



## Service Design Drinks Milan: a case of local community building around service design

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### Abstract

This contribution aims at reporting a case of community building and activation in the city of Milan in Italy, namely the Service Design Drinks Milan.

The kind of community that we are referring to doesn't necessarily build upon the belonging to a specific territory, but rather on a common interest around a topic, which is the discipline of service design. The case described provides a source of inspiration for any local agent wanting to replicate a similar initiative in its own context or for anyone interested in exploring the communities of interest.

Keywords: community building, service design, community of interest, community of practice

## Introduction

The article starts with the description of the Service Design Drinks Milan community case, including its origins, its development, its online and offline presence, the composition and the different formats that constitute the meetups. It then outlines a list of values that the community owns and how these values are reflected on the local ecosystem in a mutual virtuous exchange.

Delanty (2003) in his work *Community* sets out three macro categories of communities: (i) location-based communities (or communities of place), (ii) identity-based communities and (iii) organizationally-based communities. Location-based communities are indeed characterized by geographical proximity, identity-based community are related with religion or faith and organizationally-based communities include family, network-based guilds or even professional associations. If we had to ascribe one of those categories to SDD Milan we would point out to organizationally-based community and, more specifically, to those defined more recently (Robin and Robin, 2007; Henri and Pudelko, 2003) as ‘communities of interest’.

Therefore, the case presented can be considered as an example of the development of a ‘community of interest’ or practice (Wegner, 2010) where people can be co-located, but it is not a necessary characteristic to constitute the community. The paper seeks to discuss the characteristics that connote SDD Milan as a community of interest.

## Service Design Drinks Milan

The community is called ‘Service Design Drinks Milan’ (SDD Milan) and has both online and offline presence. The offline presence is embodied by a series of “open and informal meetings [that] bring Milan Service Design community together”, which is the statement that could be found on the online channels where the community exists. The online channels are both informative, such as the website [www.servicedesignmilan.com](http://www.servicedesignmilan.com), as well as engaging, such as the social media Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (@ServiceDesignDrinksMilan). The events run every one or two months during the evening in weekdays. They start at 7.30 pm and last around 2 hours in total. The time in the day is very peculiar because it is the ‘aperitivo’ time, which is a very traditional and established habit in Milan. The ‘aperitivo’ is a distressing moment that takes place just after working time and before the dinner and is characterized by a drink and some

snacks to enjoy while chatting with friends or colleagues. The SDD Milan wants to represent a similar kind of experience, adding to the world 'Drinks' an additional meaning, which refers to micro-learning moments.

The participants indeed, while enjoying drinks and snacks, can listen to the invited speakers of the event, who share their experience and knowledge on service design.

'Service Design Drinks' is an international format that went through a bottom-up progressive standardization. Hence, there is no central authority or direction that gives guidelines to the different local 'chapters'. It is rather the opposite: it's the case of a successful local format that gained international relevance and was therefore replicated elsewhere as spontaneous initiative of local actors. Precisely because those initiatives are independent and spontaneous, it is difficult to find reliable sources to track the first appearances of the format and a complete list of all the active chapters. Based on a research on the web in particular on social media (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) using the keywords: 'service design drinks', the first appearance of 'Service Design Drinks' (SDD) seems to be dated back to 2011 in Berlin. 'Service Design Drinks' in Berlin is just one format which is part of a more articulated schedule of events that aims at engaging the community of service design enthusiasts in Berlin and drives the local ecosystem of the service design-related events. The organizers of SDD Berlin are indeed the initiators of other correlated events such as the 'Global Service Jam' local chapter ([www.planet.globalservicejam.org](http://www.planet.globalservicejam.org)) or the 'Service Experience Camp' international conference. The global reach that the above-mentioned community managed to reach thanks both to the frequency of local-oriented events and the international attractiveness of the conference, made it become a reference for other local communities that started to replicate the format of 'Service Design Drinks'.

This is the case also of the community in Milan. The original group of organizers was made of 5 service design early professionals that occasionally met during the 'Service Experience Camp' 2015 in Berlin. The authors of this article compose the complete team that is currently conceiving and running the 'Service Design Drinks Milan'. Part of the members of the current team are also the initiators. Since the event is completely no-profit and run on voluntary basis, the main motivation that led the initiators to start the SDD Milan was to open a discussion on the discipline, share experiences and knowledge and get to know relevant stakeholders in the field.

