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Unmaking the *user journey*. Fostering alternative Service Design futures.

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Abstract

This paper bridges the discussion on a more ethical Service Design practice with the one on Dominant Design. It points out the neo-liberalist and late-capitalist roots of Service Design, which are often a barrier to envisioning ways for the discipline to be more inclusive and sustainable. A closer analysis of the user journey, the backbone of Service Design practice, highlights its critical structural issues and how it informs potentially harmful processes and outcomes. The exclusive focus on user and human-centredness prevents service designers from embracing an ecosystem, plural and antihegemonic practice.

Keywords: antihegemonic practices, dominant design, human-centredness, service user journey

Late capitalism as the framework for the Service Design discipline

Service Design (SD), as a discipline, emerged from the transformation that interested post-industrial society between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s (Sangiorgi & Pacenti, 2010). Then, two types of synchronic processes catalyzed societal change: product-service ecosystems digitization (Toffler, 1970; Pine & Gilmore, 1999) and widespread globalization processes. Together, these processes favored a shift towards a neoliberalist and capitalist society that is deeply rooted in an extractive approach to economic value creation (Raworth, 2017). The cognitive, physical, and digital infrastructures and the pragmatic thinking that characterized this type of society profoundly influenced the design community and catalyzed key discussions. They amplified the debate on the emerging *post-industrial society* and on the related transition toward a *service society* (Lusch & Vargo, 2017). The

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understanding of the *intangible dimension* of services asked for changes to the traditional role of designers and enabled new transformative tasks for the design discipline.

In this regard, the cornerstone for the emergence of SD had been the understanding of the network of relations and meanings between the sociotechnical, economic, organizational, and cognitive spheres (Sangiorgi & Prendiville, 2017). As a result, designers' new tasks went beyond the features typical of the traditional design of *materiality* and started to include analog and digital interactivity as the focus of design. The design of the intangible included the crafting of interactions between artifacts, infrastructures, providers and users, processes, and actions. In addition to this, the establishment of SD has been possible through the work of SD scholars and practitioners that, drawing from the early seeds of Participatory Design, evolved their understanding of the nature and role of the *consumer*, now considered as the user (Holmlid, 2009). From that moment on, *user-centeredness* shaped the ethos, the processes, and the practice of SD. This is exemplified by the *choreutic* vision of the user *experience* that can be found at the core of any SD process and of any designed interaction. With this focus, SD endeavors prescribe and influence users' role and all their physical and cognitive activities and possibilities (.

So far, intangibility has made SD known as the friendly face of *extractive capitalism*, since it implies a potential reduction in the use of natural resources. Drawing from Escobar (2018) and Akama (2021), we can state that, however, emerging from a neo-liberalist and late-capitalist society and perspective, SD practice and outcomes bring forward the same values and operational principles: *satisfaction, performance, efficiency*, and *functionality*, to mention a few. Therefore, SD carries the above-mentioned values in every experience that is designed, and those values structure and are embedded in the daily experience and agency of every public and private actor. This means that in a *service society* everything is mediated not only by a service infrastructure but also by the aesthetics of service interactions and by service cultures.

The use of the aforementioned values as operational principles has proven potentially harmful to human and non-human beings since the positivist and pragmatic approaches to reality are grounded on the understanding that nature is something to dominate and control for the satisfaction of human needs and purposes (Santos, 1987). As a result of these approaches, which are deeply rooted in current socio-cultural and environmental settings, human agency constantly produces externalities that reinforce capitalist patterns (Raworth, 2017). Furthermore, it means that SD has been, *de facto*, a powerful but opaque engine for producing and reproducing a type of society that, following in the footsteps of late-capitalism and

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neo-liberalism, favors those who are structuring societal hierarchies and excludes those who are not compliant with dominant ways of living.

Therefore, scholars and practitioners in SD need to re-discuss the ethical approach that characterizes their practices: there is the need for a stronger critical attitude able to discuss and challenge SD roots and genealogies. In this paper, we would like to contribute by critically assessing the *user journey* - a cornerstone of SD, from the perspective of *Dominant Design*. This will challenge the core of SD mainstream approach: the functionalist approach that aims exclusively to performative, individually based (customer) satisfaction. Furthermore, it will show the shortcomings of SD practices that do not really consider a systemic perspective and the complexity of the externalities that service designers' actions might create.

To do this, drawing on the work done so far by scholars engaged with the Dominant Design discussion, we will introduce its definition and operative principles and provide some first reflections about its implications for SD discipline and culture.

Dominant Design

Dominant Design is an expression used to refer to design practice and discipline as emerged in Europe and North America during the 20th century and later disseminated worldwide (Akama & Yee, 2016; Schultz et al., 2018). Design, as such, borne out of functionalist and rationalist ways of understanding the world and acting within; therefore, it has brought their values forward (see Akama et al., 2019; Fry, 2010, 2017; Schultz et al., 2018).

