Service Design for Fostering the Transition to Circular Economy amidst Paradoxes

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Short paper

Abstract

Circular economy is increasingly advocated as the path for sustainability, yet it fails to uptake despite governments' policies, companies' initiatives, and consumers' demand for sustainable products and services. Therefore, based on two cases, this paper explores the paradoxes that could hinder service designers' work for circular economy and how to navigate them.

Keywords

Paradoxes, actors' engagement, service design, sustainability, circular economy.

1. Introduction

The capacity of our planet is reaching its limits, yet the growth patterns of organizations and nations still rely on high usage of virgin natural resources and boosting high consumption leading to considerable environmental and social damages. To counter these trends, governmental bodies such as the European Union (EU), companies, and other organizations sought in circular economy an opportunity to embrace sustainability. Circular economy (CE) could be defined as *"a regenerative economic system [...] that promotes value maintenance and sustainable development"* (Kirchherr et al. 2023; p.4). However, CE remains a niche market (Kirchherr et al. 2023) due to the lack of engagement of various actors (e.g.,

universities, companies, governments, consumers) in the value creation process (Verleye et al., 2024). Indeed, most organizations still perpetuate their business-as-usual practices driven by high sales growth and high consumption trends. Take for instance the fashion industry that is responsible for 10% of global greenhouse emissions (UNECE, 2018). This industry enjoyed a high sales' growth rate of 21% in 2022 (McKinsey & Company, 2023) boosted mainly by fast fashion trendy collections inducing consumers to continuously buy new products. As a result, on average, every individual in Europe discards 11 kg/ year of waste textile (EEA, 2019). This fashion industry is also characterized by its complex value chain including a myriad of actors that spread globally (Ludeke-Freund et al., 2019). Amid this complexity, some of these actors engage in creating circular economy value by exchanging services and resources (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), while facing conflicting goals and tensions (Fehrer & Wieland, 2021; Carmine & DeMarchi, 2022). For instance, governments should promote society's wellbeing and environment protection while encouraging the creation of new jobs and industries growth. Likewise, companies are pressed to enhance their social and environmental impact while increasing their shareholders' profits. Consumers are urged to act sustainably while increasingly prompted to buy unsustainable products and services.

Clearly, the transition to circular economy is shaped by paradoxes defined as *"contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time"* (Smith & Lewis, 2011; p. 382). These paradoxes might undermine the efforts of actors to embrace sustainability (Carmine & DeMarchi, 2022). Therefore, it is important that actors learn how to navigate paradoxes in order to transcend traditional thinking and embrace innovative solutions (Smith, 2014). This requires collaboration among actors, such as managers, politicians, academics, and consumers (Pradies et al., 2021; Parola & Thaler, 2022; Fehrer & Wieland, 2021).

To foster actors' collaboration, recent literature shows that designers could leverage service design – a human-centered, holistic and iterative approach aimed at creating new services (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011), whereby designers apply creative principles to enable actors upscaling their innovations (Micheli t al., 2018). However,

the role of service designers to reach sustainability remains largely underexplored. Moreover, the success of the service design process may be contingent on identifying relevant paradoxes that designers may face during the design process (Gaim et al., 2022). These paradoxes may for instance emerge from tensions between economic profit and environmental/social impact (Baudoin et al.,2022). If not addressed, these paradoxes will result in paralyzing vicious cycles (Berti & Simpson, 2021), thereby hindering the innovation potential of individuals and organizations (Smith & Lewis, 2011, Lewis & Smith, 2022). Therefore, this paper addresses the following questions:

- How do service designers frame and act upon circular economy related paradoxes?
- How does their framing and actions impact their service design outcome?

To answer these research questions, this paper builds on a conceptual framework encompassing existing research about paradoxes, service design, and actors' engagement in circular economy. Following, it uses two case studies to unravel the process of service design for circular economy, building on the process theory (Langley, 1999). It concludes by presenting a framework highlighting the interlinks between paradox mindsets, and strategies adopted by designers at the individual and group levels as mutually reinforcing and entwined when engaging with circular economy paradoxes. This study contributes to the literature of circular economy, service design and actors' engagement.

