

When Mobility Becomes a Challenge: A Human-Centred Approach to Understand the Needs of People with Disabilities

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Track: Transformative services marketing and vulnerable consumers

Introduction to the research problem

Transformative service research (TSR), a priority in service research (L. Anderson & Ostrom, 2015), is concerned with a positive impact on well-being for all participants in service systems – both consumers and service providers (L. Anderson et al., 2013). Recent studies have positioned service design as key mindset to achieve TSR outcomes because of its human-centred, multidisciplinary and transformative approach (S. Anderson, Nasr, & Rayburn, 2018; Sangiorgi et al., 2019). Yet, research is lacking on how the adoption of a human-centred mindset can inform the design of transformative services. This paper presents preliminary findings of a qualitative study investigating the mobility experience of people with physical disabilities in Brisbane, Australia. The study employed critical-incident style interviews to provide participants with the opportunity to give their account of experiences about barriers and enablers to their mobility and how digitally-enabled services supported them. This study demonstrates how positioning consumers in the centre of the research enables participants to raise concerns about the issues impacting their well-being and, allow them to propose an agenda to transform their lives.

Literature review

Over the past few decades, the growth in the service sector has led researchers to identify the need to expand and deepen knowledge in key areas of service science including “improving well-being through transformative services” (Ostrom et al., 2010). L. Anderson (2010) conceptualised this priority area as transformative service research (TSR). TSR is concerned with the investigation of services to promote well-being outcomes for all entities in the service system (L. Anderson & Ostrom, 2015; L. Anderson et al., 2013). Recently, S. Anderson et al. (2018) proposed that services can be “transformative by design” to achieve the well-being goals of TSR. Service design is an ideal approach to TSR because it involves collaboration and understanding of customers’ needs and the introduction of a human-centred mindset to organisations (Sangiorgi, 2011). Service design emerged as a disciplinary area of design studies in the 1990s (Erlhoff & Marshall, 2008). This area adapts methods from interaction and experience design, anthropology, and services marketing to better understand both consumers and service providers (Sangiorgi et al., 2019). Sangiorgi et al. (2019, p. 158) also highlight service design’s transformative potential by stating that it can “envision new service concepts and service systems to enable transformative value creation”. Therefore, TRS’s well-being outcomes depend on how well services are designed. We engage in this conversation by presenting preliminary results of critical-incident style interviews to demonstrate how a human-centred perspective can help to ground potential service design solutions in the needs of consumers.

The design process follows a series of four steps: discover, define, develop, and deliver (Hunter, 2015). The presented research is concerned with the mobility experience of people with physical disabilities because mobility is vital for self-determination, directly impacting the feeling of well-being (Wehmeyer, 2005). Within this scenario, technology has increased the complexity of the mobility service system. It is recognised that digital technologies can help people with mobility-related disabilities to plan for their journeys, to access relevant information to organise transport, connect with support services that they need, and also find strategies to manage potential barriers that disrupt their mobility (Chamorro-Koc, Stafford, & Adkins, 2015). Therefore, mobility involves

people, information, technology, and organisations, which represent a service system composed of material, digital and human actors.

Method/Approach

We employed the critical incident technique (CIT) method which is a qualitative method that invites participants to recall stories that represent their lived experiences (Flanagan, 1954). The distinct advantage of CIT for this research lies in its core intention to identify both positive (enabling) and negative (disabling) factors of service experiences (Bitner, Brooms, & Tetreault, 1990), which are classified as critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954). This method also supports the exploratory mindset of the early stages of the design process (Hanington & Martin, 2012). We conducted semi-structured interviews with eight people with various levels of mobility abilities and familiar with using digital technology to assist travel. Participants demonstrated interest to participate in the research after responding to an online screening questionnaire. The interviews lasted on average 40 minutes and were conducted after obtaining informed consent from the respondents. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The analysis was conducted following an inductive approach to thematically categorise relevant incidents.

Results/Findings

54 critical incidents were identified and organised into five categories and 24 sub-categories. The five major categories include: (i) planning and decision making, (ii) transport options, (iii) technology, (iv) policy and standards, and (v) communication. Some examples of participants' reports describe that when planning to go to an unfamiliar venue, they need to contact service providers to double-check the accessibility because the information provided online is not always accurate. The physical accessibility of public transport is an issue and relevant information about it is not provided in a timely and appropriate manner. Social media platforms offer opportunities to access peer networks that provide helpful support. Service providers have different understandings of accessibility, and there are no standards about how to give this information, resulting in consumers making misinformed decisions about whether or not going to a place. These categories represent areas where services can be refined to improve the well-being of consumers and support their mobility more effectively.

Discussion and implications

The study shows that a human-centred perspective is beneficial to explore mobility needs of consumers with disabilities and identify concerns about the things that impact their well-being. The findings inform that service design solutions could potentially address the following: enhancement of peer-to-peer digital platforms by relying on successful problem-solving practices of people with lived experience of disability; incorporation of real-time transport information for timely updates about accessibility problems and solutions; and development of tools to increase stakeholders understanding of the accessibility needs of consumers by implementation of communication channels to discuss their needs. Further investigation is required to understand the challenges and limitations from the service providers point of view. This study is the first phase of a broader research that will continue to investigate the topic and for this reason the findings will continue to evolve as the investigation progresses.

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