

SOCIAL STRUCTURES AS DESIGN MATERIALS: THE ICEBERG FRAMEWORK OF SERVICE ECOSYSTEM DESIGN

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Purpose – While service design has been highlighted as a promising approach for driving innovation, service design projects too often fail to realize lasting change in practice. We argue that this failure happens in large part because of a lack of attention to the institutionalized social structures, such as shared rules, norms and beliefs, that guide the value cocreation of actors (Vargo and Lusch 2016). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to understand how actors can employ social structures as design materials to catalyzing significant and meaningful change in service ecosystems.

Approach – This conceptual paper aims at further theoretical development of service-dominant logic and understanding design from a service ecosystems perspective. We draw from institutional theory to deconstruct the nature of social structures and integrate insights from design theory to shed light on how actors are able to leverage taken-for-granted social structures as design materials in service ecosystem design. These conceptual insights are contextualized through empirical illustrations from service design practice.

Findings – We argue that social structures, entangled and inseparable from physical enactments, are the key materials of design within service ecosystems. More specifically, we use Scott’s (2014) seminal work on institutional pillars to build an “iceberg framework” of social structures as design materials. The framework situates the traditional service design materials—artifacts, interactions, activities and symbols—as the physical carriers of invisible social structures. The framework also deconstructs the materiality of social structures by suggesting that both the invisible structures and their carriers are comprised of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements.

Research implications – By deconstructing the role and nature of institutionalized social structures as design materials in service ecosystems, our research contextualizes the current issues with realizing lasting change through service design and opens up opportunities for further theoretical and practical development of design from a service ecosystem perspective.

Originality/value – This paper is one of the first studies that explicitly addresses and unpacks social structures as design materials. In addition to being a conceptual framework, this research posits that the “iceberg” can be used as a design tool to support actors in making implicit knowledge regarding social structures more explicit so that these social structures can be intentionally reshaped.

Key words – Design, social structures, service ecosystems design, service-dominant logic

Paper type – Conceptual paper

References

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