

Co-creating digital services with vulnerable consumers for marketing impact

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Abstract

Increasing the participation of vulnerable consumers from low socio-economic (LSES) communities has been a policy focus of the Australian government since the Bradley Review in 2008. In education, LSES consumers are often viewed from a deficit-based perspective rather than from a strengths-based perspective—focusing on what they do not have (deficits) rather than leveraging what they have (strengths) to improve outcomes. We challenge this deficit perspective through the use of service design to co-create ideas for digital services that will assist parents to support their children in participating in the tertiary education sector. The data was collected through two qualitative studies involving 35 parents from LSES communities using a service design approach. The data (transcripts and visual images drawn by participants) was analysed using thematic and content analysis. The results show that vulnerable consumer can co-create services given the opportunity however the preferences for services vary across different persona groups.

Keywords: service design, social support, digital

Track: Services Marketing

Introduction

In recent years, the services marketing field has expanded from a commercial focus to transformative research that aims to improve quality of life (Anderson et al., 2013). Against this background, there has also been a strong move towards understanding how digital service innovations can be utilised to provide positive service experiences (Barrett et al., 2015). This research combines both the transformative research and digital service fields to investigate how a digital support service can be co-created with vulnerable consumers. Vulnerability in service is defined as consumers entering a service exchange with some type of disadvantage (Rosenbaum, Seger-Guttman and Giraldo, 2017). Typically, vulnerable consumers are treated as passive recipients, in that they are not regularly engaged by expert-led government and non-profit services and this paternalistic approach results in little recognition of vulnerable consumers innovative power that can be released through the process of co-creation (Anderson et al., 2013; Rosenbaum, Seger-Guttman and Giraldo, 2017).

The service context of this research was tertiary education—being TAFE, college and university level post-secondary education options—where increasing the participation of vulnerable consumers from low socio-economic (LSES) communities has been a policy focus of the Australia government since the release of the Bradley Review (2008). Consumers from LSES backgrounds are generally comprised of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (including refugees and new migrants), people with a disability and Indigenous Australians (Cupitt et al., 2016). People from LSES backgrounds are under-represented at university and research into school-to-university pathways has tended to overlook the influential role of parents (Bennett, 2015). Parents have a significant influence on students' decision to go to university (Gemici et al., 2014; Raciti et al., 2016) and seek support to help students to navigate post-secondary choices. However, there is only cursory research that investigates how best to support these parents despite calls for widening participation programs to involve parent and community capacity-building activities (e.g. Behrendt et al., 2012). In particular, there is no evidence for providing this support at a national level that is both cost-effective and scaleable yet personalised and relevant (digitally). Ergo, this research attends to this widening participation agenda through a transformative services lens. In doing so, we offer novel insights and design for a new practical, digital support solution that extends the current dearth of programs targeted at LSES parents.

In education, LSES consumers are often viewed from a deficit-based perspective rather than from a strengths-based perspective—focusing on what they do not have (deficits) rather than leveraging what they have (strengths) to improve outcomes (Gale and Parker, 2013). This deficit-based account often translates into paternalistic interventions, where a group's liberty or autonomy is constrained or overlooked because the group is viewed as one that needs help, requires protection and/or lacks requisite capabilities to help themselves (Barnett, 2017). Paternalism infers notions of disempowerment and an absence of opportunities for self-determination whereby people have the right to be actively involved in services affecting them (Barnett, 2017; McGoldrick, 1991). The net result is either services that are not designed with the actual needs of these vulnerable consumers in mind or services that are developed are not adopted by the vulnerable consumers due to the absence of mechanisms that engender self-determination. Current thinking in services rejects paternalism, embraces self-determination and promotes a way forward through via co-created initiatives (Rosenbaum, Seger-Guttman and Giraldo, 2017).