## Composition of the community

The first event, that gave birth to the community, was organized in 2015 on November, the 17th. It was organized in an apartment in the city center of Milan, which is designated to host events. It attracted unexpectedly 70 people and was a first successful answer from the community that demonstrated the potential of the format. From that time on, we organized 22 events on a regular basis every one or two months that now host more than 150 people for each event. The Facebook page represents the most active online channel of the community, therefore we will hereby refer to its analytics to describe the composition of the community. The community grew progressively from event to event and it is now composed by more than 2000 people in total (2021 'likes' and 2121 'follows' on Facebook page at present time), which makes it its social media channel with the largest following, compared to SDDMilan Twitter account (749 followers from November 2015), LinkedIn page (469 followers from January 2017) and Instagram account (793 followers since May 2019).

On the page, we, as community organizers, use to publish the upcoming events and occasionally share contents that could be of interest for the community. Those contents range from articles, to promotions of contests and job offers. The job offers represent the second more published content besides the events. This is because the community is very attractive for recruiters that look for profiles in the service design field, especially regarding junior positions. We will discuss deeper this value in the next paragraph. The community is composed for its most part by people within the age range of 25-34 where women represent nearly 60% of the total (Fig.1).

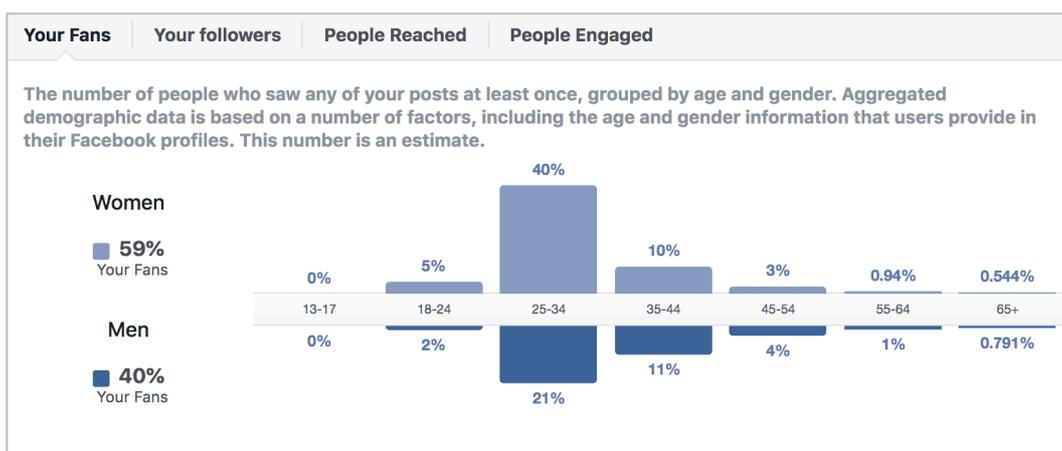


Fig.1: Composition of the community according to the Facebook page 'Service Design Drinks Milan' (age and gender)

The community is highly international. From the insights of the Facebook page we could see that there is a strong international presence with approximately 1000 people from countries outside Italy, which are half of the entire community (Fig.2). This is also confirmed by the attendance to our events. By tracking our attendants with an Eventbrite account, we spotted that most part of the participants is composed by students or alumni of the Master of Science in Product Service System Design of Politecnico di Milano: for each event, an average on 46% participants indicated the attendance to said Master course in the “University/Course” field within the registration form.

The M.sc. in Product Service System Design receives every year 80 students where half places are reserved to internationals. Since this course is one of the leading educational programs related with Service Design in Italy, it is a key player in the composition of our community.

The Service Design Landscape research project ([www.servicedesignmap.polimi.it](http://www.servicedesignmap.polimi.it), 2018) presented during the last ServDes Conference in Milan, clearly shows the multiple service design-related educational programs that the Polimi Design System offers. The M.sc. in Product Service System Design plays a key role in the service design ecosystem by gathering and educating a high number of national international young talents, that consequently populate also the SDD Milan events.

