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Service Design as a Cultural Intermediary

Translating cultural phenomena into services

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Abstract: This paper expands existing service design and customer experience discourse by critically viewing service design through the lens of design as a cultural intermediary. Through a mixed methods approach, a triangulation of theoretical frameworks examines service design as a cultural intermediary, and what this might mean for this developing field. Examples of culturally aware services are discussed, to unpack the term *social awareness* as a cultural phenomenon, in relation to trend forecasting and meaning-driven innovation. A design case is included to further explore service design and cultural transformation, and the translation of cultural trends into service concepts. The outcome supports service design as a cultural intermediary, resulting in four main analytical findings: triple semantic transformation, meaning-driven concept innovation, experiential touch-points and experiential evidencing. The paper concludes that service design needs to develop its role as a cultural intermediary. This view is currently lacking in today's service design discourse.

Keywords: Service design, service innovation, cultural intermediary, value, social awareness

1. Introduction

Service design is a relatively young field within the field of design, but has established itself in practice and research over the past decade. Service design theory (Kimbell, 2011; Sangiorgi & Prendiville, 2014), tools (Blomkvist & Bode, 2012; Segelström, 2010) and methods (Clatworthy, 2011; Miettinen, Rontti, Kuure, & Lindström, 2012) are gaining wider traction, and service design is making its way into government organizations ('Service Design in Government 2017', n.d.), the public sector (<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/>), school classrooms (<https://www.service-design-network.org/study-service-design>) and business boardrooms (Reason, Løvlie & Flu, 2016).

Service design has been defined as "designed offerings to provide experiences that happen over time and across different touch-points" (Clatworthy, 2013, p.19). In this view, a focus on experience, specifically the customer experience, has contributed to the attention that service design is now receiving from the business world, and where this work is situated (csi.nhh.no).

This paper explores the role of service design as a cultural intermediary, in light of socio-cultural trends. It originated with an observation that whilst the field of product design presents designed artefacts as cultural intermediaries (Krippendorff, 2005; Press & Cooper, 2003) and marketing presents brands as cultural influencers (Holt, 2004), service design does not discuss how service design may act as a cultural intermediary. Yet, innovative services and concepts that seem to be translating cultural phenomena into service offerings are appearing in the market. Could the exploration of service design as a cultural intermediary expand service design discourse, and in turn impact the innovation capabilities of businesses?

2. Exploring service design as a cultural intermediary

2.1 Paper Outline

In this paper I present theory regarding design and brands as cultural intermediaries, to introduce the concept of cultural reflexivity in design. I use existing examples from the market to show instances of services that are culturally initiated, albeit not through service design. A discussion of how service design can assist in the translation of cultural phenomena into details of services is presented to show it may deliver customer experiences in line with identified socio-cultural trends. An example is presented, using *Prefall*, a personal service design project to indicate how such trends might stimulate a service design solution. These individual parts are brought together in a closing discussion about how service design could, and should, embrace the role it has as a cultural intermediary, and the implications this may have for research and practice.

2.2 Methodology and methods

To investigate the cultural role of service design, I used a bricolage approach (Yee & Bremner, 2011) of mixed methods. A literature review examined the relation of design and branding to cultural intermediary. Theoretical frameworks were triangulated and applied to service design for further investigation of the translation of cultural trends into service concepts, together with a study of existing examples of culturally aware services in the market. First-stage testing of forecasting methods unpacked the cultural phenomenon of *social awareness*. Initial qualitative interviews were conducted to enquire into the interest for the identified area of service design and cultural intermediary. To further explore this area, a design intervention was carried out using the methodology of Research by Design (Sevaldson, 2010), in which the researcher participates as a designer. Through this design work four analytical findings surfaced, which are presented in the final section of this paper.

3. Theoretical framings

3.1 Cultural intermediaries in the creative industries

Maguire and Matthews (2014) describe cultural intermediaries as “the taste makers defining what counts as good taste and cool culture in today’s marketplace”, when discussing different creative domains that mediate culture. Venkatesh and Meamber (2006) describe cultural intermediaries as individuals or organizations that transfer meaning. The notion of the cultural intermediary, whether a person, product, organization or other, builds on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of distinction, and how the cultural consumption of the ‘new petite bourgeoisie’ shaped the taste of individuals aspiring their status and cultural knowledge. Through the following sections I attempt to

clarify the term in relation to product design, and within cultural branding, to highlight in what way I believe existing theories of cultural intermediary may be relevant for service design.