The constitution of Dominant Design has been possible through the process of institutionalization of Design - meaning the process of constitution of Design as a discipline, and a recognized practice and knowledge (Del Gaudio et al., 2021). This process has established what was defined as the proper way of designing, which can also be understood as a *normative way of designing*. Due to design's Anglocentric/Eurocentric origins and preexisting power relationships, this process has led to the affirmation of a cognitive empire: a dominant way of discovering, knowing, and acting within design (Fry, 2017). Its worldwide acknowledgment has, over time, legitimized the application of a globalizing viewpoint in design processes through the widespread use of dominant techniques, framing the cultural and contextual visions and practices of the non-dominant ones (see Akama et al., 2019; Schultz et al., 2018; among others).

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A close look at Dominant Design allows us to identify three principles that sustain and reinforce its structural process of development: (1) institutionalization; (2) universalism; and (3) solutionism.

Institutionalization corresponds to the affirmation and perpetuation of certain ways of knowledge production through sets of procedures established according to existing hegemonic power relationships between cultures (Del Gaudio et al., 2021). Specifically, the knowledge developed by dominant institutions (and therefore by people in positions of authority and privilege) has been considered valuable without a critical process of discussion. This dominance also has allowed its widespread diffusion and the subsequent exclusion of alternative ways of knowing and doing. The institutionalization of Design is one of the processes that has transformed the discipline into a *tool of oppression,* altering and impoverishing existing cultures and their legacies (Gutierrez Borrero, 2015; Prendeville & Koria, 2022).

Universalism corresponds to the process of definition of generalized methods and practices that could be used across cultures and contexts (Prendeville & Koria, 2022). The application of this principle aims at designing *one-fits-it-all* solutions, strengthening the processes' efficiency. *Efficiency*, *functionality*, and *performance* are key qualities in the definition of universal solutions. Therefore, universalism implies processes of homogenization of knowledge, practices, and processes and the identification of practices that do not engage with local specificities and socio-cultural issues. Dominant Design, governed by the principle of universalization, has favored knowledge that transcends the realities involved, detaching them from their singularities and generating objective solutions to non-situated problems (Haraway 1988).

Solutionism is at the root of the widespread problem-solving design approach and designers' mindset. It feeds a design practice based on pragmatic, fast-paced processes able to answer the needs of the market since they produce *profitable*, innovative, *productive*, and efficient outcomes. In doing this, it includes, though, a process of simplifications of problems that conflicts with a complex understanding of reality (Santos, 1987) and disregards key relationships between the different elements that compose reality and promote an understanding of reality as matter that can be manipulated by human beings according to their needs. It implies, therefore, that the individual and its *satisfaction* are at the center of the process and the goal to be achieved by the solution, ignoring the variety of perspectives and possibilities available in the ecosystems.

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Analysis and Discussion: User journey as a *Dominant Design dispositive*

To better understand and share the relevance of critically assessing SD knowledge, tools, and practice through a Dominant Design lens, we decided to analyze the User Journey tool, a cornerstone of most SD practices, through the Dominant Design principles outlined above.

According to some well-acknowledged public repositories[1] of SD tools, the user journey is a detailed but synthetic visual representation of the user's interaction with and throughout the designed solution - that is, the service. The key feature of this representation, useful for the analysis, is that it happens from the user's perspective. Specifically, for the visualization, the journey elements that are taken into consideration are: the users' interaction with service touchpoints, obstacles and barriers to the user's experience, user's positive/negative emotions, user's relationships with other stakeholders'/roles involved in the interaction process itself, etc.
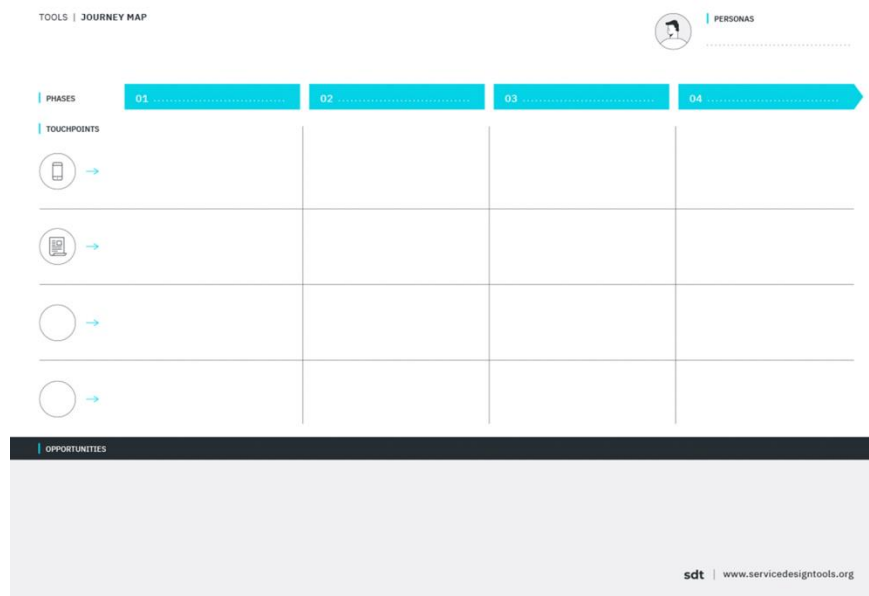

Figure 1. An example of the service user journey (Source: Service Design Tools, https://servicedesigntools.org/)

These User Journey's core aspects are connected to the solutionism principle described above: the individual and their satisfaction are at the center of the design

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[1] See for example the Service Design Tools repository website at https://servicedesigntools.org/

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SERVDES 2023

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process. With this focus, there is no representation of the environment/biosphere and of its active/passive participation in the service process, and of the interactions and relations between it and human beings. This is due to a unidimensional approach to interaction and representation of the project that disregards the multiplicity of interactions that might take place at the same time and the plurality of ways in which they can happen. Therefore, this approach to SD seems to reinforce the extractive approach of the neo-liberalist and late-capitalist society, which does not take into consideration the existence of other beings and the influence of human actions on the environment and other species.

