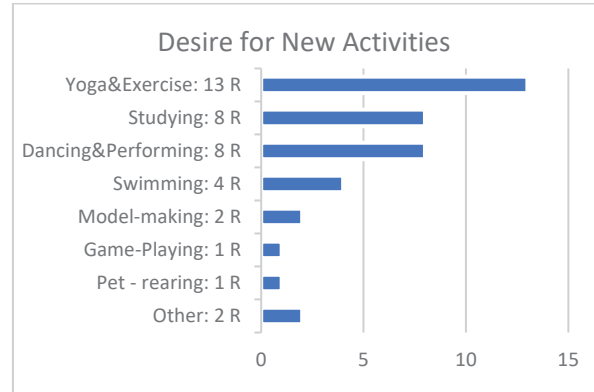
Studying: Throughout the analysis, a repeating pattern was that household individuals desired or already performed intellectual activities like studying, completing assignments or even simply surfing on the internet and social media. As P38 (US) puts it: "I'd like a region in which I could study comfortably." P38, who lives in a household of five members, in a home of six rooms, says that the typical act that her family performs in the living room is "hosting." Thus, the usage of the living room depends on guest visits to their house. Although the home has plenty of rooms and also a "back-stage sitting room," P38 considers the lack of a region for studying in the living room as a deficiency. Respondents' desires indicated the need for a *defined* study area that includes comfortable furniture and sufficient storage units for relevant equipment inside the living room. One reason for this desire to study in the living room was because "it is spacious and large" (P63, US). Another reason was the desire to not be far away from family gatherings. The respondents' desires address a more defined study experience, with furniture specifically designated for study activity, rather than appropriating the dining table as a study desk or engaging in other makeover practices.

Exercising: Another important emerging activity that requires consideration is exercising. Some of the respondents would like to exercise in their living rooms. However, in a conventional living room, there might not be enough room for this type of activity, as P80 indicates: "I would like to do yoga but the space is so cluttered and not enough." P110 (US) explains the current activities that he conducts in his living room as "doing exercise, playing PlayStation games and watching television," while the units his parents placed in the living room are sorted as armchairs, a dining table and chairs, a television unit and a centre table. Thus, P110 exercises in a mostly conventional configuration in which he appropriates the space and stereotypes for this activity. As a counterpart case, P94 (US), having a similar conventional setting (armchairs, console table, television unit, dining table and chairs) implies that she prefers to exercise in the living room, as it is large. However, she finds it difficult to constantly carry her workout equipment to the living room. This respondent expressed her appreciation for a solution to this exhausting routine. The cases of P94 and P110 reveal that the living room is already appropriated for engaging in exercise. P67 (US) underlined another issue with exercise practice:

> Student-5: "What kind of activities would you like to perform if there were means in your living room?"

> P67: "Nothing for my own, but my brother uses our living room for doing exercise, as it is large. It becomes a nuisance as he makes the room so messy."

We also understand that it is difficult for such a regular household activity to be considered a legitimate one for purposes of assigning permanent space and units to it in the living room. This caused exhaustion on the part of users, as they had to exercise with makeshift and temporary solutions every time. Also, other household members considered the makeshift practices as being disruptive to the current living room setting.

Dancing and other performances: Dancing was another repetitive pattern that the respondents performed or desired to perform inside their living rooms. It was discovered that the respondents who actually danced in their living rooms opened up a convenient space in the current living room setting. Opening up space for dancing and exercising may indicate why the centre tables were often perceived as redundant. P93 (US) considers the units that address her needs in the living room as being "only a few [pieces of] furniture, wall to wall mirrors and giant loudspeakers," for dancing practices. It was understandable that P93 required less furniture to accommodate dancing because her parents had designated a rather cluttered living room consisting of "armchairs, couches, display cabinet, centre table, television unit, smaller tables, dining table and chairs" (P93). In a parallel theme, in which furniture disables bodily performances, we hear P69 (US), who lives with his family and mostly uses his personal room: "I'd like to play drums in the living room but because we don't have sufficient space, I cannot do [that]." While P69 engages in "study and hobbies" in the living room, he needs more space for playing the drums.

As seen in this category, the patterns and necessary data obtained from the everyday lives of the respondents represented differences and diversities from the established living room norms regarding the survey research of each student.

3.1.2. Desire for an Improved Version of a Stereotype

In total, 30/120 respondents responded to the question asking about their desired activity/unit in their living rooms by defining some improved versions of certain stereotypes, for example: "multifunctional couches and wall-mounted table, opened-up when needed" (P97, manager, 52 years old).