3.2 Design and the designer as cultural intermediaries

Many of today's products are no longer designed solely based on functionality. Cooper and Press (2003) describe how culture is embodied and transformed into designed objects, and discuss how the designer makes meaning possible through design. By enabling meaning through these objects, the designer becomes a maker of culture, a cultural intermediary. In product design discourse, the study of meaning (semantics), has been approached to understand how meaning is signified, and interpreted through designed artefacts. Krippendorff and Butter (1984) termed this *product semantics*. Through product semantics, designed artefacts can function as cultural intermediaries, in the way they are influenced by culture. Krippendorff (2005) supports Cooper and Press's view of designed artefacts conveying meaning, and argues for a movement from pure functional design to a focus on what the designed artefacts mean to users, terming this *the semantic turn*. Krippendorff discusses how the designer interprets cultural tendencies, translating these into physical elements of design such as shape, material, texture and colour.

The three-legged *Juicy Salif* lemon squeezer by Phillip Stark is an example where meaning is embedded through form and aesthetics, and the experience of using it surpasses its functionality. Julier (2001) discusses how meaning is constructed and represented in an on-going process between design and culture, and how the *Juicy Salif* moves from the functional object of a utilitarian lemon squeezer (Figure 1), to an object of contemplation and admiration (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Functional - Chef Inox Stainless Steel Citrus Squeezer. Figure 2. Emotional - Juicy Salif, by Phillip Stark for Alessi. Image from www.petersofkensington.com.au Image from www.panik-design.com

Crane (2012, p. 2) writes how fashion products can “be viewed as a vast reservoir of meanings”. If indeed designed services act as cultural intermediaries, in the same way that designed artefacts do, what are the vast reservoirs of meaning in services, and how are they embodied through service design? If product semantics are a way of embedding meaning, how can we understand the semantics of services?

3.3 Cultural branding and brands as cultural intermediaries

Holt (2004) describes cultural relevance in relation to brands, through what he terms 'cultural branding' and 'iconic brands'. Holt explains how brands that successfully encapsulate cultural references can become iconic; in the way they translate cultural phenomena into brand specific details such as campaigns or products, thus presenting brands as cultural intermediaries. Within branding theory, the creation of *cultural capital* is discussed as the most valued resource customers receive through brand consumption, based on Bourdieu's theory (1984) of cultural knowledge as a form of currency. Cultural capital can be accumulated and displayed through signals, attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours and/or goods consumed, as Lamont and Lareau summarize (1988). Already in 1899, *conspicuous consumption* was theorized by Veblen, regarding upper-class individual's consumption of leisure activities, goods and services as a way of displaying wealth, and thereby social status (Trigg, 2001). With a shift of focus from owning products to using services (Millburn & Nicodemus, 2014) how can individuals 'conspicuously' consume services to acquire value such as cultural capital? What are the identity-building symbols of services, and could the semantics of services then be discussed in relation to the brand construct of a service?

3.4 From brand values to service semantics

Karjalainen (2004) explores how the designer translates brand values into products through design, and terms this *semantic transformation*. Through this transformation, certain brand characteristics are translated into products, and help create 'product families', products that relate to each other design-wise, such as Apple's products (Figure 3).

