



Moving towards plurality: Unpacking the role of service design in relation to culture

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, there has been growing discussion about the relationship between service design and culture. However, these discussions are often fragmented and ambiguous, limiting the nuance in how culture is understood in service design. As such, the purpose of this paper is to build a more comprehensive understanding of the role of service design in relation to culture by drawing together discussions from existing literature. What emerges from our literature analysis is a framework presenting four different views on the role of service design in relation to culture, each with distinct interpretations of culture and its connection to service design. Furthermore, we present the emerging issues related to each of these four views, highlighting the overall necessity of attending to cultural pluralities in service design. We propose that a dynamic movement between these different views can provide service design practitioners and researchers with a decentralized perspective that can help them get unstuck from perpetuating a single, static understanding of culture.

Keywords: culture, plurality, service design, design

Introduction

“Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in English language” (Williams, 1983, p.87). Williams (1983), a seminal theorist of culture studies, proposes three general definitions of culture: 1) a common process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development; 2) a particular way of life of people or a group; 3) texts and practices whose function is to signify or produce meaning. Despite decades of related research, culture remains a wide and ambiguous concept that is difficult to define (Milner & Browitt, 2013).

This difficulty in interpreting culture also manifests itself in service design. Over the past two decades, there have been growing discussions about culture and how service design relates to it. For example, Cipolla and Reynoso (2017) suggested that analysing cultural aspects within existing indigenous services can provide valuable insights for developing new service concepts for low-income regions. With regards to organisational change, Yu and Sangiorgi (2018) considered the transformation of organizational culture as an effective way to promote participatory service innovation. In connection with service businesses, Dennington (2018) highlights the value of service designers’ abilities in the conveyance of popular cultural meaning through service offerings. Many cultural concepts have been coined, used or adapted to explore the relationship between service design and culture. However, these discussions about culture are fragmented, which inadvertently may limit the ability of designers and researchers to explore the richness and diversity of culture in service design. Consequently, there is a need for a more holistic understanding of the role of service design in respect to culture as well as a need to build an understanding of culture that appropriately reflects service design’s values, ideals and professional practice. Furthermore, without an understanding of the different perspectives on what service design is doing in relation to culture and some of the related issues, practitioners and researchers may unknowingly contribute to the erosion of cultures or the imposition of one culture over another (Tlostanova, 2017).

In response to this challenge, the purpose of this paper is to build a more comprehensive understanding of the role of service design in its relationship to culture by drawing together discussions from existing literature. To achieve this aim, this paper develops a two-by-two framework in which existing literature is positioned in relation to its view on culture (*pre-existing* or *becoming*) and how service design is seen in relation to culture (*separate* or *entangled*). This framework reveals four

distinct views on the role of service design in culture. Furthermore, we provide a brief explanation of the key emerging issues in relation to each of the four overlapping and interrelated views on the relationship between service design and culture. We propose that a dynamic movement between these views is one promising approach to address many of the emerging issues because it can provide service design practitioners and researchers with a decentralized perspective to better understand and work with a plurality of cultures.

Approach

We employ articles related to culture in service design as the data source for this analysis of the role of service design in relation to culture. These articles are collected from academic journals and conferences in service design (e.g., *Design and Culture*, *Design Issues* and *ServDes*) and other related fields (such as *Co-design* and *Social Innovation*). In our sample, we selected not only texts that explicitly discuss culture, but also articles from which cultural factors are taken into account indirectly. To understand how service design researchers view culture and how they position the relationship between service design and culture, we did meaning condensation of excerpts that were drawn from the literature (Kvale, 2007). The fragments of segmented text were clustered into four views (Describing, Shaping, Adapting and Enacting) by seeking similarities and differences, which is referred as the initial code (Charmaz, 2014). These were then finally condensed and synthesized within a matrix that differentiates their perspective of culture in relation to time and the relative connection between service design and culture (focused code) (ibid). Based on this analysis, we built a framework that brings together these four perspectives to show their differences and similarities. Based on the framework, further analysis of articles was conducted to synthesize emerging issues related to each of the different views on service design in relation to culture.

