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Challenges and opportunities for service design[ers] in Vietnam: the Ho Chi Min City's public healthcare context.

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Abstract

In the last decade, service design has been promoted globally as an approach to creating efficient and meaningful experiences for customers, users, and citizens. However, in some regions, its practices are incipient. This study listened to design practitioners in Ho Chi Minh City, the largest Vietnamese metropolis, to unveil issues and opportunities for service design in the public sector, mainly healthcare services. The practitioners' lenses helped to identify various HCMC citizens' pain points to accessing public [healthcare] organizations. It also describes obstacles professionals face collaborating with government bodies to propose a change via service design. Although the local designers suggested potential approaches to improve the service offering in public and private sectors, they mostly lack opportunities to develop expertise in service design.

Keywords: Service design, Vietnam, public sector, healthcare.

Introduction

The design industry has different maturity levels across countries. Currently, there are several opportunities in Vietnam to study and develop professional practice in disciplines such as visual communication, industrial, spatial, and fashion design. However, within the realm of experience design, the context is diverse. Education and job opportunities thrive in digital design, particularly interaction design, game design, etc. In contrast, the current scenario is less promising for service design. To date, this area has not received serious attention from businesses, and local designers' awareness of its practices is low. Although service design demand has

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increased since the pandemic, opportunities to develop related projects are relatively scarce. Service design programs are neither available at university-level education.

As a developing country_ Vietnam quickly became an industrial powerhouse in the last decade. The design area was inserted into the national development strategy, helping boost the local design industry. Assuming the next development stage of the country is concerned with expanding and improving the service sector (Nayyar et al., 2021), public organizations and businesses are moving in this direction. Services expansion can be visualized as an economic and social development tool. However, in the Vietnamese context, various obstacles exist to expanding the services at different levels. One critical concern is the offering of public services to citizens. Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), the most populated Vietnamese urban area, is well-ranked regarding public service delivery according to the PAPI 2020 - Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (CECODES et al., 2021). However, in the context of healthcare, the citizens' satisfaction is only average in service-related aspects such as waiting periods and respect for patients during treatment.

Related work

As an interdisciplinary practice that develops blueprints to deliver holistic services (Shostack, 1984), in the last two decades, service design has been adopted by businesses in several industries. In addition to supporting clients and users, service design is critical for enhancing citizens' experiences. In this sense, its practices have also gained traction across the public sector (OPSI, 2022; SDN & Mager, 2016). For instance, aiming to deliver public services citizen-focused, some European countries are utilizing service design as an approach to public governance (Whicher et al., 2013). Service design literature is expanding within the public sector, particularly in healthcare. Case studies on the adoption of service design cover a range of aspects, such as the patient experience and management change (Fry, 2019; Patrício et al., 2019).

According to Sangiorgi (2010, p. 29), service design "has recently been considering services less as design objects and more as means for societal transformation." Thus, it is moving toward the realms of organizational development and social change. Although scholars have already conducted relevant studies on the role of service design in social innovation endeavors (Rizzo et al., 2016; Yang & Sung, 2016), the issues design practitioners face when working with public organizations are less covered. We refer to the service design tender or procurement practices

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(Park-Lee & Person, 2018) by which designers and design studios/consultancies conduct projects demanded by government entities. Assuming this is a critical issue in delivering service design projects in the public sector, some organizations have developed guidelines for civil servants to manage and evaluate such projects (Design Singapore Council, 2022; Thoelen et al., 2015).

Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory perspective to delve into the results of an online questionnaire applied to Vietnamese design practitioners. It included 25 questions, the majority in an open-ended format. Initially, the survey investigated service design activities in the HCMC area. Following this, the questionnaire obtained information about local designers' expertise and their perceptions of service design development in the public [healthcare] sector. Considering that the service design scene is still evolving in the country, and a few professionals are working in the field, participants were reached based on the personal network of one of the authors. Practitioners from different backgrounds and with some expertise in service design were invited to participate. A grounded theory approach was used to code and analyze the responses.

Findings

In this section, after introducing respondents' profiles, we organize the survey results into two subsections: one presents designers' perceptions of HCMC's public [healthcare] service offering, and another unveils their perspectives on collaborating with HCMC's public organizations.

[Service] Designers' profile and practice

Out of 16 invitations, 14 practitioners in the HCMC area replied to the survey. On average, they have nine years (SD = 5,39) of design practice. Half of the respondents are freelance designers; the remaining group works in corporations, design studios, or start-ups. In addition to service design, most respondents (57%) develop activities in visual communication design. Others work in industrial, spatial, fashion, and IT-related design.