To date, there has been little research in the service literature that examines the co-creation of value within a context of vulnerable consumers. This context differs from other service contexts due to low levels of perceived empowerment, institutional and structural factors that deter participation (see Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Current thinking in services research posits that customers who co-create value effectively receive improved outcomes and increase likelihood of repeat patronage (Sweeney et al., 2015). The co-creation of value is also at the heart of the social services mix (Russell-Bennett et al., 2013) which is an adaptation of the co-created service mix (Vargo et al., 2008) into the transformative service space. So, what then, do vulnerable consumers seek that will motivate them to co-create a service to increase participation in the tertiary sector and how might this support differ across different types of vulnerable consumers? Using Cutrona and Russell's (1990) theoretical framework of social support to understand the preferences of vulnerable parents for digital social support, five dimensions of support were used in this research: informational, instrumental, network, esteem and emotional. Thus, the research question framing this research was: *how do preferences for digital social support differ across vulnerable parent groups?*

Methodology

This research involved service design, which is an interdisciplinary process to solve a problem. Service design is human-centred, co-creative, iterative, evidenced and holistic with an ability to provide solutions and experiences (Patricio and Fisk, 2010). Importantly service design can be harnessed for social impact. In this project, a service design approach was used to generate imaginative, innovative and interesting service strategies to assist parents of disadvantaged students to apply for further study after Year 12. The research involved two qualitative studies across metropolitan, regional and remote locations in four states and 35 parents; the first study involved interviews to identify personas reflecting key psychological motivators and barriers for participating in tertiary education with the second study involving participatory workshops with parents to co-create digital service solutions. Interviews seek to deepen information and understanding, allowing researchers to make sense of the multiple meanings and interpretations of a specific action, occasion, location or cultural practice (Johnson, 2002). The method permits the researcher to delve into the 'hidden perceptions' of their research participants and overcome cognitive bias (Marvasti, 2004). A third stage of validation interviews was conducted to refine the personas and the digital service solutions.

Results, Discussion and Implications

The co-created digital solutions were in the form of drawings of websites or apps and the components of these drawings were content analysed to identify the specific types of digital tool preferred. These tools were then classified using Cutrona and Russell's five types of social support and then mapped against each persona. The research identified four types of vulnerable parents and developed personas for each group based on animal characteristics (Magpie, Emu, Possum and Penguin parents) and for each of these personas there were differences in the digital solutions co-created to provide social support (see Figure 1, Appendix). We have addressed the research question of: how do preferences for digital social support differ across vulnerable parent groups? and identified that vulnerable parents are not a homogenous group with social support varying across the personas. While Magpie parents have no need for networking support, the other parent personas seek this and Possum parents indicated a need for emotional and esteem support to address their fears and increase their confidence. The preferences for social support tools were mocked up into a unique co-created digital portal that represented the social support that would create value for each persona (see Figure 2, Appendix). Overall, this novel research disrupts deficit-based status-quo thinking by engendering self-determination among vulnerable consumers via service co-creation

resulting in an innovative, transformative solution that can enhance participation in tertiary education by people from LSES backgrounds, effectually improving their quality-of-life.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Social Support Preferences for Parent Personas










| Persona | Ideas | Description |      | | | | |
|--|--------|--|--|--------|---------|--------------|---------------|
| | | | Emotional | Esteem | Network | Instrumental | Informational |
|  Magpie: Parents | Portal | Parent link: career pathways options "so my child and I are properly informed" | | | | | |
| | App | Career Calculator: utilising major details like ATAR, career choice, affordability, location | | | | | |
| | People | Connecting parents with schools: early year parent, careers open day with interactivity | | | | | |
|  Emu: Parents | Portal | Virtual University / VET: engaging, entertaining interactive experience providing information, pathways, connections with other parents and children | | | | | |
| | App | Goal Setting: structured goal setting, action plan and reminder app to be used for HE decision-making process and includes networks between professionals | | | | | |
| | People | Immerse us: short, intense workshops with parents, professionals and children | | | | | |
|  Possum: Parents | Portal | Uni Unmasked: simple information about university to demystify the experience, job options with alerts/reminders. Offer advice and counselling for the whole family. | | | | | |
| | App | Organise me: "an app to book appointments and remind me of events" | | | | | |
| | People | Managing the Anxiety: "schools to organise parent/teacher nights with careers counsellors to help us through the process" | | | | | |
|  Penguin: Parents | Portal | Understanding Uni: all-encompassing, social media-oriented, information-rich website that can be used by all | | | | | |
| | Blog | Practical Careers Blog: "provide me with in-depth entertaining information about careers and connect me socially" | | | | | |
| | People | Festival Vibe: "socially-engaging festival-style information sessions run by the school making it easy for me to attend" | | | | | |

Figure 2 Mockup of Composite Digital Portal for Possum Parents

