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Human bodies as service interface

Whereas designing with any kind of material necessitates a body, service design approaches the bodies of humans as one of its primary materials. Services are often materialised in human-to-human exchange; that is true both for 'high-touch' services traditionally associated with low-status occupations, such as domestic care, waitressing, sex work, etc., as well as for 'high-tech' services that privilege intellectual capacities, such as management consulting, lawyering and designing. In all these activities, humans use their bodies to mediate exchanges, in the way they present themselves to others, in the way they talk and gesticulate, in the way they move around space and in several other bodily ways for enacting services.

In this chapter, we discuss how certain aspects of human bodies can be approached as materials for service design. Building on the perspective of post-phenomenology, an experience-centric approach to the philosophy of technology, we frame the human body as a key service interface (Secomandi & Snelders, 2013; Figure 2.16.1). Service interfaces can include anything that mediates service experiences, such as built environments and connected digital devices, but also human and animal bodies. We hold that human bodies, like any other form of technology, can be enacted and designed as artefacts. For instance, clerks' interactions through chat or email can be enacted and designed in several artefactual ways. Even in the case of face-to-face interaction,
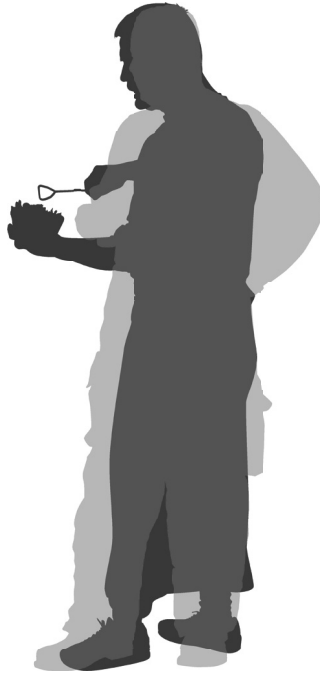
Figure 2.16.1   Human bodies as service interface

services are always encounters with an interface, in which bodily artefacts occupy a mediating position.

Post-phenomenology and bodily artefacts

Our conception of bodily artefact is elaborated below with reference to a few cases spanning across various service settings.

From a post-phenomenological perspective, every human body has a two-fold experience, sometimes described as our ability both to 'be' and to 'have' a body. In services, as in all other domains, human experiencing depends on an interplay between these two dimensions, which can be more precisely defined as body schema, or the perceiving body, and body image, or the perceived body (Secomandi, 2015, 2017). The body schema is associated with our bodily capacities to act, but is largely implicit in all perceptual acts. Body

images are more explicit representations of one's own body and can include perceptions, attitudes and beliefs pertaining to it. Although the body image is always perceived 'in relation to' the body schema, it is not 'external' nor derived as an exact representation of it. The body schema, in turn, is not invariant and can be to some extent influenced or shaped by the body image. Body schema and body image are mutually constitutive of one's position in the world. As argued further below, designers often give form to services by manipulating or at least influencing the body images of the humans involved in their co-creation, so that these humans can act in concert by design and not just by chance.

Body schemata and body images are not necessarily co-extensive with the boundaries set by the human skin. The body schema of a dentist, for example, can be extended through the incorporation of technologies, so that she is able to experience a damaged tooth by 'touching' it through the tip of the probing instrument. The body schema can be extended 'inwards', too, through techno-logical implants, such as when the new dental crown from the patient of the above example transforms the experience of chewing food.

Also entangled in technologically mediated service relations are body images. The visual display of physical activity in self-tracking devices can influence users' body images by quantifying their bodies, monitoring them around the clock, classifying them as active or sedentary and so forth. The body images of other humans can also be experienced through mediating technologies, an example being the gesture of courtesy of a cleaning worker manifested through the fold of the toilet paper in a hotel bathroom.

These examples show how human bodies are never just natural and obtained by birth. They are always artificial, in the sense of developing and acquir-ing meaning in accordance with humans' own intentions in social contexts. Furthermore, they are artefactual, too, in the sense of retaining a material dimension in lived experience that cannot be entirely reduced to the 'natu-ral world' nor to the 'human inner-self'. Because human bodies live in this dual role of shaping and being shaped, they can be considered designerly; in other words, human bodies are always design bodies (Angelon & van Amstel, 2021). The design and enactment of bodily artefacts in services is best evidenced when design bodies use body images to attain ends in inter-personal relations.