The framework for understanding culture in service design

In its basic form, the framework is a two-by-two matrix (see Figure 1), which presents four different quadrants for plotting the position of different views on service design in relation to culture. These different

interpretations of the role of service design in relation to culture can be distinguished across two dimensions.

The first dimension reflects how culture is viewed in relation to time in service design. In some service design literature, culture is viewed as *pre-existing*, which is often conceptualized to depict and to understand the current situation based on the evidence of the past and the present (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; van Boeijen, 2015). Such a view is often reflected by researchers who stress that culture sets the context before service design activities and that this pre-existing context exerts a deep influence on the service design process (Dalsgaard, 2017). On the other hand, some scholars emphasize that service design is concerned with culture in the future, what might become (Bremner & Roxburgh, 2014), and the ethical practice of world-making (Escobar, 2018). In this view, culture is recognized to be always in the process of *becoming*, in which the shared values and processes of groups are constantly evolving.

The second dimension relates to how researchers position service design in relation to culture. On the one hand, culture and service design are separate. In some research, there is a tendency to otherize culture from service design, seeing culture as a separate entity from service design (e.g., Lee & Lee, 2007). In a methodological perspective, design pragmatically focuses on how to transform the situation (Dalsgaard, 2017), which is sometimes referred to as solution-ism (Manzini, 2016). On the other hand, service design and culture are *entangled*. In this research, service design and culture are seen as intimately intertwined (e.g., Manzini, 2016; Akama et al., 2019). A phenomenological perspective holds that service design, as an ontological instrument, is process of organic and continuous transformation, which is entangled with the real world (Akama & Prendiville, 2013). This, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to separate service design from culture.

Framed by these two pairs of alternatives, *pre-existing* and *becoming*, and *entangled* (phenomenologically) and *separate* (pragmatically), the different perspectives on the relationships between design and culture gradually become clear. We name these views “describing”, “shaping”, “adapting” and “enacting”. As shown in Figure 1, these four views are interrelated and overlapping, as service design may play more than one role when interacting with culture. Together, these four views help to unpack the role of service design in relationship to culture within service design literatures (see Table 1).