The main theme characterizing this category was space-saving. The common suggestions of P99, "a more practical dining table which occupies less volume," and P91, "more compact units which integrate television unit, console and display cabinet which occupy so much space in total," again, addressed space-saving concerns. Seven out of 30 respondents addressed space-saving improvements especially about dining tables, advising that the tables should be smaller, modular or adjustable.

Table 4. Respondents' suggestions for improving living room setting

Unit	Number of respondents addressing this stereotype	Suggested improvement
Dining table	7	Modular, adjustable, smaller versions
Television unit	2	Incorporation with other units, being more functional
Console table	2	Incorporation with other units
Display cabinet	2	Incorporation with other units
Coffee table	4	More of them Wheeled versions Siding with couches Less hazardous
Couches	3	Making them more comfortable, functional
Armchairs	2	Making them larger
Plugs	2	Making them easy to reach
Living room, general	6	Smaller furniture, larger spaces

3.1.3. Desire for the Missing Stereotype

In total, 16/120 respondents implied that they desired some units—but which were among already available furniture stereotypes. The units pronounced as being desired, as illustrated in Table 5, were: library, television, service table, dining table, father armchair and ottoman. SR48 (19, US), who lives with her family, feels the need for a dining table: "A dining table is a major necessity, as you can use [it] comfortably when your guests come." However, this respondent also describes her use of the living room in terms of hosting guests. The missing dining table represents a shortcoming for formal occasions.

Table 5. Respondents' desires for owning the missing stereotypes
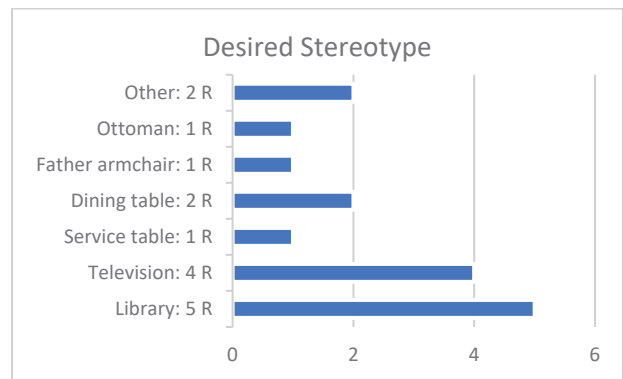
The desire for a television is also a very typical activity defining a living room. We included this object although it is not a furniture. But television is usually considered as a focal point of the living room. With its existence as a norm, television directly or indirectly affects the design or layout of other furniture stereotypes, like television units. However, from this desire or 'father armchair', we can at least see that the living room is addressing everyday life. Another significant unit is the library. This could be interpreted as being related to the emerging study activity in the living room context. The units comprising this category were mostly available stereotypes that the mass-market furniture industry already suggests for setting up a living room. The reason why they were desired was simply that they were missing from the living rooms of respondents' homes.

3.1.4. Users' Contentment with their Current Living Room Settings

According to the survey results, 30/120 respondents believed that no change was necessary regarding their living room settings. They did not aspire to a different unit or a practice that would be performed in their rooms. P37 (US, 18), who lives with her family of four, says: "A living room is a living room. Why bother to change? I like it as it is." This respondent also implies

that her household does not use the living room on a daily basis; rather, members spend their time mostly in their backstage sitting room: "The total amount time that I spend in the living room is [a] maximum [of] 30 minutes a day." This conformist approach demonstrates to us that it is a significant preference to build up a conventional living room and maintain it—even if one does not use it. Regarding Turkish home culture, it is a common practice to maintain the reception area so that it is clean, tidy and isolated from everyday activities (Nasır et. al. 2019). Besides visualizing a new living room activity zone, it is a taboo for some social groups to even perform conventional activities—like sitting, relaxing and watching television—in the living room. Thirty respondents did not prefer any change or improvement, whether or not they used their living rooms for everyday activities.

3.1.5. Furniture Stereotypes of Abandonment

As mentioned in the beginning of the design research phase, the students were assigned to develop their own set of questions in relation with interrogating the stereotypical understanding of the living rooms from their own point of view. Apart from the common questions regarding all of the students' questionnaires, there was another inquiry about the abandonment of stereotype units, which specifically Student-6 and Student-8 were interested in.

- Is there any furniture that you have discarded or would like to discard from your living room?