Physical skills, utterances, gestures, hair styles, etc. are common types of body images that can mediate the exchange of services, often in association with other technological artefacts. An example relating to physical skills is when

a beginner skier starts to practice getting to the bottom of a slope by follow-ing a ski instructor. While imitating the instructor, the beginner can initially become aware of his own body as dangerously clumsy in negotiating turns and stops along the track. As learning progresses, the skier is then able to deliber-ately apply a more skilled body to tackle difficult slopes and experience them as tamed and exciting. In this example, we hold that the body image of the skier is extending the original body schema in association with other incorporable artefacts (skis, clothes, poles, etc.) as means for experiencing the world.

Before concluding this section, we observe that body images can not only be constituted through social interaction, as in the example above, but can also be shared with others and change across cultures. A customer may note how the gestures of cashiers vary in shops in The Netherlands or Brazil. While in The Netherlands cashiers will keep staring at buyers, apparently indefinitely, until all items are bagged and pocketed, Brazilian cashiers will quickly redirect their gaze to the next in line after the last item is handed over.

Human bodies in service design practice

In the previous section, we showed how human bodies can constitute services. Essentially, all service exchanges involve bodywork, insofar as human bodies are necessary for their co-creation and delivery. In this section, we argue that approaching these bodies as a material for service design primarily entails co-creating body images in service interfaces.

In principle, designing human bodies should be a concern for anyone who, in one way or another, influences the participation of people during actual ser-vice encounters. Because discourses about design are generally lacking regard-ing service activities whose outcomes traditionally depend on bodywork (e.g., hairdressers, doctors, actors, waitresses, athletes, etc.), we focus here on the work of service designers.

In service design practice, human bodies are often enacted as materials through various tools and techniques (e.g., visualisations, prototypes, etc.) that can offer alternative perspectives on human bodies. A toy figurine that is used to enact intended actions for client-facing workers can highlight bodily artefacts in particular ways, for example, how they should move in space, gesticulate and talk and so forth. Similarly, but in a different direction, an arrow crossing down the service blueprint invisibility line dismisses the bodily artefacts used to interact with clients and requires other artefacts to interact with colleagues

and suppliers. Underlying these enactments is a necessary reference of the tool or technique to body images of the humans intended by service designers. That is what allows the thematisation of servicing and serviced bodies as an artefact in the design process to be communicated about, tinkered with and eventually prescribed. To be sure, bodies do not just become an artefact through design, for they are already artefacts in any service interface. What design tools and techniques add is the enhanced ability to grasp, handle and shape bodily artefacts in service interfaces.

As with any other design material, human bodies hold the potential to express intentions along many interesting dimensions, such as aesthetic, symbolic, affective, etc. As with other materials, the ethics of designing human bodies must be approached with care and discernment, especially when the intentions of service designers are to be expressed by the bodies of others with whom or for whom they design. When human bodies are treated solely as artificial and artefactual without considering them as designerly, their capacity to design themselves can be disregarded together with their intentions. The result of that is an oppressed design body, eager to revolt and take back its design freedom.

Consider the case of managing the emotions of client-facing service workers for a profit. In many service settings, workers can feel pressured to assume bodily artefacts that sit at odds with their own feelings and intentions, for example, when flight attendants are instructed to always have a smile on their faces. In such cases, workers may feel a discrepancy between externally imposed body images they are expected to manifest and their actual bodies. This type of conflict can be amplified when gendered, sexualised, racialised and deskilled versions of body images are stipulated by external design bodies, such as managers and design consultants, who may not know or care for those bodies. The dilemma between designing body images for their own self and for others can stay in place, even if workers are included as design bodies and participate in the design of the service.

Ethical challenges like those should not turn designers away from approaching human bodies as service materials. It is obvious that serious conflicts can emerge within and among human bodies when these are designed without consideration for questions like who is doing the designing and for what purpose. However, these conflicts also point to the deeper phenomenological reality of both being and having a (design) body, which is an inescapable if somewhat ambiguous human condition in the first place. We invite service designers to embrace this ambiguity with critical imagination and consider body images as an artefact that can be projected 'ahead' of the

present condition, mediating between the bodies that we are and those that we can become.

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