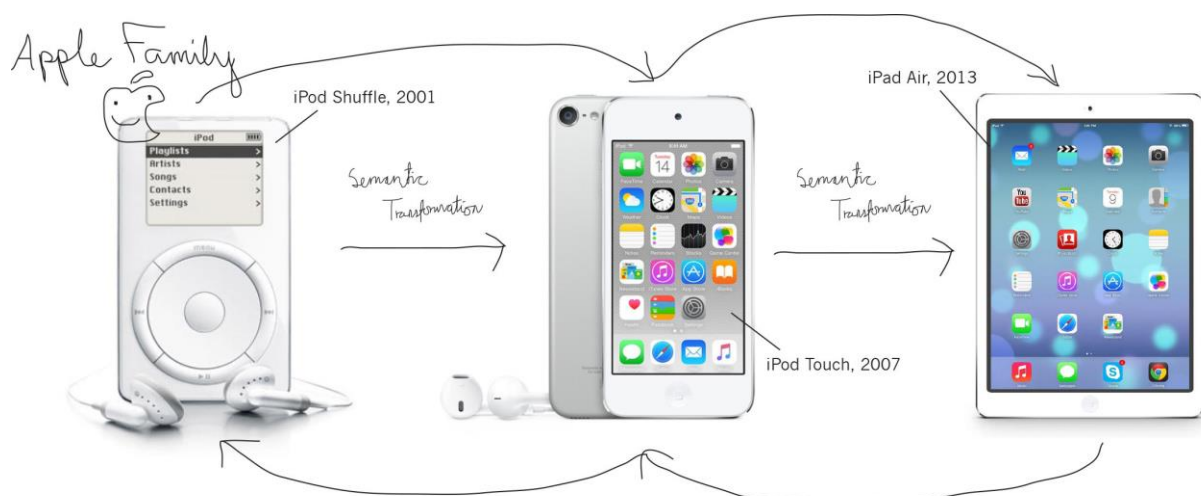


Figure 3. Visualization of the Semantic Transformation in Apple's product family. Illustration by Claire Dennington 2016

To account for the transition from brand into service, Clatworthy (2009) developed the conceptual model of the Brand Megaphone. The model illustrates how a brand's core values are amplified through the service personality, which again are transformed into details of a service, such as touch-points, behaviours and tone-of-voice. To assist in this transition da Motta Filho (2012) developed a draft Brand Experience Manual that contains guides for the translation of a brand into service, naming this translation a *brandslation* (Figure 4). This manual supports the need for further exploration of the translation of values into details of service design, which could be achieved through a cultural approach. As service design strongly relates to branding (Clatworthy, 2012), and brands are presented as cultural influencers and translators of cultural phenomena (Holt, 2004) we

can ask where the cultural branding discourse lies within service design, and how service design may assist in the translation of cultural phenomena.

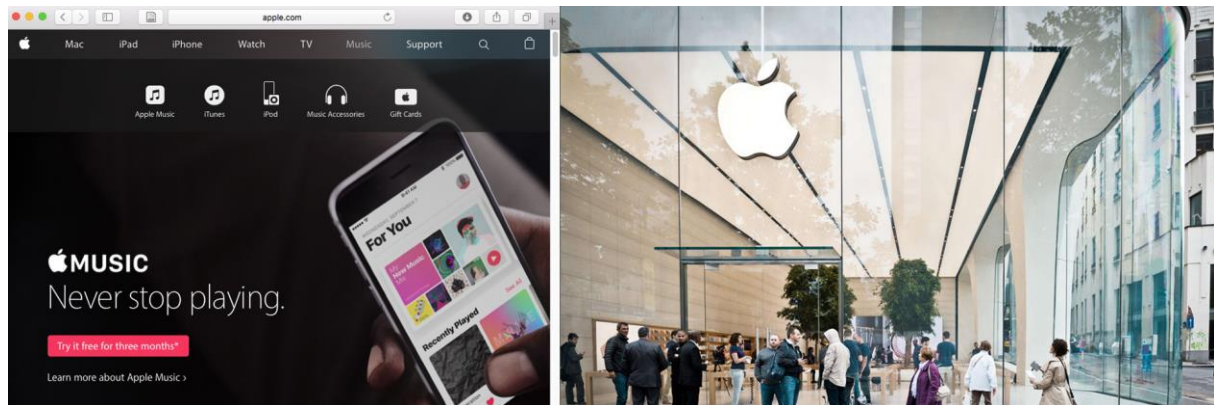


Figure 4. Brandtranslation - Apple translates the brand into details of service, such as Apple Music and physical Apple stores. Images from www.apple.com (screenshot) and www.designboom.com (by Bruno Dalimonte)

4. Service design + culture – a missing discourse

4.1 Service design discourse today

So far this paper has highlighted design and branding as cultural intermediaries, yet there seems to be little discussion around this topic within the field of service design. Maguire et al. (2014) present several domains within the creative industries as cultural intermediaries, including service-oriented industries such as fitness and book retailing. These they approach from a sociological perspective, but do not include cultural intermediary from a service design point of view. Popular service design books (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2012; Kimbell, 2015; Reason, Løvlie & Flu, 2015) mention culture in short paragraphs, but there is a lack of more elaborated chapters on cultural constructions, influences and changes. The online retailer Amazon has no service design books listed under 'Culture'; instead they are listed under 'Industry' and 'Business & Money'.