### **Formats of the events**

There are three main formats that shape the events of SDD Milan:

- *Theme-specific*: this format is the most frequent one. Based on previous research on the different field of applications of service design, we detect trends in the practice in order to propose forward looking cases to the audience. We therefore invite relevant speakers that can share their experiences with the topic while displaying projects they underwent as examples. We use to invite practitioners from the field as well as academics, in order to bring mixed perspectives. The practitioners could be service design professionals coming from design consultancies or companies. Sometimes we pair a consultant with a representative from a company to illustrate a project done in collaboration between the two. After the speakers' presentation, we moderate a discussion with the community about the topic.

- *Native Culture Services*: a peer-to-peer sharing session within the community. It is based on the value given by the internationality of the participants. The speakers are indeed the community members, who are invited to present a service design case from their native country and discuss it with the rest of the audience in an informal debate.
- *Transforming Designers*: a panel discussion with experts about the evolution of the role of the service designer followed by an interview session with the recruiters of a design consultancy, dedicated to a selected group of participants to the event. This format is run in partnership with the design consultancy that performs the interviews. This kind of event owns the value of offering job opportunities to the community and it's a recruiting occasion for the design agency that also gains visibility through the event.

Country	Your Fans				
Italy	1,454	Mexico	13	Hungary	5
Germany	63	Taiwan	11	Singapore	5
United Kingdom	43	Turkey	11	South Korea	5
United States of America	33	Finland	10	Poland	5
Brazil	28	Belgium	8	Romania	5
Spain	27	Russia	8	Ireland	4
China	23	Chile	8	Israel	4
Netherlands	23	Australia	8	Greece	4
India	21	Canada	7	Lebanon	4
Switzerland	19	Argentina	7	Ukraine	3
Colombia	18	Thailand	7	Egypt	3
France	17	Sweden	6	Pakistan	3
Peru	15	Indonesia	6	Belarus	2
Portugal	13	Norway	5	Cyprus	2
Denmark	13	Japan	5	Austria	2

Fig.2: Composition of the community according to the Facebook page 'Service Design Drinks Milan' (country)

## **Discussion**

We believe that SDD Milan represents a successful case of how a common interest around a topic, and specifically around service design, can become agent of inclusion and local activation (Wegner, 2010). Based on some of the qualities that authors (Gardner, 1991) identified to characterize communities, we report a series of values that we believe SDD Milan fosters within the service design community in Milan.

### **Networking and professional growth opportunities**

The events bring value to the participants because they represent gathering moments of networking, where attendants can spontaneously share experiences and knowledges and get to know each other. In this sense, SDD Milan is a hub of the service design professional local ecosystem. Hence, the events can be considered as sorts of celebrations that embody the shared identity of the members where extensive informal interactions are fostered (Gardner, 1991). Besides the events dedicated to recruiting (see the description above of the format *Transforming Designers*), all the events provide the opportunity to meet professionals that work in the field and match supply with demand in service design. Students or young professionals are indeed eager to learn about the contents presented as well as explore new job opportunities or investigate new collaborations (Fig.3). Recruiters or more experienced professionals can instead promote open positions in their companies and look for potential candidates. Hence, the commitment of SDD Milan is to pool talents, energy and resources, guided by the spirit that “when the team wins everybody wins” (Gardner, 1991).



Fig.3: One of the event of Service Design Drinks Milan

### **Growth of the local ecosystem**

A distinctive element of the events is that they are moving location from time to time. The locations range from co-working spaces to design agencies, to more traditional event locations. We believe that the nomadic nature of the events represents a value for both the community and the local ecosystem of innovation. If from one side the host location gets visibility and promotion, from the other side the community members get to know relevant actors on the local arena. During the last ServDes conference, SDD Milan had the honor to lead the open ceremony with a panel discussion between the invited track chairs in Teatro dell'Arte of Triennale di Milano.

### **Knowledge sharing and growth**

The SDD Milan could be considered as an extension of the institutional education in Service Design offered in Milan. They represent micro-learning experiences that provide perspectives from the field which enrich the theoretical knowledge with insights from practice. The events are also occasions to build new relationships and connections through spontaneous networking which favors the community growth.

## Replicability and scalability

As mentioned above, the format has been already activated and adapted in other locations around the world. The 'chapter' in Milan in particular represented an example for other cities that had the willingness to initiate a local chapter. We, as organizers, have been contacted to share our experience and support other launches in different ways. Dublin and Toronto took Milan as an inspiration for building the brand identity. Currently the logos of those two chapters constitute a declination of the SDD Milan logo. For other chapters we provided a more articulated and stronger support to build the community both at national and international level.

