



Unpacking the nature of social structures as the materials of service design

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Abstract

Service design is increasingly broadening its focus from creating intangible offerings to shaping service systems. This shift calls for a re-examination of the materials of service design. The traditional emphasis on touchpoints and service interfaces reflects a reductionist approach that leaves service design practitioners tinkering with disconnected parts, rather than addressing the service system as a whole. While historically social structures, such as norms, rules, roles and beliefs, have been seen as externalities in service design, a focus on shaping service systems brings them into the spotlight. The purpose of this paper is to build a more holistic understanding of service design materials to enable a systemic service design practice. Drawing from institutional theory, this paper develops a conceptual framework of service design materials that situates the traditional materials as the physical enactments of institutionalized social structures. The framework deconstructs the nature of service design materials by suggesting that they are all comprised of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements and have specific contradictory properties. Building on this understanding, the paper presents a practical tool called the Iceberg Blueprint of Social Structures that can help service design practitioners to expose the social structures constituting service systems.

Keywords: design materials, social structures, institutions, systemic approach, service design, service systems

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