Journals covering areas of design such as *Design Issues*, *Design and Culture*, *International Journal of Design* and the service design specific *Touchpoint Journal* have not yet published any articles up until the close of 2016 specifically addressing service design and culture, although a couple do mention services in relation to societal (Koo, 2016) and cultural (Manzini, 2016) contexts. A review of papers presented at the largest research conference for service design, ServDes (servdes.org), over the past five (and only) conferences, indicates that there has been no active discourse around service design as a cultural intermediary. Rather, the primary focus has been within the fields of business, computer science and engineering (Blomkvist, Overkamp & Holmlid, 2016).

4.2 An expanding discourse

However, adjoining areas such as social innovation (Mortati & Villari, 2014) and social entrepreneurship (Balis, 2014) may indicate emerging areas where service design is more culturally determined, as does the work of Meroni (2006) and Manzini (2008) on strategic design, new food networks and food-system innovation. The dominating view in service design, however, does not currently seem to be culturally oriented. Initial semi-structured, qualitative interviews with a few individuals internationally, from practice and research - within branding, design ethnography and service design - indicate there is support for the topic as being of interest. This is further reinforced

through several informal conversations with service design practitioners as part of my own service design practice and research inquiries.

I would argue that the sum of these findings indicates the need for further exploration of service design as a cultural intermediary. Key to this is the question of if service design focuses upon its role in acting as a cultural intermediary, what could this actually mean for service design.

5. Culturally located examples

5.1 Culturally aware services and service offerings

Overall, my research into relations between service design and cultural intermediaries was initiated by the observation of interesting and innovative services and concepts appearing in the market. They seemingly offer more ‘meaningful experiences’ (Norton, 2003), acting as cultural intermediaries through the translation of socio-cultural phenomena into details of their services. To illustrate this, I next present examples drawn from international sources accessible online.

The dining concept *Conflict Kitchen* in Pittsburgh, solely serves cuisine from countries with which the US is in conflict. The concept’s aim is to expand the engagement the public have with food, culture and politics by offering an experiential opportunity for customers to encounter another side of the conflicted country’s story. The food and design elements shift alongside the represented country (Figure 5). In addition, talks, film screenings, concerts, and events such as virtual cooking classes are hosted, to involve customers’ in ‘more meaningful dining experience’ (<http://conflict-kitchen.org>).



Figure 5. Conflict Kitchen’s shifting graphic design elements of the exterior. Here showing the Cuban, Iranian and Venezuelan concepts. Images from www.conflict-kitchen.com

As a non-profit organization, all excess resources are re-invested in educational programs, performances and publications (Figure 6). By orchestrating several touch-points; the transactions between service and customer (Clatworthy, 2011) - such as the food, events and design elements, the concept offers an experience over time.



Figure 6. Shifting experiential touch-points. Example of publication and art installation during Conflict Kitchen's Iranian concept. Images from www.conflict-kitchen.com

Established brands are also addressing societal issues through new service offerings. When IKEA launched the social kitchen *Kuchnia Spotkan* in Warsaw ('Retailer Community Kitchens', n.d.) - a large, fully equipped kitchen in a spacious city apartment - they were not only offering a space for people to get together to make and enjoy a meal, they were simultaneously addressing the issue of small, expensive living spaces in larger cities. It could be argued that IKEA is not only trying to sell furniture, but also explore how to create opportunities for customers to become involved in valuable experiences, in an innovative way that aligns with their brand proposition of "affordable solutions for better living" (ikea.com).