Regarding service design, nine (64%) practitioners are involved at different levels in projects, including consultancy. They are working in education (20%), entertainment (16%), retail (16%), and hospitality (15%) industries. Five respondents (36%) are

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currently not developing service design activities. In total, 11 (78%) respondents never conducted projects with public organizations. Those who developed service design initiatives in the public sector have completed education, sustainability, healthcare, culture, and entertainment projects.

Henceforth, in the following two subsections, we cluster the most cited topics raised by the respondents. They are summarized in a bullet list format.

Perceptions of HCMC's public [healthcare] services

Regardless of prior expertise, the survey asked practitioners to identify areas in the HCMC's public sector where service design initiatives are needed. Responses primarily suggested that there is room to intervene in transportation, healthcare, and education contexts.

Challenges

Current issues for citizens in HCMC to access general public services:

- *To supply their essential needs, citizens in HCMC are offered outdated public services and go through lengthy and complicated processes, wasting time and money.*
- *Service offering in HCMC is unbalanced, and the income gap impacts access to services in private and public contexts.*
- *The Vietnamese design industry is in its early stages; thus, initiatives to incorporate service design approaches in public services are incipient.*

Current issues for citizens in HCMC to access public healthcare services:

- *Regardless of the region, metropolitan or remote areas, healthcare facilities struggle to provide citizens with good services.*
- *Infrastructure, human resources, and management problems hamper the offering of adequate healthcare services to society. Some facilities are overloaded with patients leading to low quality of service.*
- *Patients searching for healthcare face several obstacles. A critical issue is a waiting time for booking and having a medical appointment, as well as the related procedures (examination, treatment, pharmacy, etc.).*
- *Information technology (IT) investments like online platforms are needed to connect healthcare services and ease processes involving patients and medical teams.*

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Opportunities

When asked to suggest contexts for service designers to innovate in the HCMC's public healthcare, respondents elaborated on the challenges they had already pointed out. Most referred to processes related to booking a medical appointment and having an examination or treatment. They also cited aspects of infrastructure, such as facilities and online services. Other comments on opportunities in both the public and private sectors:

- *By developing online systems to support telehealth, opportunities arise in designing services to reduce bureaucracy and overcrowding. In addition, IT-based systems may allow the development of new approaches to help patients during the treatment period.*
- *Citizens who experience better services at public healthcare facilities, from medical examination to treatment, will push for more improvements.*
- *The healthcare industry in Vietnam has great potential because people with private insurance are increasingly looking—and willing to pay—for high-quality healthcare services.*

[Service] Designers' perceptions of collaborating with HCMC's public organizations

Assuming that developing design projects with government entities require particular procedures, we asked designers to portray the HCMC context. Regardless of prior experience, they were suggested to elaborate on the feasibility of developing [service] design activities to meet public sector demands.

Challenges

Current issues for conducting [service] design projects for the HCMC's public sector:

- *In general, due to government organizations' structure and bureaucracy and the absence of policies for inserting design in public services, practitioners have limited access to developing service projects.*
- *In the HCMC context, designers do not have equal access to public tenders for service projects.*
- *Design practitioners must manage several risks when working with the local government. The government decision-makers' awareness of design is low, and there are few directions on the feasibility and sustainability of public projects. Designers also lack support from a professional association.*

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Current issues for conducting [service] design projects for the HCMC's public healthcare sector:

- *Vietnamese regulations in the healthcare sector are an obstacle to designing services. Designers are constrained to join such projects due to lacking specific information and connections with public authorities and departments.*
- *In addition to the shortage of expertise in service development, the costs of developing service design projects in the healthcare sector are significant concerns for public authorities and designers.*
- *The current development of healthcare services fails to adopt a human-centered approach. Future initiatives must delve into patients' needs and learn from their experiences to develop healthcare services.*

Opportunities

Contexts for collaboration with HCMC's public organizations to improve critical services to citizens:

- *Opportunities to develop public service experiences include tourism [hospitality], healthcare, transportation, and infrastructure.*
- *HCMC public services need interdisciplinary collaboration to find solutions for citizens and city governments.*

Promising contexts for service designers to intervene in the HCMC's healthcare system both in the public and private sectors:

- *As a result of economic development, Vietnamese people are eager for better healthcare services. This condition offers several opportunities for designing services that may benefit businesses and society.*
- *The service experiences are still unfolding at HCMC. Thus, there is potential to contribute to designing interventions that will improve the quality of healthcare services, impact citizens' lives, and support systematic change.*

Brief discussion

HCMC and other highly urbanized areas around the globe seek service innovation to improve public services and leverage social development. As a means of societal transformation (Sangiorgi, 2010), we suggest that service design in the public sector

can help rearrange processes, unblock flows, and shape social order. When consistently implemented and conducted professionally, service design projects allow citizens to interact with government organizations conveniently and effectively from the first contact.

