
Vessels: Objects as carriers of intangible content in PSS

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Abstract

Services are a combination of both tangible and intangible elements and are created in the moments of interaction between people and products (or touch points) in a service. This paper challenges the role that products can have in services and proposes the term Vessel as an object in services that can carry and deliver intangible meaning to stimulate better interactions between service users and frontline staff.

Author Keywords

Vessel; services; product; meaning; psychology

Introduction

This paper is one result from a collaborative research project in the Netherlands as part of the CReative Industries Scientific Programme (CRISP). CRISP aims to create new roles for the creative industries in the economy and society. CRISP focuses on the design of Product service systems, generating and disseminating the knowledge, tools and methods necessary for designing complex combinations of intelligent products and services with a high experience factor.

The research this paper responds to is a collaboration between Technical University Delft and KLM (Dutch national airline). The goal is to explore how we can reverse some of the negative emotions passengers experience during long haul flights.

For my part as Research Associate at Design Academy Eindhoven has been to generate opportunities through a human centered design process, the conclusions I will present in this paper proposes a new way of looking at products within services, that products that might normally be dubbed speculative or conceptual in nature have characteristics that could be incredibly beneficial to services.

Contemporary design is much more about the spaces, interactions and meaning between things and people as it is about things themselves. (Clarke 2011)

Service Design

Service design is a still emerging design field in which most English Language research has been published in 2008 or later. Nevertheless, service design stands on the shoulders of many other disciplines. From a design

perspective the industrial design and interaction design are the biggest influences (Selegstrom, 2010 Holmid, 2007). As a result, the tools and techniques of service design are to a large extent inherited from industrial and interaction design, and from the human centered focus within these (Holmid & Evenson, 2008). The nature of services poses new challenges for traditional design disciplines, giving rise to a service design community. Whereas design traditionally deals with tangible artifacts, most services are a flow of events mediated through artifacts and interactions. (Segelstrom 2011).

Research into service started properly in the 1970s and early research focused on clarifying why services were different from products. In a literature review, Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Leonard (1985) identified four characteristics in services commonly stated however only the following three of these are relevant to this paper:

Intangibility: The intangibility of services only refers to that services cannot be touched. In the words of Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Leonard (1985, p. 33): "Because services are performances, rather than objects, they cannot be seen, felt, tasted, or touched in the same manner in which goods can be sensed."

Heterogeneity: Services are delivered by different individuals whose temporary mood fluctuates over time, which leads to the fact that the outcome of a service procedure cannot be standardized in the same way as goods production can be. This leads to further complications when a customer is involved in the process, a customer that is different in engagement, attitude and so on from the previous and next

customer. As the term heterogeneity isn't self-evident, it is at times referred to under other names such as non-standardization, variability and inconsistency.

Inseparability: This characteristic relates to the fact that production of services is inseparable from the consumption thereof. Matter of fact, Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Leonard (1985) did use the longer label "inseparability of Theoretical background production and consumption". This also highlights that customers of a service also are co-creators of the service (to use the phrase popularized by Vargo & Lusch (2008a)).

Vargo & Lusch challenged this traditional service-view even further in a series of papers, which has become known as service-dominant logic (short form: S-D logic). They presented 8 foundational premises for this new dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), which were later refined and expanded to 10 foundational premises (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a). Put together, they highlight a focus on interactions between service provider and service receiver and the joint effort in making a service transaction meaningful. Foundational premises 6-8 should be brought to the attention in the context of this paper:

"FP6. The customer is always a co-creator of value.

FP7. The enterprise cannot deliver value, but only offer value propositions.

FP8. A service-centered view is inherently customer oriented and relational" (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a, p. 7)

These three Foundational Premises and Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Leonard's characteristics are important in the context of this paper as these principles help us to look at objects in new, different ways, which will be explored later. The term Vessel is the word that will be used to describe objects that can be looked at in this way.

Vessels

Vessels [a vessel]: *An object or product that acts as a carrier of intangible content. This intangible content is either generated by the user or product/service provider or a combination of the two.*¹

are purposely termed to escape traditional ideas of designed objects. Allowing a fresh approach to define the nature of these objects or products and their functionality. They deal with meaning that people associate with objects or that objects can evoke. When do objects become meaningful? Objects, in and of themselves, are neutral. We give objects meaning by projecting our own memories, emotions or perspectives onto them.