When dating service match.com (2015) saw that 3.1 million of their users listed "coffee and conversation" as an interest, they teamed up with Starbucks, and introduced "Meet at Starbucks", a one-click-coffee-date invitation feature with a chat function. That function enabled users visiting Starbucks to chat directly with other users there, creating experiential opportunity for people in our digital age to meet up in real life, adding individual value to the customer experience. Examples such as these prompt us to ask a number of questions about the dominant directions of service design discourse. Is this just a PR-stunt, or can it be seen as dabbling in the societal issues of loneliness and the fear of meeting face-to-face in today's digitalized society? Why is service design not central in developing concepts like these?

5.2 Service design as a cultural intermediary: transforming trends into offerings

Delivering customer-centric service experiences is key to gaining positive economic advantage for service providers. This places service design in relation to the experience economy (Pine, Gilmore, & others, 1998) from a business perspective. As customers are becoming more connected, aware and active (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2013), they are demanding more valuable and meaningful experiential opportunities (Norton, 2003). Several new terms seem to be branching out of the experience economy, such as *the expectation economy* (Mason, Mattin, Luthy, Dumitrescu, & Osterwalder, 2015) and *the conscience economy* (Overman, 2014), with a focus on clear conscience consumption. Can identifying what kind of culturally negotiated experiences customers demand, help service designers create value through new service offerings?

Seen in the light of innovative service concepts appearing in the market, I ask whether the identification of socio-cultural phenomena can assist service design in value creation. Socio-cultural phenomena could be viewed as *societal trends*, defined as "trends that relate to the social and cultural values and practices within a society." (trendsactive.com). Martin (2009) describes *trends* as

movements or directions that influence culture, society or the businesses they move through, and in e.g. fashion, *trend forecasting* is used to identify these movements, to deliver desirable products at the right time (Pettinger, 2014). Could forecasting methods be adjusted to help service design deliver desirable services, at the right time?

Through previous work, and in the initial phase of my research project, I have conducted first stage testing of forecasting methods, to explore if they may be adapted to service design. This identified the broad term of *social awareness* as a cultural phenomenon. I use this as a lens to investigate the act of building valuable relationships through the design of culturally aware services. By social awareness, I mean creating awareness around, for example, environmental, political, ethical, societal or health related issues. Identifying these directions could be a way of supporting the development of more innovative services that, in turn, offer more meaningful experiences. Verganti and Öberg (2013) use the term *meaning innovation* about design-driven innovation that can lead to meaningful experiences through added cultural, symbolic and emotional value. Can service innovation be seen as meaning driven innovation? And, can societal trends, such as social awareness be translated into details of service to create more meaningful experiences?

6. Translating social awareness into service details through design

A design intervention carried out by the author was enacted to explore the design of culturally negotiated services in the context of fashion. The outcome of this work, *Prefall* (prefall.com), is a service for buying/selling second-hand fashion, with inspirational digital and physical content addressing fashion re-use. Through this design work, four main findings emerged, which I will briefly describe under following headings: triple semantic transformation, meaning-driven concept innovation, experiential touch-points and experiential evidencing.

6.1 Triple semantic transformation

An overarching finding that surfaced while designing *Prefall* is how a multiple translation process occurs. Initially, the translation of the identified socio-cultural trend into meaning, then a translation of this meaning into the service concept, and finally the translation of the meaning-driven concept into details of the service, such as touch-points and experiential evidencing. This could be termed a triple semantic transformation (Karjalainen, 2004; Clatworthy, 2013) as part of service design, and is worthy of further investigation to develop the understanding of service design as a cultural intermediary.

6.2 Meaning-driven concept innovation

My second finding is that when working with the design of *Prefall*, I was not designing a new service concept based on customers' expressed needs or functional improvements; rather, I was working with the design of meaning into the service concept, acting as a cultural intermediary. Designing meaning into products is a central part of product design discourse and practice. Verganti (2009) discusses how meaning can be a driver for innovation through design, and Holt (2004) presents meaning-driven brands as cultural influencers.

Prefall translates social awareness into a new service concept, by identifying the cultural movement of growing awareness around fashion consumption, and combines reuse and the experience of a high fashion brand to translate fashion recycling into a highly experiential service, offering the opportunity for a more meaningful way of consuming fashion (Figure 6). Existing service design tools

and methods, as found in service design books, on sites such as *servicedesigntools.org*, or as taught in service design education, are not currently sufficient when designing new service concepts based on meaning, and cultural references and contexts.

