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Satu Miettinen is dean and professor of service design at the University of Lapland, specialising in design and its multifaceted impact on society. With a focus on participatory design processes and arts-based research (ABR), she investigates how design and arts can foster community collaboration and innovation. Miettinen's research emphasises acknowledging cultural contexts in design practices and promoting sustainable and inclusive solutions. She has published extensively in academic journals and frequently presents her work at international conferences. Passionate about education, she inspires students to explore the intersections of service design, society, and technology, encouraging a holistic approach to contemporary challenges.

Legacy of Women in Service Design

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Abstract

This research paper discusses the legacy of women in service design. It is a short historical review of some of the main topics that especially female researchers, academics and practitioners have addressed in the era of service design. This research paper is grounded on a thematic literature review. It discusses several concepts where women have had research impact: Service design, design for services, service ecosystem design, systems-orientated service design and decolonizing service design. In the conclusions, it proposes some future directions for women in service design.

Keywords: Women, legacy, service design, research

Introduction

It is important to acknowledge women in service design. As a relatively young discipline, women have made considerable contributions to service design. This article is asking: “What is the main contribution of women in service design research?”

The discipline started developing in the late 1990s with the advocacy of exceptional women, Professor Birgit Mager. She established the service design discipline at the International School of Design in Cologne. She was one of the co-founders of Service Design Network, an international organisation promoting service design research, practice and education. There have been similar contributions by women such as Lucy Kimbell, Anna Meroni, Daniela Sangiorgi, Katarina Wetter-Edman, Mari Suoheimo and the author Satu Miettinen along the way. This article introduces some of the

research work done by women that has helped to develop the service design discipline. This is not to say that men shouldn't be acknowledged. There are many wonderful and knowledgeable men that have made contributions to service design but this article is trying to highlight academic women and their publications. Of course, the world is not binary at all but we need to acknowledge diversity of gender also in service design. It already might be a bit old-fashioned to celebrate only women.

Suoheimo, Trapani and Miettinen (2023), all women, discuss the historical perspectives on service design in the context of technology. They recognise several concepts and transformations from the history that service design is underpinning. They introduce several different approaches to service design: Service design, design for services, service ecosystem design, (ibid.)

In this article, I'll first introduce previously mentioned topics and secondly add to this list systems-orientated service design and 'decolonial' point of view. Miettinen and others (2025) have recently discussed an emerging paradigm in service design that highlights the larger systemic view on service design as well as the need to understand ethical, 'decolonial' as well as 'pluriversal' views in service design. The overall context of service design has become more complex and challenging.

Research Methodology

This research article is based on a thematic literature review. The literature review tries to identify, analyse, and synthesise the main themes that women have contributed to service design (Braun & Clarke 2006). I try to provide some insights into the research landscape that women have contributed to. I will group the literature under the main topics and finally, analyse and synthesise

this in conclusions, (Mason 2002).

Thematic literature review has many limitations. It is leaving out important and relevant references that should be acknowledged. Hopefully, many women recognise themselves in the topics even if their publications are not mentioned.

Findings

I'm summarising some of the main topics where women have contributed to service design. Women's contribution is very much in line with the overall development of the discipline. One can recognise the shift in service design from a more operative towards a more strategic approach (Miettinen et. al. 2025, forthcoming).

Service design

To start with, service design has an initial approach towards designing and co-creating experiences with users and stakeholders while keeping a holistic view in mind. Service design has been focusing on tools that help analyse the service experience such as service journey, touch points and blueprints. The user-driven service development has been important and has also included several methods based on co-design, inclusion and discovering user insights. Many times, an iterative design process is applied to service development and later on the famous "double diamond", (Bitner 1992; Bitner 2001; Miettinen & Koivisto 2009; Miettinen and Valtonen 2012).

Design for services

Service design has evolved from having an operative view focusing on user insights and engagement during the development process. Design for services highlights the need to design for value co-

creation during the consumption of the service. This view gained popularity as it discussed both value co-creation utilised in marketing literature and co-design with users. This approach highlights also the connections between specific service contexts, resources and service-dominant logic, (Kimbell 2011; Meroni and Sangiorgi 2011; Wetter-Edman 2014).

Social innovation and service design

Services and service design has been recognised as a platform for social change, (Cipolla et. al 2019). Service design can be a true catalyst for change. In relational services, interpersonal relations play a role in creating solutions, (Cipolla 2012). Service design can also be incorporated into the public sector where it can create social innovation with active citizens, (Penin 2018).

Service Ecosystem design

Mager and others (2023) discuss product-service systems (PSS) as a model that integrates both products and services to deliver value to customers and focus more on providing comprehensive solutions. Further, they refer to ecologies of reconfigurable elements within larger social or technical systems. This is shifting service design already closer to service ecosystem design which challenges linear double diamond with an embedded loop for feedback and reflection. Service ecosystem design acknowledges the actors being part of a service ecosystem, and a social structure and aims at transforming also the system as a whole, (Vink et. al 2021a&b).

Systems-orientated service design

Suoheimo and others (2025, forthcoming) have been investigating how systems' theories can be integrated into service design. This

is needed to address complex socio-economic-technological challenges. Service design has become both a transdisciplinary and a transformational approach. Määttä and others (2024) have a systems-orientated service design approach to inclusive education which can be recognised as a wicked problem.

Decolonizing service design

Seppälä and others (2021) have investigated how art-based methods can help in creating more horizontal and democratic research practices as well as how art-based methods can decolonize participatory research. Service design employs art-based methods. Rautiainen and others (2021) have had a close look at the facilitator's role in service design workshops to enable decolonial approach. Decolonizing design in the context of cultural heritage is more important than ever, (Paananen, Suoheimo & Häkkinen 2022).

Conclusions

We can state that there have been about forty years of service design. Or at least thirty years with the very title of service design. Female researchers in service design are addressing more and more complex challenges with the service design approach. Concurrently, service design itself is addressing more and more complex challenges, addressing diversity and the need for decolonizing not only for services but the very design itself.

Of course, it's hard to differentiate the contribution to design by gender as we research in teams and the world is not binary at all. Yet, in this article, I wanted to highlight the work of some wonderful women and briefly introduce the different approaches to service design.

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