Vessels and psychology

We all live with objects that have over time generated rich meaning towards us, be it the dining table that has generated a history of interactions between the family or the first sofa you bought as a student that we struggle to let go of for the associated memories.

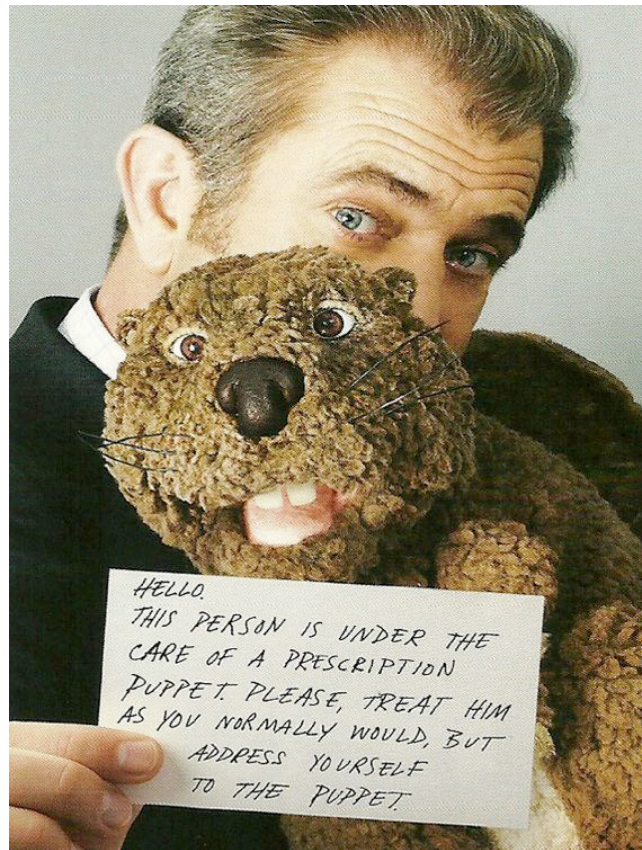
Vessels can be more powerful than an inevitable meaning being generated over time. However Vessels are concerned with psychology and a richer example would be that of a puppet. A play object that allows the player to define its meaning through how it is used. This open-ended nature of the puppet is an important characteristic of a Vessel. The film 'the Beaver' illustrates this concept well. The film is a story of a man who is considering suicide and is saved when a beaver

puppet intervenes by talking with him and preventing him from going through with the suicide. This puppet becomes a Vessel through which he is able to express himself better, more confidently and takes him albeit temporarily out of his depression. Whilst the puppet was not designed to prevent people from suicide, the nature of the object allowed this action to happen.

Psychologically speaking there are two possible states happening in the character. Firstly according to David Eagleman, a neuroscientist, and author of *Incognito: The Secret Lives Of The Brain*, your brain does not like to keep things secret. He says your brain also does not like stress hormones. When you keep something secret, it increases the level of stress hormones in the body. The stress is created by the infighting between the part of your brain that wants to keep the secret, and the part that wants to reveal it. If you tell the secret - even by writing it in a private journal or sharing it in privileged conversation with a doctor or lawyer - it relieves its burden on your brain.

Alternatively or even collectively the character could be experiencing Psychological projection. According to Sigmund Freud psychological projection is a psychological defense mechanism whereby one 'projects' one's own undesirable thoughts, motivations, desires, feelings and so on onto someone else (usually another person, but psychological projection onto inanimate objects also occurs).

¹ This definition was termed by myself the author of this paper for purposes of exploring and defining the Vessel concept.



Projection concerns externalizing the issues that we need to deal with ourselves. Usually we project onto others issues and problems that we need to address within ourselves.