2. Theoretical framework
2.1. Engaging Actors in Circular Economy

Circular economy is a system promoting no waste, materials reuse and regeneration of nature (Kirchherr et al., 2023). It relies on the 3Rs principles, namely reduce, reuse, and recycle (Ranta et al., 2018). However, the systemic shift from the current linear economy based on the extract-make-dispose patterns towards CE requires all actors to put circular economy at the heart of their value creation processes, consumption patterns and business models (Fehrer & Wieland; 2021). The aim is to

create circular values, meaning values that foster environmental, social and economic benefits. The creation of circular value is contingent on the engagement of different actors such as companies, politics, and consumers (Verleye et al., 2024; Urbinati et al., 2017). Actors' engagement refers to a *"dynamic and iterative process that reflects actors' dispositions to invest resources in interactions with other connected actors in a service ecosystem"* (Brodie et al., 2019, p. 183). Thus, actor engagement is impacted by the interplay of actors' linkages and characteristics. To engage actors such as companies and consumers in circular economy, service designers innovate products and services reflecting the benefits that these actors could gain (Khitous et al., 2020; De Bruyne et al., 2024). Subsequently, they should "signal" these benefits and "convince" actors of them (Verleye et al., 2024). Indeed, designers should foster behavioral and emotional connectedness especially between companies and their consumers (Brodie et al., 2019), with effects potentially spreading to the wider system (Brodie et al., 2019; Verleye et al., 2024). However, the transition to CE is shaped by many paradoxes (Carmine & De Marchi, 2022), which could hinder actors' engagement.

2.2. Paradoxes in Circular Economy

Paradoxes are *"contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time"* (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). Consumers, companies, and communities are constantly facing paradoxes, meaning competing, interdependent demands (Smith &Lewis, 2011; Berti & Cunha, 2023). These paradoxes are rooted at multiple levels; in the individuals, organizations and societies (Li, 2020; Nisbett et al, 2001; Carmine & DeMarchi, 2022). For example, political leaders face the paradox of balancing environmental and economic priorities, managers must navigate shareholders' economic profit and fulfillment of communities and employees' social and environmental wellbeing. Likewise, consumers must deal with temptations of constantly buying and consuming and holding back to care for the environment (Mostaghel & Koteshwar, 2021; Wooliscroft & Ganglmair-Wooliscroft, 2018). Nowadays, many actors constantly face these competing logics when dealing with questions related to sustainability (Berti, 2021; Fehrer & Wieland,

2021). To avoid that these paradoxes result in paralyzing vicious cycles (Berti & Simpson, 2021), it becomes crucial to understand how to navigate paradoxes to harness the innovation potential of actors (Smith & Lewis, 2011, Lewis & Smith, 2022). Navigating paradoxes requires individual actors to "frame/ think" them and to take "actions/ strategies" to navigate them (Carmine & De Marchi, 2023). Furthermore, dealing with paradoxes requires collaboration amongst various actors (Pradies et al., 2021; Deeds-Pamphile, 2022) to transcend a traditional way of thinking and unlock new and synergistic solutions (Smith, 2014), thereby developing organizational agility, actors' performance, and advance innovation (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). This applies to the transition to circular economy, which requires actors to join efforts, collaborate and share resources towards a common goal while navigating tensions (Geissdoerfer et al., 2020; Fehrer & Wieland, 2021). In this vein, recent literature contends that service design could be used as an innovative approach to navigate circular economy related tensions (Geissdoerfer et al., 2016; Fehrer & Wieland, 2021).

2.3. Service Design to Navigate Paradoxes

Service design is a human-centered, holistic and iterative innovation approach that is key to service innovation, as it brings new ideas to life (Teixeira et al., 2019; Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011). By putting the human (e.g., end-user, consumer) at the center of the design process, it allows a contextual and holistic understanding of users' experiences while involving, considering the needs and goals of other actors in the system (Yu and Sangiorgi, 2018), thereby enabling new forms of value creation with various actors (Micheli et al., 2019). It is *"an approach to problem-solving that applies the creative principles used by designers to a variety of fields in order to help individuals and businesses take innovation to a higher level"* (Kazuhiko, 2014; p.15). Service design allows designers to intentionally shape institutionalized social structures (e.g., organizational culture, values of individuals and communities), with the aim to reach desired value creation forms (Vink et al., 2021). Therefore, service design is primarily linked to institutional work (e.g., Kurtmollaiev et al. 2018; Vink et al. 2021), meaning that through service design, designers can intentionally shape

institutionalized social structures, and avoid simply reproducing social structures unconsciously (Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2021). Implementing service design unfolds through a creative and iterative process of exploration (i.e., understanding the problem, users' experiences), ideation (i.e., imagining new ideas), prototyping (i.e., conceptualizing the ideas and their testing) and implementation (Krippendorff, 2007; Patricio et al., 2019).