Instead of mapping current service design practices, this study adopted HCMC design practitioners' lenses to identify issues and the potential to develop service design activities in the public sector. Overall, they observed that the touch points of interaction between people and local public organizations have not been designed logically and generate dissatisfaction when citizens access government services. More specifically, they pointed out that the local public sector needs an upgrade regarding universal access, facilities, human resources, IT support, and management of procedures and processes. Although our findings are related to HCMC, such a scenario of obstacles to delivering public services is similar in several urban areas in developing countries.

Building upon the issues raised by the design practitioners—and based on our observations in HCMC—we introduce further aspects to illustrate the Vietnamese public service challenge. A critical element to consider is culture-based. Vietnamese people's standard behavior is based on interaction with others when seeking assistance. Therefore, asking the staff is often more interesting than looking up information. Conversely, because digital literacy is not widespread in the country, some people struggle to interact with online platforms and digital kiosks.

Although IT management systems and automation could bolster public service processes, socio-economic factors affect implementation in some industries. People still intervene mainly in the service supply due to the availability of cheap labor and the lack of a systematic approach to the service offering. For this latter aspect, a significant example of a pain point in the public healthcare system is the paperwork patients must go through. In addition, often, the processing is manual, and there is no systematic record of patient information.

Medical expertise is excellent in Vietnam; however, the poor service organization is the main reason for the overload in the public healthcare system. Aspects such as the absence of remote services, the lack of information on how to seek health assistance, and the complex insurance procedures, among others, require people to move to medical facilities. Although these issues can be visualized as opportunities for a design intervention on different levels of public services, government entities are one of the most challenging environments for service design due to regulations, policies, hierarchies, and public servants' involvement.

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Another challenge pointed out by the respondents is the lack of awareness of [service] design practices by policy and decision-makers at HCMC's governing bodies. These staffs often disregard the design expertise needed to conduct service projects. A change of mindset of governmental stakeholders is required to put the citizen at the center of the service offering, not only the convenience of the service operator. In this sense, the activity developed by service designers needs clarification to be inserted appropriately in public procurements for service projects. In the case of Vietnam, the [service] design maturity level is an additional barrier to its adoption in the public sector.

We suggest that the current perception of service design in HCMC's public and private spheres mainly concerns architecture and interior design improvements. Therefore, because these projects do not invest in service touchpoints, the processes have low efficiency. They are generally developed to meet organizational needs and lack research on user behavior and demands, failing to serve citizens/customers. In addition, as human labor in service systems prevails, often, these staffs lack the training, means, and infrastructure to deliver efficient services.

As for opportunities for inserting service design in the public sector, respondents highlighted the role of IT in supporting and expanding citizens' experiences with government organizations. In this context, various services, such as telehealth, may be improved or created. Even though initiatives in the public healthcare sector are often hindered by low infrastructure investment and the characteristics of human resources, still service design can help to improve the operation process and efficiency of the public systems through participative approaches with different stakeholders (Yang & Sung, 2016).

Concluding remarks

Our study findings show that the service design practice in HCMC is in the early stages; out of 14, only three respondents have 75% of their weekly activities related to service design. Conversely, there are also institutional obstacles to consolidating this industry. Interestingly, we noticed that practitioners failed to consider education in service design as a critical factor in the development of Vietnamese service design. We acknowledge that service design university-level education is not standard in major economies, but in these countries, there is a counterbalance in a vibrant service design industry training its professionals. As for Vietnam and other countries, creating higher education multidisciplinary programs in service design

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could shape a pool of qualified professionals to boost the development of services in the private and public sectors.

This study is limited to the perceptions of a few designers in HCMC and does not encompass practitioners in other Vietnamese regions. Moreover, assuming the public sector has several stakeholders—such as civil servants and policymakers—future studies should adopt a comprehensive approach to investigate the challenges and opportunities in designing public services. As for the next stage of this research project, a triangulation of designers, civil servants, and citizens' perspectives is expected to provide significant directions regarding the public [healthcare] service offering.

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