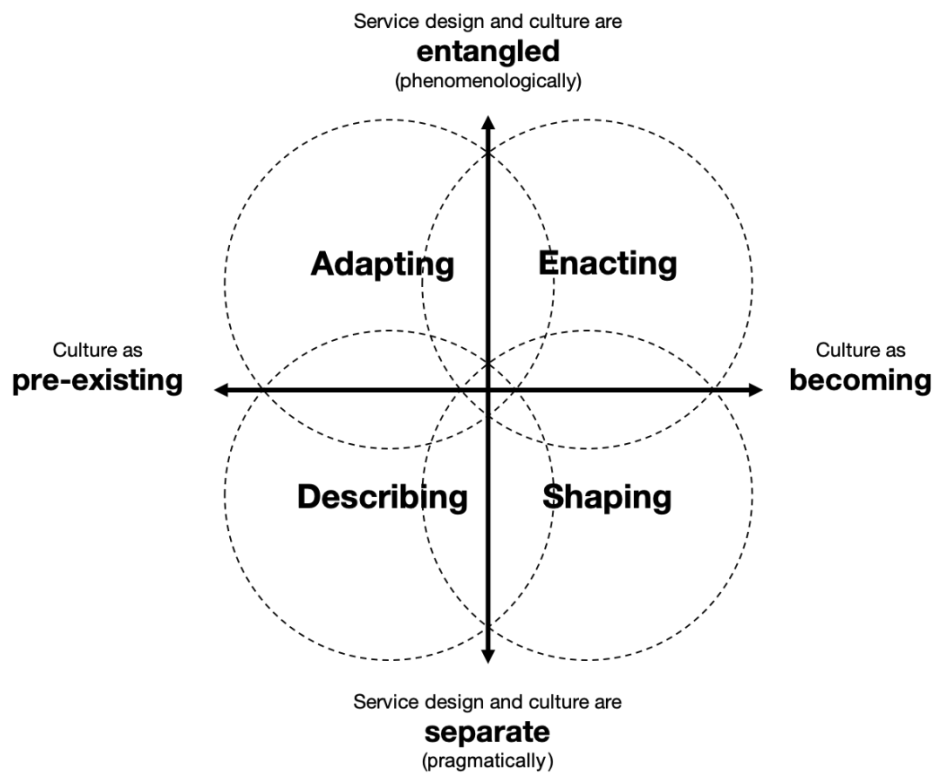


Figure 1. A framework of the views on the role of service design in relation to culture

	Describing	Shaping	Adapting	Enacting
Relationship between service design and culture	Separate	Separate	Entangled	Entangled
View of culture	Pre-existing	Becoming	Pre-existing	Becoming
Common service design activities	Depicting; Communicating; Illustrating	Handling; Moving; Manipulating; Impacting	Reflecting; Enhancing; Challenging	Performing; Embedding; Facilitating; Spreading
How service design interacts with culture	Service design depicts the characteristics and status of a culture.	Service design handles and moves culture carefully.	Service design must respond to changing cultural circumstances.	Service design is a process of performing and transforming culture.
Examples of the interactions between service design and culture	Service design uses different language systems and tools to describe a culture and its characteristics, providing background to service design activities (e.g., Taoka et al., 2018);	Culture can be used as an input to contribute to craft service innovation (e.g., Cipolla & Reynoso, 2017); The objective of service design can be to change culture (e.g., Dennington, 2018).	Service design approaches need to be dynamic and reflective to respond to changing cultural circumstances (Lee, 2014); Service design practitioners build/rebuild methods to adapt to complicated cultural contexts (e.g., Moalosi et al., 2010).	Every design act endorses the dominant paradigm, or proposes alternatives (e.g., Fuad-Luke, 2014). Design culture is generated from the interaction between design actions and other cultural worlds (e.g., Manzini, 2016)
Key emerging issues	Static and universal categorizations of culture denote subtle but important differences in service design (Bardzell, 2010).	Service design tends to detach methods from reality and designers in the service design process (Akama & Prendiville, 2013).	Western-centric service design approaches are mismatched with other cultural contexts (Taoka et al., 2018; Lee & Lee, 2007; Baek et al., 2019).	Service design tends to be insensitive to a multi-layered relationality of culture (Fuad-Luke, 2014; Akama et al., 2019).

Table 1. Features and issues of different views on the role of service design in relation to culture

Describing

Service design uses different language systems and tools to depict and communicate a specific culture with its own characteristics and status. This understanding provides a background to service design activities. It forms the first relationship between service design and culture. Based on the literature review, we find service design researchers regularly describe culture through geographical categorization (e.g., Baek et al., 2019; Lee & Lee, 2007). Building on cultural geography, this view sees culture as a capable entity of hierarchical transformation (Sauer, 1952). In this way, hemispheres, countries, cities, and communities can all become geographic units of culture used for the description of service design. Especially, the distinction of national boundaries is a customary way of outlining a culture in service design. For instance, Taoka and his colleagues (2018) compare the role of non-designers in co-design between Japanese and European cultural context. Cultural geography studies can present an evident correlation between place and culture (Zhao et al., 2006). Additionally, the nationality of a person can easily be established, making it an accessible mode of categorization (Dahl, 2004). People from the same country indeed often share some values and standards (Hofstede et al., 2005). Therefore, geographically defined cultures can help service design practitioners and researchers quickly understand and adapt to various cultural contexts and identify potential contextual challenges for service design activities.