The evolution of designed objects as Vessels

As Service design research was emerging in the 1970s parallel to that In 1976, the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, New York opened with a radical inaugural exhibition titled MANtransFORMS with its emphasis on process rather than end product, the exhibition challenged the definition of design practice and its relationship to society. The 1976 intervention – highlighted both the critical and social role of design, its emphasis on the spiritual, emotional and embedded meanings of space and 'things' preempts the move, in 21st century design, towards meaning, value and consumption as a framework for the making of design. Its approach redolent of contemporary design ethnography and its claim to place 'the user' first. (Hollein 1989:10) This paved the way for a general move towards conceptual design, during the 1990s which made it easier for noncommercial forms of design like speculative design to exist, this happened mainly in the furniture world, product design was still conservative and closely linked to the mass market. Society has moved on but design has not, Critical Design is one of many mutations design is undergoing in an effort to remain relevant to the complex technological, political, economic and social changes we are experiencing at the beginning of the 21st century. (Dunne & Raby) Vessels are also a form of design mutation from a conceptual design approach. Vessels are more concerned with generating meaning for users than primarily focusing on form and function. It sees design as a communication tool for personal reflection as well as a form of personal expression. Using designed artifacts as carriers of this internal and expressive meaning. What makes seeing design in this way really engaging is the sense there is something to understand about objects beyond the obvious issues of function

and purpose. It suggests that there is as much to be gained from exploring what objects mean as from considering what they do and what they look like. (Sudjic 2009)

Whilst vessels have roots in conceptual or speculative design, what evolves this idea is the appropriation of the vessel concept to services. In doing so this conceptual, open-ended, unfinished design approach becomes relevant commercially if executed successfully in a service context. To understand how I have come to see opportunities in service design I will illustrate the evolution of the Vessel through two self-initiated research projects.

The first 'An anxious Imagination' the birth of the Vessel as a term in my Masters Graduation project in 2008, and secondly a more recent project 'Normal, apparently I'm not it' which in retrospect could be considered designing a product as a service.

An Anxious Imagination

The thesis asked the question: *to what extent can conceptual design and a creative design process have a positive effect on anxiety?* The goal was to further understand how conceptual design could be appropriated to complex issues such as phobia anxiety. The instinct was that typically conceptual design involves itself with applying positive associations to objects. Phobias are essentially a negative association to a thing or object. I can't say it was a profound observation but it was a starting point.

In the case of people's phobias, the environment in which I found myself designing was quite removed from the actual feared object. Claustrophobia became about the transparency of walls, or corners. Arachnophobia became about windows and corners, clothes hanger phobia became about sound, buttons became about small holes, and the fear of holes was about the unknown. This highlights the complexity of peoples psyche that anxiety is often linked to other objects or environments.

The case study focused on a girl called Elizabeth who suffered from Arachnophobia. For Elizabeth it was the situation rather than the actual spider that triggered her anxiety, the fear was the anticipation of seeing the spider rather than the spider being present which most often it was not.

Elizabeth's anxious imagination

The staircase was "a minefield of dark corners" which spiders could accommodate.



The window was considered a point of entry for the spider into Elizabeth's private space, which created a nervous tendency to assure windows were closed. Both designs give presence to Elizabeth's fear, but in giving the spider presence allows her to negotiate her



feelings towards her anxiety in more controlled circumstances. The sink was a place where Elizabeth would often expect to find a spider present, as a place where she washed, this invasion was by far the worst. The Spider-Path offers an escape route for the spider,

and Elizabeth also reckoned that through the path's flexible form, she could control where the spider would travel. She even mused over the idea that she could lead the spider to a container of poison.



The fact that Elizabeth was able to establish some control even in her imagination was a fantastic surprise to her, and as far as I was concerned I began to see how objects could be open-ended forms that offer the user new experiences, and interactions that were not controlled by the design or designer. So this was the birth of my fascination in open-ended unfinished non-solution design forms. However the nature of the designs were still somewhat speculative. They didn't really have a commercial value and of course the meaning was lost on the general public. In fact they became interesting sculptural pieces that were more representational of an irrational eye.

In regards to Elizabeth the design solutions were not in fact the solution, but a platform in which demands Elizabeth to negotiate her feelings towards these environments and objects. This quality is important to Vessels as the tangible stimulated a space for the intangible nature of the problem to be negotiated.

Interestingly though the objects did evoke different meanings for different people. An elderly woman took one look at the window and told me it made her think of people throwing stones at her windows which she had trouble with in her neighborhood. She mused over the idea that the glass was somehow elastic and would repel the stones back out at the perpetrator. The fact that different people created different meanings through the objects gives it a vessel quality, and in a bespoke sense it acts successfully as a Vessel for Elizabeth as the tangible object stimulates an intangible altered meaning.

