

# *Exploring the transformative impacts of service design: The role of designer–client relationships in the service development process*

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*Based on a multiple case study on Service Design (SD) projects, we discuss different levels of SD's transformative impacts, associated with three types of designer–client relationships. In the 'delivering' relationship, SD informs service planning and development practices based on user-centred insights, while affecting physical service resources/technologies. In the 'partnering' relationship, SD aligns actors with the target users' experience while extending the SD impact, beyond physical resources/technologies, to human actors. Finally, in the 'facilitating' relationship, SD helps client organisations build their own capabilities for sustainable user-centred innovation, while achieving a wider impact on physical resources/technologies, human actors, processes, and routines. The contextual factors and implications of the designer–client relationships for SD practices are also discussed, based on expert interviews.*

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The recognised benefit of integrating design to improve company performance (Gemser & Leenders, 2001) leads many companies to seek the expertise of professional consultants, which can provide an outside-in perspective (Gericke & Maier, 2011). Involving external design expertise in innovation processes entails two relevant, yet currently disconnected, issues: The nature of designer–client interactions (Nikolova, Reihlen, & Schlapfner, 2009) and the design's roles and impacts on innovation processes (Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2009; Perks, Cooper, & Jones, 2005).

Design communities have studied designer–client interactions, focusing on developing taxonomies (Bruce & Docherty, 1993; Bruce & Morris, 1994) and identifying conditions or strategies for successful design management (Hakatie & Rynänen, 2007; Maciver & O'Driscoll, 2010). However, little research has been conducted on different designer–client relationships in

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regards to the specific qualities of designers' actions, skills, and outputs. Also, although studies have indicated how design impacts innovation processes and how its outcomes may be affected by the way designer–client relationships are managed (Roy & Riedel, 1997; Verganti, 2003), design impact characteristics according to designer–client collaborations have seldom been articulated.

Compared to product innovation, service innovation involves organisational transformation as a critical condition for service implementation and performance (Karpen, Gemser, & Calabretta, 2017). As a service concept and specifications are operationalised through performances, processes, and deeds (Edvardsson, Gustafsson, & Roos, 2005; Vargo & Lusch, 2004), less-prepared organisational resources and capabilities may obstruct successful service delivery (Kowalkowski, Windahl, Kindström, & Gebauer, 2015). Therefore, service innovation can require a wide range of improvements in organisational resources, processes, structures, and cultures, often made by changing the fabric of an organisation (Andreassen et al., 2016). Accordingly, organisational transformation by SD draws growing attention (Andreassen et al., 2016; Sangiorgi, 2011) while empirical studies on that topic are increasing (Pinheiro, Alt, & Mello, 2012; Terrey, 2013).

In this study, we aim to explore SD practices and their transformative impacts which are influenced by designer–client relationships. A multiple case study on ten SD projects identified a typology of designer–client collaborations and different SD qualities and approaches. These findings were discussed in relation to SD's transformative impacts on organisational resources and capabilities. Further interviews with seven SD experts contributed to our understanding of the contextual factors and implications of designer–client relationships.

## *1 Related studies*

### *1.1 Designer–client relationships*

The topic of how to effectively utilise external designers to benefit from their outside perspectives is an integral part of designer–client relationships (Von Stamm, 1998). Empirical examinations of consultant–firm collaborations generated different taxonomies. For example, Bruce and Docherty (1993) categorised designer–client relationships in three ways: family, arms-length, and one-off purchase. The 'family' approach allows designers to proactively engage in creating corporate strategies and innovation solutions based on an understanding of clients' tacit knowledge, culture, vision and strategy, whereas designers in the 'arms-length' and 'one-off purchase' approaches work according to the client's requirements, remaining external to the client organisation's internal practices and processes. Bruce and Morris (1994) more simply classified designer–client relationships as short-term and long-term relationships.

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