However, it is necessary to recognize that the way of describing culture using geography as the only reference point can hide a more nuanced understanding of culture. Description itself is a subjective intervention through which designers and researchers participate in constructing reality, rather than being neutral (Bremner & Roxburgh, 2015). For designers and researchers, seeing and describing people of a taxonomized cultural background with geographical or nationalized categories can be speculative and risky (Akama et al., 2019). On the one hand, when it comes to culture, the place and country are imaginary and bear the subjectivity of describers (Tuan, 1977). When service design designers and researchers use pre-existing geographic divisions to describe culture, given perceptions will inevitably be brought into design activities (Dalsgaard, 2017). On the other hand, a growing number of scholars argue that it is problematic to employ national and geographical boundaries as the exclusive criteria for conceptualising culture in service design. It implies there is a unique and mechanical interrelation between geographic material and culture, which support a geographical

determinism in service design. Here, culture could be simplified as a feature that represents the fixed geographic materials (Ingold, 2018).

Shaping

As a discipline that attaches great importance to change, some research depicts service design as carefully handling and moving culture to develop new services and further promoting cultural transformation. In these articles, service design and culture are often assumed to be two separate entities at the methodological level. Dennington (2018) suggests that the two are interactive: Culture is considered as the materials or resources for the development of a new service concept (also see Pahk et al., 2018; Cipolla & Reynoso, 2017). Service design then offers various tools and methods to offload the idea and abstract solutions that transform or shape culture by manipulating, building and evaluating the external representation of culture. Service design pays significant attention to shaping and modifying culture within organizations. Organizational culture in service design often focuses on culture at the individual level (e.g. actors' mindsets) and institutional level (e.g. structures) (Kurtmollaiev et al., 2018).

In these descriptions, service design tends to provide solutions to address specific cultural problems. It often considers the practical and economic impact of the solution while ignoring meaningful discussion of culture (Manzini, 2016). The reason for this limitation is perhaps that service design tends to detach methods from reality in the service design process (Akama & Prendiville, 2013). Designers typically employ an "outside perspective" in the service design process, which means that problems and solutions are defined and created in isolation from the particular, dynamic cultural context (Janzer & Weinstein, 2014). On the one hand, the tendency of externalization gives design practitioners plenty of space to imagine the design solutions and manipulate them (Dalsgaard, 2017). While, on the other hand, the outside perspective threatens the effect of using culture as a raw material for service design and suggests potential risks in doing so. This detachment can cause service design practitioners to intentionally or unintentionally produce outcomes that contribute to controlling the culture of others diffusely (Janzer & Weinstein, 2014).

Adapting

To confront some of the above-mentioned risks in describing and shaping culture, some literature focuses on building and challenging the cultural consciousness in service design. Scholars suggest that service design approaches need to dynamically respond to changing cultural circumstances (Lee, 2014). These activities constitute the third view of how service design interacts with culture – here it means adapting to culture. Theories supporting the geographical taxonomies, which have been extensively explored in earlier studies, have greatly influenced designers perspective of cultural observation in service design. One of the most cited and famous works on cultural dimensions is the value patterns created by Hofstede and his colleagues (2005). These cultural dimensions have been integrated into service design activities because of their concise, clear and powerful differing approaches. This approach has helped service design practitioners build methods for adapting to complicated cultural contexts (e.g., Moalosi et al., 2010).

The application of Hofstede's theory has been extended to a lot of cross-cultural and intercultural researches which are based on the classifications of nationalities in service design and design more broadly. Researchers have shared several critical reflections regarding the issue that Western-centric service design approaches are significantly mismatched with other cultural regions. For instance, Taoka, Kagohashi, and Mougénot (2018) suggest that, in Japan, the presence of designers in the co-design process, hinders the empowerment and participation of non-designers, due to Japan's high-power distance. Similarly, Lee and Lee (2007) mention that in South Korea, which is more collectivist, user-participatory design research methods had poorer productivity and effectiveness than within the more individualistic German culture. Baek, Kim and Harimoto (2019) claim that current user-centred design framing overemphasizes the visible cultural levels (such as behaviour and structure) and risks neglecting the intangible value of culture. The above scholars all call for the enhancement of cultural awareness in the design process, specially the need for adapting design methods to different complex cultural circumstances.