The understanding I developed as a result of experiments over a range of common and very unique

phobias was that in fact the design isn't in the classical sense a solution at all; it is a platform, or interaction that requires the user to embrace the design and their fear, that they through the design find ways of coping. The design merely offers a gesture, which allows for positive interpretations whilst keeping the element of the unknown and randomness. The design allows the possibility for positive and beautiful experiences in the environment that they would normally associate with anxiety.

Normal Apparently I'm Not It

This research explored how conceptual design, and a creative design approach led to helping Emily, a girl of 21 communicate better in social situations. Emily has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, and Emily and myself explored how myth, could be used to offer a coping mechanism in dealing with her Asperger's lifestyle.

Emily's Asperger's

"For me it involves a lot of anxiety and difficulty in understanding what is going on in close relationships. Communication skills, I'm kind of bad at talking to people... I have to think about it before I do it. You have to remember what it is people do when they're happy, ... or when they're trying to tell you something important. You have to understand that different people will talk to you in different ways and that different situations require a different set of words. I read something the other day in the book A Barthes reader by Roland Barthes, he talks about myth and there were some interesting descriptions of myth:

What is myth today? I shall tell you at the first a very simple answer; myth is a type of speech. Myth is a system of communication, Myth is a function of society, myth as a tool to approach society"

" a system of communication... I need one of those...I'm autistic"

Emily introduced this idea of myth, which adds an interesting layer to the understanding of Vessels. In essence she began talking about an intangible form of a vessel. It wasn't until I discussed with her about finding this myth to work with that she confessed to having a host of imaginary friends. One in particular that she called her mirror-self, which was essentially an imaginary version of her, but a more confident outgoing version.

Through Emily's online Asperger's network we found lots of forum conversations about people's accounts of their imaginary friends and conversations.

I put my theory to Tony Attwood a leading international expert in Asperger's syndrome, and he had this to say regarding my proposition.

"You raise a very interesting suggestion. I do know that many children, adolescents and even adults with Asperger's syndrome maintain imaginary friendships for a variety of reasons. Certainly, it is better to have an imaginary friend than no friends but I do find that the friendships are extraordinarily comforting and valuable for the person with Asperger's syndrome. I do not know of any specific therapy that has capitalised on this characteristic but your suggestion is intriguing and should be explored further. "Speaking as a clinician, I

would contemplate using the friendship as a way of improving self-confidence in particular situations and also providing an opportunity to debrief after a particularly stressful situation. I would also consider using strategies such as "what would your friend say or do in this situation" and to tell your friend of your achievements."

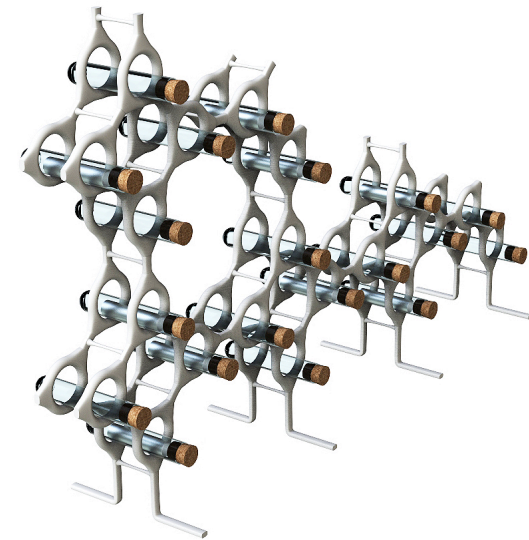
Writing

"It's written in a book called *different Minds* that people like us couldn't give words their emotions, but we can easily write them! I can write a million times on a thousand pieces of paper. But I couldn't express myself once, and that's why you are angry with me. So whenever I get the time, what I can't tell you I will write it down." (My Name is Khan 2010)

A by-product of this process was the discovery that in fact Emily could write very clearly and expressively. In the written word she had no problems in communicating exactly what she wanted. It seemed such an opportunity that it could not be cast aside, but as a means of exercise could be adapted to the outcome.

As we had an intangible form of a vessel in her Imaginary self, the goal was to create a platform for her to express and embrace this relationship, and for her to reflect on these conversations to help her learn from her Mirror self as Tony Attwood suggested.

What resulted was an emotional archive. A domestic piece of furniture that would house the various conversations she had with her Mirror self.