The questionnaires of most of the students were found as similar, however specifically, Student-6 and Student-8 also scrutinized the existing stereotypes that the respondents wanted to discard from their domestic environment. Although I realized that we would provide the responses from only 30 respondents—which was the total sum of the number of the respondents that two students interviewed—I encouraged the students to fetch the relevant data in our qualitative data analysis session; because even with only 30 respondents, the answers about discarding stereotypes or preferring to discard them would yield a discussion regarding the validity of the stereotypes. Out of the 30 respondents, we found that 20 of them favoured the abandonment of their current furniture, while 10 respondents saw no need for removing any unit. Among the respondents who preferred discarding some units and objects, 12 of them implied certain furniture stereotypes. Regarding these units, display cabinets were prominent in the surveys: "I would remove my display cabinet. I don't think it is essential. It is possible to put the stuff into other places." (P115, male, engineer, 28 years old). The reason for considering discarding units was mostly to provide more space and eliminate clutter: P118 (engineer, 34 years old): "I would remove the dining table, which occupies too much space. I could take it to the kitchen." Other units that the respondents would like to abandon were side tables and coffee tables, console tables and "buffet[s] with a mirror" (P80, university student, 20 years old).

Respondents expressed their desire to discard these units, as the units mostly took up space. However, most of the respondents did not intend to take that action. P83 (20, US[8]), who lives with her parents, explains the situation as: "We have an incompatible side table but we cannot remove it, in case … it gets useful one day." Another respondent, P84 (20, US), who enjoys watching movies, listening to music and exercising in their living room, expresses: "There are things that we should discard but because my mom is keen on them, we cannot get rid of them." Student-6 interpreted this situation as indicating that most households she interviewed kept their conventional

configurations in the same order and did not go beyond the current layout. However, recognizing the responses regarding the desire to abandon certain units, she concluded that it was important to make some changes. After the analysis of this initial inquiry, we found a preference for having spacious living rooms over acquiring many stereotypes. We observe a tendency to discard certain stereotypes from the dining room furniture, like display cabinets, console tables, other small tables, etc., more than the sitting group. Through this quest, students gained an idea about the furniture units that the respondents do not need anymore, but keep as a spatial and social norm despite the limitations of the sample. Besides furniture units, other objects that the respondents wanted to discard were carpets, knick-knacks, photographs, vases and candlesticks.

Table 6. Units considered to be discarded
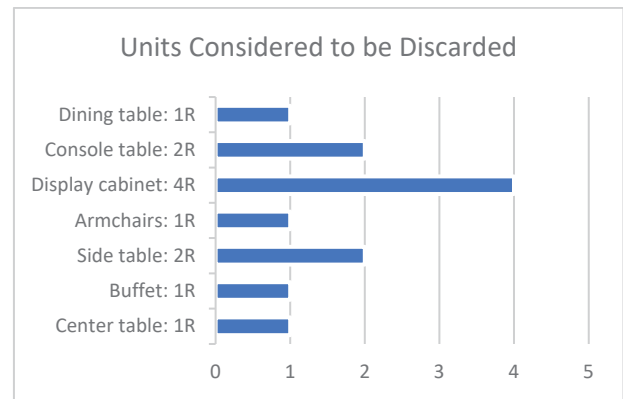
4. Design Research Yielding Design Ideas

The design research process has proven to be successful in terms of both interrogating the notion of stereotype and including a user-centered approach to the students' design process. Outcomes deriving from the research process presented a wide range of responses—from those that point to unconventional demands, which included defining new activities like swimming, dancing, etc., to more conformist tendencies, like complying with the current mass-market layouts in efforts to improve their domestic lives. Having such user data at hand, students were able to reconceptualize furniture units, instead of immediately drawing from a certain stereotype. Lockwood (2010) implies, through his articulation of fundamental notions about design, that using an empathetic approach can both be a source of inspiration and contribute to reaching user insights. Lofthouse (2008) points to the importance of using observation to support problem identification. In conjunction with this approach, students could identify several design problems through their fieldwork and data analysis. Such identifications led the students to create new design ideas for living rooms. Analysing the respondents' desires to conduct study-related activities, Student-2 created a subzone in the living room that would define an artistic activity, and Student-4 focused on designing a new product, called Multy, that addressed users' needs for charging and plugging in their devices, including providing charging slots on the front edge of the unit (Nasır, 2021). Another idea was generated by the fact that some users desire to engage in, and some of them already undertake, exercise and yoga practices in their living rooms, which was difficult because they would have to move items to make room for the practice, or the room could be messy. This was considered a solid design problem and a source of inspiration for a new product or zone for Student-5, Student-6, and Student-8. Another case where the design research yielded fruit was the design idea of Student-7. Unlike