As discussed by the researchers, previously mentioned, engaged with challenging Dominant Design, human-beings' centricity is a characteristic of Western culture and values, which speaks both to universalism and institutionalization. More specifically, it makes the user journey a sort of artifact's embodiment of the service according to a Western and capitalist perspective. It does not embrace alternative ways of conceptualizing service and the service journey. Therefore, it uses a universalist approach that disregards alternative cultural frameworks, like, for instance, those rooted in indigenous cultures/Global South's cultures. It becomes a non-situated method applied to local needs and diverse realities. This emerges clearly by looking at the use of an individual and a stereotyped user persona as representations of user's desires and needs and as the baseline for the definition and evaluation of any service interaction. The user journey simplifies the diversity of the users' behavior imaginaries. This generates both the standardization of the offerings and of the modes of interaction; and transforms every *service assemblage* (between human and non-human beings, the matter, the relationships) into a stereotyped, business-modeled, western-centric service offering.

Finally, related to all three principles, there is no sign of embracing a collective-centered perspective and of the exploration of the social and environmental effects of the SD multiple interactions. There is no visualization of the influence exercised over the interactions of the user's community and no visualization of the impact of resources along the service chain.

Final Considerations: Why discussing the Dominant Design *paradigm* is important for the future of SD?

As previously discussed, the process of servitizing society through individual experience has structured our everyday experience and our private and public agency (Karpen, Holmlid & Yu, 2021). In our *service society,* services'

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infrastructures, modes, languages, and interactions mediate and define almost all our possibilities – individual/collective and private/public agency.

In this paper, we attempted to explain how this powerful pervasive system is made possible by the existence of Dominant Design practices and knowledge. More specifically, in the previous section, we pointed out *human centricity* as the building block of SD practice and the implications that this brings. Human centricity, the expression of a Western approach to knowledge and world-making, prevents the adoption of a multi-species and ecosystem-oriented perspective that would prevent harmful consequences of design practices on minority groups and on the environment, as we explained throughout the paper.

Drawing from this, we also saw that embedded in this average SD design culture, there is an implicit but non-critical assumption of an idea of solutionism where the late capitalist frameworking is the unique possibility of representing the complex interactions of a service.

The key features of SD, which are informed Dominant Design principles, permeate any SD practice and frustrate any attempt to build ethically grounded ones. However, this paper aims at strengthening a critical standpoint by raising key questions: How can we change SD, then? How can we move from its theoretical framing to a more equitable, inclusive, respectful, and non-harmful SD practice?

Considering that transforming SD in this direction presents itself as an immense task, we think that the first step is to consider this as an activist challenge: SD scholars need to become more aware of how Dominant Design principles, as therefore neo-liberalist and late-capitalist ones, manifests themselves in SD culture, processes, tools, organizations and action models - both in current professional and academic practices. There is also the need to promote a more critical analysis of SD practice and knowledge from the outlined perspective to understand and better manage the implications of existing ones. We must critically evaluate the pure *functionalist practices* that aim exclusively to performative, individually based (customer) satisfaction, with business and organizational models that do not consider a real systemic perspective and the complexity of the externalities that our action as service designers might create. On this, Prendiville (2015) points out the relevance of place and place-making in the design of community services. Here we started with the user journey, but this can and should be done with related methods and tools.

The previous section shows that we cannot separate the idea of targeted user interactions from its consequences and impact on the relations and interactions of connected systems. As Akama and Prendiville (2013) have pointed out, SD needs to be seen beyond a set of fixed interactions or systemized process. Within the SD

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process, every time more based on a co-design approach, entanglements are constantly transformed and connected. Therefore, the need for efforts aimed at bringing a multispecies and ecosystem perspective emerges. A positive example in this direction, even if rooted in the current political, social, and cultural Eurocentric perspective, is the recent adoption of the principle *Do No Significant Harm* by the European Commission (ECCWG, 2021). According to this principle, we must be aware and evaluate systemic impact; explicitly understand how certain actions might potentially cause social and economic injustice or even lead us towards a *capitalocenic* and inevitable *anthropocenic* catastrophe.

There is a need for tools and practices that take into consideration the multiple interactions of every service assemblage (between human, non-human, the matter) and that go beyond functionalism, solutionism and universalism; and include reflections on social qualities such as social justice, fair work, ethical use of environmental resources. We hope that these reflections ignite an open discussion on how the future approach of the service design discipline and practice should be.

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