This proposal was more concrete than that of the previous example in 'An anxious Imagination'. However what resulted from this was something quite unexpected. When Emily shared these conversations with her family her parents found them incredibly insightful. That in fact they could understand much clearer how Emily felt about certain aspects of her life. The visualisation of these conversations into the domestic environment became an interesting communication tool for Emily to be understood and also for her family to understand her better.

What had essentially been created between Emily and her Family was that 'system of communication' Emily so craved. The archive acted as a vessel on two levels, firstly for a translation for self-reflection for Emily to create personal meaning but more importantly as through this archive Emily's parents could also generate meaning.

In retrospect what was created could be described as a service, a form of self-help therapy through which created positive meaningful interactions and understanding between her and her Family that didn't previously exist. This object, which housed Emily and her Imaginary self, became a mediator between Emily and her parents.

Expressive Cocoons

'Expressive cocoons' is an opportunity discovered in response to the research project 'the play's the thing' which actively looks to adopt this Vessel concept to a service context. My role as Research Associate at Design Academy Eindhoven in a collaborative research with KLM has been to generate opportunities through a human centered design process to speculate how design can reverse negative emotions during Long Haul flights. In the case of KLM's in-flight services the research led to the insights that traditionally flights were very social events. As flights started flying longer hours boredom appeared in passengers. Airlines and passengers in order to design their way out of boredom created isolated cocoons, which depleted the social interactions between people in the cabin.

In the first workshop with cabin crew we created a Customer Journey Map which highlighted all the actions that Cabin Crew do during a long haul flight, however despite being up in the air for up to 11 hours with passengers they couldn't really speculate what it is that passengers actually do.

In order to fill these gaps we conducted a passenger workshop called 'Hand Baggage Only'. Each passenger was asked to bring with them hand luggage that they would typically take on a long haul flight. The passenger participants brought a host of different artifacts with them for different purposes. A book was not necessarily about reading and socks were not just spare clothing but these artifacts were personal strategies that enabled them to control their experience as best they could.

These artifacts highlight passenger's attempts to control their experience and look for meaning in the absence of something specific. What participants talked about were not the objects themselves but the reason and meaning behind the objects.

Bas

Nationality: Dutch
 Flying experience: 2-4 LH FPY
 Flying Purpose: Mainly work



Profile from artefacts
 Bas

Bas carries a small library with him never reading a complete book but picking at bits from multiple books. Naturally he likes his privacy and quiet, he packs a turtle neck jumper to pull over his head combined with a blind fold and ear plugs to escape the plane and sleep to assure he arrives with good energy levels. His turtle neck also protects him from getting a cold from the draft that often occurs in the dry atmosphere of the plane.

In parallel workshops with passengers and cabin crew we explored existing interactions in the plane and speculated on potential new interactions in the plane. cabin crew admitted that in the future they would have to be more proactive towards passengers. Passengers however had mixed feelings between craving social interaction and being protective of their own personal space, these cocoons that passengers build around them for protection. With these findings in mind I conducted a workshop at the Service design in tourism conference in Austria. I wanted to explore with other tourism professionals and service designers how through touch points passengers could communicate in the plane. The groups generated stories of negative experiences they had had in a long haul flight and from these stories in their groups they were challenged to use objects commonly found on the plane to generate a solution to this negative story.

In conclusion the four groups acted out their new stories with their props to demonstrate their solution. One group in response to bad smells and an irritating dog produced a mask that would shut out the smell, and sound creating a blissful cocoon. Other groups produced more social solutions using a tray and a blanket as a pillow between their seats that would allow passengers to sleep without leaning on each other. The conclusive conversation on review of the various artifacts they had designed was that the better solutions were the ones that required passengers to talk and compromise. They concluded that by stimulating conversation with the perpetrator of their negative experience they could find a more satisfying solution. (Wray, 2012)

When we presented these conclusions to KLM, they responded by saying that traditionally long haul flights were very social experiences but as planes evolved to travel for longer periods of time, boredom became apparent in passengers. Airlines and passengers designed their way out of boredom by creating cocoons that depleted the social interaction between passengers. This project proposes that designing objects for in-flight services as vessels of intangible content and meaning can make these cocoons more transparent and stimulate more interaction between people in the plane.