most of the design concerns, which address human individuals, Student-7's idea was to redesign and reconsider the living room environment, furniture and units with regard to the pets that live in the home (Nasır, 2021). Therefore, conducting the design research, which resulted in being more knowledgeable about the users and their everyday lives, enabled the students to identify design problems more genuinely instead of immediately drawing from certain furniture stereotypes that the mass market keeps reproducing.

5. Summary

In the theoretical stage of the course, the students initially studied and gained an understanding of the normative structure of living room furniture and zones through an array of sources. Following that, they questioned and developed an understanding of the established norms and stereotypical configurations, based mostly on the critique literature of everyday life and critical design. To have a genuine approach for their design process, students were assigned to undertake surveys that would help them understand how respondents conduct their everyday lives and which activities their respondents perform or would like to perform in their living rooms. Clarke (2011) signifies that the region of design anthropology adheres to the tradition in which corporate, retail-driven associations regarding object culture are questioned. Increasingly, designers are immersing themselves in both social research and creating form. Hence, observational techniques, human focus and an emphasis on the dynamics of the everyday have become prominent subjects regarding contemporary design practice. The research phase undertaken through this course has been mind-opening in many ways. We saw that the affirmations advising which stereotypes a living room *should* include were not considered 'necessary' for every user. The main body of the research analysis revealed that respondents *do* undertake some personal activities in their living rooms. However, there are no defined zones or furniture for them to engage in dancing or working out. Bodily practices like dancing, exercising, or intellectual activities as studying, etc. are performed in a living room setting constructed in compliance with norms, by repurposing the units and adjusting the current configurations, as well as by making use of affordances of tables, chairs and other units. Additionally, some respondents desired to engage in these unconventional activities but could not do so. Finally, whether felt as a desire or conducted through appropriation practices, the students were inspired by their receipt of information from users.

Nevertheless, we also see that what some respondents desired for their living rooms was a missing stereotype, or an improved version of a stereotype or no change at all. The responses revolving around the notion of 'stereotype' show us that the aforementioned respondents mostly comply with the established norms and conventions. These may be interpreted in light of several factors. One of them could be about the power of *'abstract living rooms'* constituted by the mass-market-driven dissemination. Social control pressures households to acquire conventional furniture derived from both the options available in the market and society's judgement regarding an individual has created a proper living room. Both the pressure of social control and the mediation of the furniture industry market may lead masses of people to purchase conventional set-style furniture that mostly addresses sitting, eating and dining functions. Another reason could be that the daily activities of these respondents may not differ from the assumed generic practices.

This research regarding its limits demonstrated many different levels and dimensions about the relationship of users and the stereotypical understanding of constructing living rooms. Furthermore it was a good venue to realize that the required furnishing and conducted practices in respondents' living rooms were not fixed as what the mass-market furniture retail stores were offering. Obviously, more user research would contribute well to the region of living room furniture design, which has been a realm dominated by stereotypes and normative configurations, imposing upon the users which units they should acquire. Region of living rooms had rich potential for informing design research where such a standardized realm and the dynamics of everyday life—public and private qualities of home life—were supposed to clash.

Endnotes

1. Oxford Learner's Dictionaries
2. This course was conducted in the Department of Industrial Design, Faculty of Fine Arts Design and Architecture at İstanbul Medipol University, in the spring semester of the 2016-2017 academic year.
3. For instance, see Binggeli, 2011; Mitton and Nystuen, 2016; and Fisher et al. 2018
4. For the Istanbul context, we can see the 'Modoko' and 'Masko' sites; for the Ankara context, the 'Siteler' site, 2020; for the Izmir context, the 'Kısıkköy' site. (For an extensive review of the furniture industry for the Sakarya context, see Bıçak, 2017).
5. Modoko, established in 1969, accommodates 350 prominent furniture stores as a large furniture site (Modoko 2020).
6. Masko, established in 1984, is larger than Modoko, having 778 furniture stores (Masko 2020).
7. There were actually nine students who took this course. But as the submissions of one of the students were not sufficient for inclusion in this study, overall analysis was undertaken regarding the works of eight students.
8. Abbreviation for 'University Student.'

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