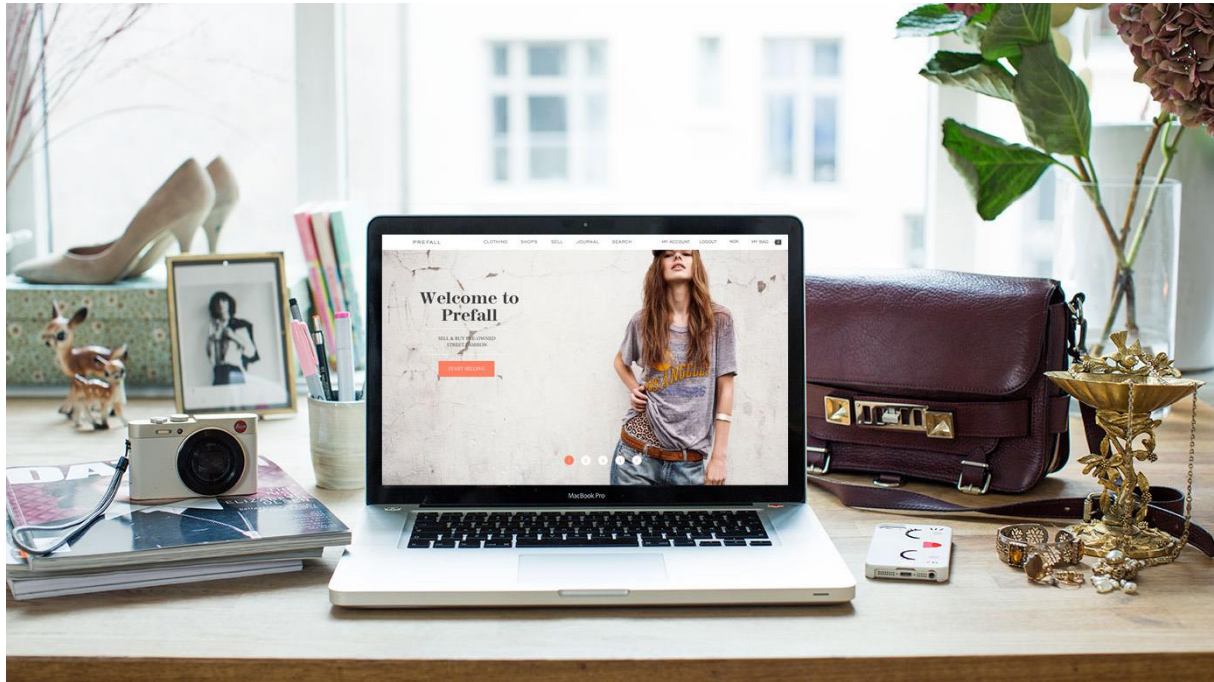


Figure 6. The designer was working with the design of meaning when developing the fashion reuse concept Prefall. Here a press image from the launch of Prefall. Image by Renate Torseth.

6.3 Experiential touch-points

My third finding is that when designing meaning-driven service concepts, there is a need to design highly experiential touch-points in strong alignment with the concept and brand values, which also translate the identified trend. During the design work it became apparent how the translation of *Prefall's* brand values into digital and physical touch-points needed to embody different levels of meaning to offer different levels of value outtake for the customer, through the experiential characteristics of each touch-point, to reinforce the meaning-driven concept (Figure 7). An example of such experiential touch-points is *Prefall's* short fashion videos (vimeo.com/prefall) connecting the aspiration for a certain fashion style with promotion for fashion re-use, creating an aesthetic and visual experience in line with a high fashion brand. This finding supports Clatworthy's *brand megaphone* model (2009), however, there is still a gap in service design discourse that addresses this area in depth.