Enacting

Fuad-Luke (2014) suggests that design culture is “*a continuous micro-political act of everyday*” and every design act endorses the dominant

paradigm or a specific hegemonic view of the world or proposes alternatives. Manzini (2016) states that design culture is generated from the stimulation of interaction between design actions and other cultural worlds. These views are representative of the fourth view of the relationship between service design and culture, enacting, where service design is a means of cultural performance. In this discussion, culture is an entity in which service design is intertwined and embedded (Manzini, 2016).

Service design, as a series of continuous micro-political acts, requires a more comprehensive, dynamic approach to be sensitive to multi-layered relationality (Fuad-Luke, 2014; Akama et al., 2019). Service design methods based on conventional “scientism” are often viewed as a systemized process of using the methods (Akama & Prendiville, 2013). The process simplifies a design expert as a “process-facilitator” (Manzini, 2016) and, as such, service design is more likely to replicate the world as it is (Bremner & Roxburgh, 2014). This issue undermines the ability of service design in acting with, on, and through cultures and contributes to service design ignoring the hidden body of culture (Baek et al., 2019).

Moving towards plurality

This paper provides a preliminary framework that unpacks four views on the role of service in relation to culture. These four views often co-occur and are interrelated to each other. By reflecting comprehensively on these four views, we find that there is an overarching issue that applies to all four views; service design risks imposing an exclusive value and criterion of culture on others, as one sense of “modernity” is often over-emphasised in design (Tlostanova, 2017). The emphasis on modernity can contribute to building a new world in a messianic way by eliminating other possible ways of cultural transformation (ibid). Therefore, service design can contribute to reproducing colonial design practices, that control and discipline people’s perceptions and interpretation of the world (ibid). The spread of one way of doing design contributes to the perpetuation of service design, as a global, homogenous activity, dominated by a single set of cultural interests and seeking a “Western” answer (Akama & Yee, 2016).

This exclusive, limiting perspective is dangerous to service design due to the possibilities of diluting the pluralistic richness of service (Kim, 2018). Janzer (2014) argued that designers should be sensitive to this cultural

reality. Otherwise, they may contribute to or practice neo-colonial/colonial design. To resist the emphasis on modernity and reproduction of coloniality, service design researchers increasingly call for the need to embrace heterogeneity and a plurality of cultures. In response, one aim is to enhance the cultural awareness of service design practitioners so that they can be cautious of employing instrumental rationality and move towards a recognition of difference and plurality as the central conditions of service design (Akama & Yee, 2016).

One important concern lies in the culture of the plurality reflexive, where plurality can be self-generating for cultivating different potentials (Light, 2019). Moving towards plurality means that service design needs to be released from any single and static understanding of culture. Instead, plurality involves considering service design and culture as a unified living entity with mutual and respectful relationality. Perhaps the framework on the views of service design in relation to culture that is presented in this paper can offer a more holistic frame to think about the plurality of cultures in service design, while curbing the tendencies to see culture based on a given taxonomy.

The four views on the role of service design in relation to culture provide different contributions to the service design discipline. Service design's tendency towards the externalisation of culture can help the designer to "manipulate" design solutions pragmatically in order to pursue usability and effectiveness (Dalsgaard, 2017). However, service design has reason to question this tendency of detachment, as it may ignore the subjectivity of designer in the service design action (Akama & Prendiville, 2013). By re-focusing on the micro design actions of the every day, designers can take a more phenomenological perspective to understand the interwoven and interactive relationship between design and culture (ibid; Fuad-Luke, 2014). As such, by moving between these different views and building consciousness of the related cultural issues, this framework offers a decentralized way to work across the different views of service design in relation to culture, while recognizing one's positioning and its limitations. Our hope is that this framework opens up continued and more nuanced discussion on how service design can better recognize and work with cultural pluralities in all its views.

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