Service design is therefore an original method of inquiry in learning experiences being an innovation practice (e.g., Liedtka, 2015; Carlgren et al., 2016) that allows to address issues in original and unexpected ways (Dell'Era et al., 2020). However, research still lacks a more detailed and systematic understanding of how service design can influence institutional work (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2021; Verganti et al., 2021). This becomes even more crucial when it comes to designing services for the transition to circular economy while acknowledging its paradoxes.

Therefore, this paper addresses the following questions:

- How do service designers frame and act upon circular economy related paradoxes?

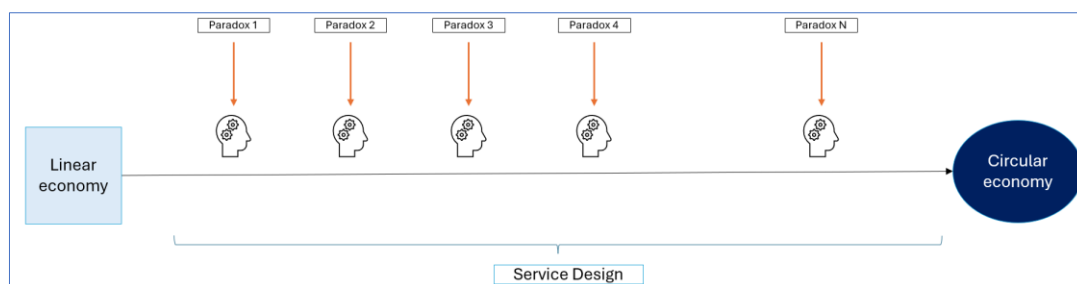- How does their framing and actions impact their service design outcome?

Figure 1: conceptual framework.

3. Methodology

3.1. Case Selection

Two cases were selected (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Gehman et al., 2017) using purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 1999) as it allows to *"compare[s] and contrast[s], to identify similarities and differences in the phenomenon of interest"* (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 534). Thereby, ensuring that the two cases are particularly

appropriate for the research purpose. This approach allows empirical investigation of contemporary phenomena within their real-life settings (Yin, 2009).

3.2. Research Setting

The two case studies originated from a Master course about designing services for sustainability at a Nordic University. Six students who were already working in diverse industries joined the course and were divided into two groups. The course spread over eight weeks, in the first week, students were trained on Service Design. For the remaining seven weeks, the students had the task of designing services prompting the transition from fast fashion to sustainable fashion.

3.3. Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, workshops, learning diaries and reports, observations and oral presentations during the spring 2023.

Interviews provide a strong descriptive opportunity and allow depicting participants' viewpoints and perception (Hopf, 2004). Based on purposeful sampling, we interviewed accurate individuals, here, students (hereafter, designers) who were trained on service design with the task of using this approach in the transition to circular economy. Interviews were conducted on a bi-weekly basis using Zoom in English, each 45 minutes on average, recorded and transcribed. The interviews focused on the knowledge and experiences of the interviewee (Doringer, 2021) especially regarding the process of designing services for the transition from fast fashion to sustainable fashion, the turning points, interaction with other actors in the system, barriers and opportunities that unravel along the service design process. The interviews opened the researcher's eyes to the process and paradoxes that designers face during the process of designing sustainable products and services.

Furthermore, two workshops were organized using service design tools (Micheli et al., 2018), one among students while another gathered students, researchers, a fast fashion leading company, and sustainable fashion emerging companies (e.g., second hand, organic and sustainable fashion). Participants were probed to think and re-think the impetus of end-users (i.e., consumers) to embrace sustainable fashion, struggles and solutions, and to ideate about the future of sustainable fashion.

Ultimately, since creating circular value takes place in a system, designers were encouraged to interact with various actors (e.g., salespersons in fashion stores, managers, consumers). This also allowed for a wide array of observations and ethnographic follow-up, thereby a comprehensive understanding of the process, especially the nexuses between different service design practices, designers' interactions with other actors, and development in the designers' perceptions/ mindsets. Moreover, upon the start of the project, the designers had the opportunity to interact with an expert in service design and sustainability, and upon its end, the designers presented their findings to a public audience and engaged in a Q&A session. These two presentations were recorded and transcribed.

Overall, 19 hours of data are gathered as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: data from interviews with designers, workshops and presentations.