In Italy we gave support to the organizers of the chapter in Bologna first, and then in Veneto. Besides offering our brand identity to be adapted, we shared our experiences and our lessons learnt, we created the connection with our contacts for the sponsorships and for the speakers. In providing guidance and support for the creation of other local communities, we reflected upon those values that we consider peculiar of the context of Milan and therefore must be taken into consideration when replicating the format in another place:

- *Schedule*: "aperitivo time" during weekdays is traditionally the best timing to organize these kinds of event for Milan and Italy more in general but there could be places and culture where it would be favourable organizing these moment during work time or weekends;
- *Inspirational approach*: we found out that events with a more operational focus (eg. whose topic was the presentation of a specific service design tool or practice) had a lower engagement than events with a more "strategic" or broad and inspirational topic, but this could not be the case for other contexts;
- *Nomadic events*: the huge number of spaces, dedicated to design and innovation, capable and willing to host this kind of events allowed us to hold our events in a variety of spaces, that in turn allowed us to give our community a closer look to this kind of businesses.

Regarding these features, other communities could try different approaches, according to their specificity in audience composition, awareness on the topic, level of interest and motivation of the participants, but we also believe a Service Design Drinks community should serve these universal and fundamental values:

- *Engagement of community members*: members should be actively involved to design and deliver activities in a participatory and collaborative way;
- *Informality*: the exchange and sharing of knowledge should be carried out in a unstructured way in order not to create rigid hierarchies or closure in the participants;
- *Independence*: the management of the community should be carried out by a team of people that doesn't belong to a single organization or company in order to not incur in conflicts of interest or control over content and speakers;
- *Avant-gardism*: the topics tackled should serve the purpose of evolving the discipline and looking one step further than the status quo;
- *Networking*: following the principle of informality, networking activities allow participants to expand their awareness and knowledge of the discipline.

In order to translate these values into practical actions we identified a series of best practice that allow people to kickstart a community in their context in a quick and iterative way:

- *Experiment*: adopt an innovation approach and run test with your community as early as possible in order to learn from your context and adapt;
- *Activate your network*: in defining strategy, topics and themes of the community, leverage first on the personal network of the team because it will help to create a solid base where to start exploring from;
- *Address students*: students have more time and in general a more open attitude and willingness to try new things than workers. They represent an incredible source of energy for a newborn community;
- *Act as a bridge*: a community represent a meeting point - between students and job market; between freelancers and companies - so every activity should enable exchange between different parts of the community;
- *Find a ritual*: drinks represent a good aggregating element as they recall more informal occasions. This could not be the case for other

cultures and places but a small side element that becomes distinctive of the brand will help your community to recognize you and aggregate.

### **Community activation**

Our community is characterized by a very high level of proactivity and initiative. For every event we have a high number of volunteers that offer their help for the event production (Slingerland et al., 2018). The tasks that the volunteers perform are related with checking-in participants, serve beers, welcome the speakers, place the signs and take pictures.

This value embodies very well the distinctive characteristic of a community of enhancing “participation and sharing leadership tasks”, as claimed by Gardner (1991). The volunteers are motivated just because they can have the chance to learn how to run such an event, because they get visibility with the attendants and the speakers and they are given branded SDD Milan gadgets. The volunteers indeed are publicly acknowledged during the event and they are recognizable because they are given a branded tag to put on their shirts.

Besides their involvement during the event, some volunteers take also part in the development of the communication of the event. This include the design of the visuals, which are designed by a different person every time. This kind of activities that relates with branding the events also contribute to the development of a sense of belonging to the community (Colombo et al., 2018). Moreover, the diversity of contributions makes the overall communication of Service Design Drinks Milan community-owned and well reflects the varied composition of the community.

### **Conclusions**

For all the values outlined above, we believe that SDD Milan represents a case of local agent of inclusion that leverages on a common interest to instill a sense of belonging to community members. A distinctive aspect of the community is the diversity of cultures that are represented by its members. The power of SDD Milan is to leverage on this diversity to create “a common ground and a larger unity” (Gardner, 1991). The common interest around service design and the opportunity offered by SDD Milan make those different cultures gather in a same location offline

and online, therefore providing a platform to boost knowledge, inclusion, aggregation and professional opportunities.

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