6.4 Experiential evidencing

The final finding is that during the design of a meaning-driven concept it became necessary to evidence the concept in a more experiential way, to test the experience of the intended meaning physically e.g. through pop-up concepts (Figure 8). Through this I was able to gain insight into the experience rapidly and assess the results of the translation of meaning. Evidencing, used as a tool for transforming intangible ideas into tangible evidence for assessment of future services (<http://www.servicedesigntools.org>), could be developed in a more emotional and experiential direction. This could be done through short-term physical spaces for testing the experience of certain service features that translate the identified cultural movement and brand values. In this way, the designer can continuously evaluate whether the translation of the intended meaning is a success, and also gain feedback from stakeholders and customers.



Figure 7. Experiential touch-points. A physical guide with tips for selling secondhand clothing. Image by Solveig Knudsen



Figure 8. Experiential evidencing. Prefall pop-up concept. Image by Solveig Knudsen

7. Discussion – A move towards more culturally sensitive services

The findings indicate that service design can indeed act as a cultural intermediary. Examples of existing services also show that there is a cultural transformation of socio-cultural phenomena into services. However, these do not seem to be originating in service design, which may suggest an area to develop. The identified themes - triple semantic transformation, meaning-driven concept innovation, experiential touch-points and experiential evidencing - indicate an area of trend-driven service design that could be developed to build service design as a more culturally sensitive field. Yet, as of now, there is a lack of service design tools, methods and discourse oriented towards culturally initiated service design. Viewing service design, and the service designer as a cultural intermediary, could impact on the way service designers work in practice. It could do so through closer collaboration between service designers and the marketing team within businesses, or the need for in-house service designers in organizations and businesses. It might also allow for a stronger focus on developing service designers' creative skills and concept development in design education, enhancing the designer's ability of translation through design. Based on these reflections, I will now discuss some areas for further research.

First, I suggest the need for research into the development and application of a method or tool that could assist the design of more culturally sensitive services, through exploring in detail the elements of meaning-driven concept innovation.

Second, as new touch-points are surfacing, Clatworthy (2011) calls for more experiential touch-points, and Matthews (2015) suggests the inclusion of non-physical touch-points. To investigate the potential of more experiential touch-points, further research could look into different levels of translation, and in what way this may affect value outtake for customers.

Third, Matthews (2016) presents Graphic Experiential Evidencing as a visual tool for conveying brand experience and emotional response during service development. This focus on emotional response

was highly present when evidencing *Prefall*, where an extension into emotional and experiential evidencing was used as a way of translating social awareness into tangible evidence. I believe such an extension could help develop service design.

Finally, I suggest it may be valuable to introduce a more specific subset of cultural capital, in the light of current cultural phenomena, to an extended discursive understanding of service design. Through the design work with *Prefall*, a value-based term emerged: social awareness capital. I define this as a subset of cultural capital, offering customer value through socially aware service offerings. By identifying such a subset in the early stages of concept development, it could be used as a key variable measure, to assist service designers with the translation of cultural trends into new services.

8. Conclusion

This paper explores service design as a cultural intermediary, and in what way cultural phenomena can be translated into services. The findings from this explorative research, approached through the mixed methods of a literature review, first-stage interviews, examples from the market and my own design work indicate that service design can, and should, act as a cultural intermediary. Further, it is likely that we can expect an increasing focus on this angle, as the number of services that relate to cultural phenomena is expanding.

Service design as a cultural intermediary is a view that seems to be missing in current service design discourse, with a current functional and process oriented focus. This work presents initial explorative research, and as such should be seen as indicative. The empirical findings align, and clearly pinpoint, an area of relevance worthy of further study. I believe this may be a step toward starting a relevant and important discourse within service design concerning its cultural reflexivity. As a contribution to this discussion there is a need to explore the identified areas of meaning-driven service innovation, experiential touch-points and experiential evidencing more extensively. To investigate the potential of cultural transformation in service design as a means for service innovation, there is a particular need to carry out further design-initiated interventions.

Further research could explore the triple semantic transformation process: how the service designer acts as a cultural intermediary through the translation of socio-cultural trends into meaning, and how service design acts as a cultural intermediary through the translation of meaning into the service concept and service details. In addition, there is room for the development of a method or tool for research and/or practice that could assist in such translation. This, in turn, could contribute to the rise of more emotional, cultural and trend sensitive services from service design, ones that are culturally framed and experienced, and thereby alter the dominant notions and expressions of service design discourse as it stands today.

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