Data	Duration (minutes)
Presentations	144
Interviews	454
Workshops	542
Total (minutes)	**1 140**
Total (hours)	**19**

The above data was further triangulated with diaries that designers wrote on a bi-weekly basis (except for the first diary which was due by the beginning of the first week of the course), Miro boards that students used during their design processes, final reports, and presentations (Table 2).

Table 2: other data

Data	Number	Pages
Learning diaries	25	68
Miro Boards	2	
Final reports	2	44
Presentation materials	4	
Data collected by Students	various	

Finally, the researcher also used field notes such as pictures and own notes, post-its and canvas that participants used in the workshops.

3.4. Data Analysis

This study embraces a process of abductive reasoning to analyze the data and theorize from the cases. The interviews, workshops, diaries, reports and other data serve as a foundation for new theory development (Bogner et al., 2009) through a process of abductive reasoning (Dubois & Gadde 2002). Moreover, it takes somehow a deductive approach to map the service design process as it uses the service design literature and the actor engagement literature. Other times, it relies on data-driven thematic analysis in an inductive way. The analysis starts with a *within-case* analysis to map the service design process separately, and identify changes in the mindset, turning points, paradoxes and opportunities arising within each case. Following, the two cases are compared using a *cross-case* analysis, therefore triggering new rounds of within-case analysis. The data analysis revolves around numerous analytical iterations between within- and cross-cases, which unfolds in the development of a theoretical framework and synthesis of findings.

4. Results & Discussion

The preliminary results show that the service design process was different among the two cases. In the first case, the process was linear and involved the least iterations (Figure 2), thereby resulting into a superficial involvement with the system dynamics. On the contrary, in the second case (Figure 3), the process was non-linear characterized by several iterations that unfold into four different concepts.
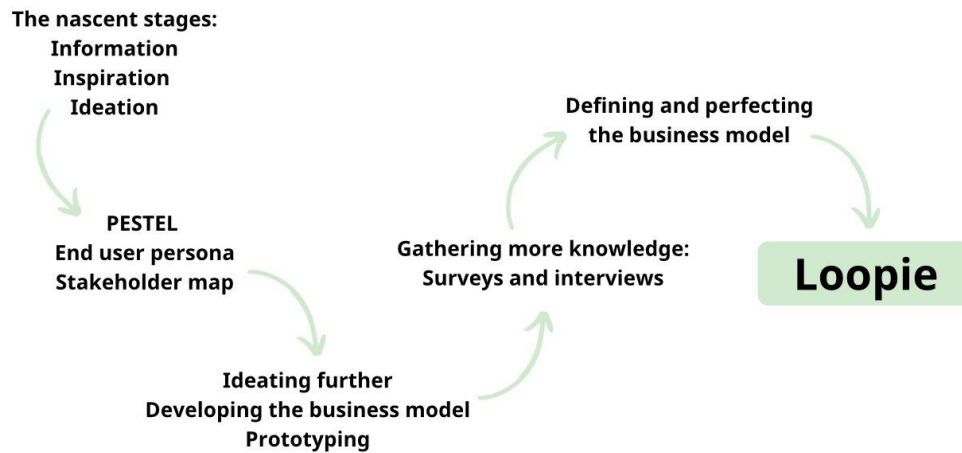
Figure 2: the design process of designers group 1. Source: designers' report.
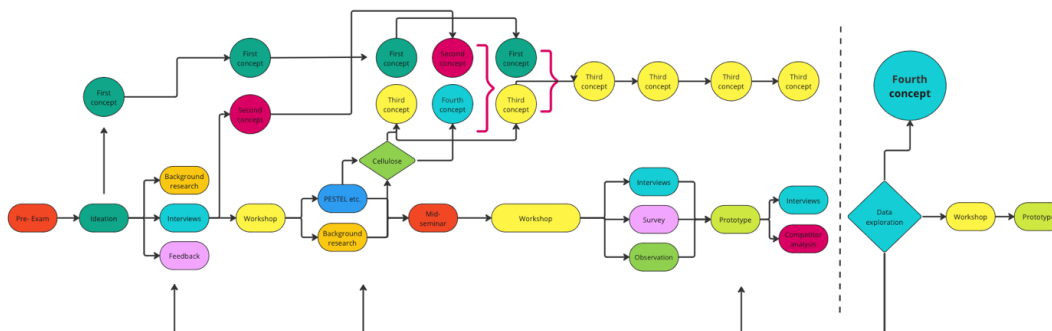
Figure 3: the design process of designers group 2. Source: designers' report.

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