As these cocoons are important to passengers, rather than removing them, the opportunity looks to create expressive cocoons that adopt the Vessel concept. It asks the question how could these cocoons be more transparent and enables passengers to express themselves more, create meaning for themselves and people around them. How can the interaction with objects in these cocoons stimulate interaction, meaning and awareness of people around them?

Vessels In Service Design

To understand the conceptual role a vessel can play in conjunction with PSS (service provider, service user and products) and the complex interactions PSS entail; the following quote from William Shakespeare's Hamlet inspires as an analogy:

*"The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King".*

When Prince Hamlet proclaimed 'the Play's the thing', he meant that the play can elicit visible proof of what a ghost had told him, that his uncle, King Claudius, murdered his father. This is the essence of what vessels aim to achieve, to contain and deliver an intangible message or meaning. This is a beautiful way of thinking about services and particularly the various interactions between service users and frontline staff.

For a play to be successful, it is essential that the actors trigger the audience through delivering a story. Props allow actors to connect to each other, and also to visualize and communicate the context of the story to the audience. Essentially what makes this combination suitable to explain a PSS is that all the elements are created from the same idea or message. They share a coherent content, or in this case a story. In a service context it can be a company's philosophy or desired experience, the props (vessels) connect the actors.

Translating this to the KLM case study, where the cabin crew and passengers take the role of the Actors and Audience, and Vessels take the role of props, potentially vessels could elicit visible proof of people's state of mind or negative situations. This

communication could stimulate interactions, which could potentially add meaning through richer interactions. The actors and audience would be connected and yet have their own perspective. Fundamentally this paper proposes a new way of looking at products in services. That characteristics that might normally be dubbed critical or speculative or even artistic in nature have characteristics that could be incredibly beneficial to services. To examine the values of Vessels and their appropriateness in services, here we overlay Vessel characteristics against the service characteristics mentioned earlier.

We analyze the three service characteristics of Zeithaml and Parasuraman that vessels can cater to. Intangibility, heterogeneity and Inseparability, using the Emotional Archive in 'Normal apparently I'm not it' as a Vessel example.

Intangibility

Zeithaml and Parasuraman describe services as intangible because services are performances, rather than objects, they cannot be seen, felt, tasted, or touched. Similarly Vessels capitalize on, and attempt to carry intangible meaning, message or content and deliver this to people. In the context of KLM's in flight services where the performers are the passengers and cabin crew, the need to connect these performers is apparent. If through vessels the intangible nature of services were given a more controlled platform on which to perform, the interactions that could follow could increasingly improve the performers emotions during long haul flights.

Heterogeneity

Zeithaml and Parasuraman importantly point out that

within services different individuals with different personalities whose temporary mood fluctuates over time. Vessels are open-ended objects; the meaning that can be generated caters to a spontaneous mood or state of being. It allows for randomness and choice to an individual at any given moment or mood. Through Vessels passengers would merely be offered a platform to express themselves. Vessels could communicate these moods and their fluctuations allowing Cabin Crew or even surrounding passengers to react and attempt to cater to them.

Inseparability

Inseparability relates to the fact that customers are co-creators of the service. Building on the previous point in reference to heterogeneity through the new interactions that could be produced through Vessels, not only does it allow Cabin Crew as frontline staff to react but also it offers passengers the opportunity to react and become service provider through their response. The advantage of the vessel is that it can be designed to a point to trigger positive responses as apposed to purely negative ones.

In regards to Vargo & Lusch's foundational premises (A service-centered view is inherently customer oriented and relational, The customer is always a co-creator of value, *and* The enterprise cannot deliver value, but only offer value propositions.) we can refer back to 'the Play's the thing' analogy. The play's the thing assumes that the narrative of the play is passenger focused. However the play only exists if the audience receive the message or meaning of the play, yet cannot assume that this will be a foregone conclusion. It is dependent on the audience to look for meaning in the narrative. The play through its actors and props merely offer a

'proposition' or suggestion. The better the actors and props the more successful the performance, through which greater value is created.

Future Work

Fundamentally this paper proposes a new way of looking at products in services, that characteristics that might normally be dubbed speculative or conceptual in nature have characteristics that could be incredibly beneficial to services.

"In the collaboration with KLM, we will test the potential of this general and broad opportunity by exploring concretely what form Vessels could take in an in-flight service context, and how these 'cocoons' can become more expressive through the Vessel concept. How can passengers through using objects on the plane create services between each other?"

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