

Designing transformative service initiatives (TSIs) in polarised contexts: a framework for effective practice

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Abstract

Purpose – Transformative service initiatives (TSIs) are often applied to address wicked problems in contexts that are polarised. For TSIs to be effective, they require both diversity of perspectives, a level of social cohesion and acceptance of the TSI as legitimate. Yet polarisation typically undermines cohesion and fuels resistance within communities, limiting the effectiveness of TSIs. The purpose of this study is to address the problem of how to manage diversity of perspectives when designing TSIs in a polarised context.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors adopt a theory synthesis approach and combine insights from service design with the theory and practice of deliberative democracy. The authors draw on deliberative democracy, as it offers practical tools and strategies for addressing disagreements in polarised contexts. The study brings together two distinct literature streams into a single conceptual theme to develop a framework for effective TSI design in polarised contexts.

Findings – In polarised contexts, the effective design and delivery of TSIs requires close attention to three features: actors (who should participate in the process, what types of citizens have an interest in the topic and what perspectives are represented); processes and practices (how the initiative is structured and what behaviours can be enabled to address polarisation); and outcomes (what can the process realistically yield, recognising that consensus may not always be possible).

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, the research is the first to introduce deliberative democracy theory to the services marketing literature. The core contribution of the proposed framework is the identification of bridging and bonding practices as the key mechanisms for creating procedural legitimacy of a TSI in a polarised context.

Keyword Conceptual

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Transformative service initiatives (TSIs) are activities undertaken by public, private, non-profit organisations or volunteers. The aim of such activities is to improve social welfare, inclusivity and the well-being of vulnerable individuals (Boenigk *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b). TSIs often address complex

societal challenges, known as “wicked problems”, such as health epidemics, refugee crises and poverty (Kabadayi *et al.*, 2023). However, the contexts of these wicked problems can be

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highly polarised, with a lack of social cohesion and high levels of resistance across the community. For example, the Refugee Study Orientation Programme is a TSI that aims to assist refugees who want to start or continue their disrupted academic careers (Boenigk et al., 2021a, 2021b). This TSI was established at the height of the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015, where the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers deepened social and political polarisation in refugee receiving countries (Banulescu-Bogdan and Collett, 2015).

TSIs depend on the ability of diverse stakeholders to come together and co-create solutions that are broadly acceptable (Carlini, 2025). To be effective, they require the involvement of actors with diverse perspectives, including consumers, frontline employees, managers, policymakers and design experts, in a collaborative approach that combines lived experiences, operational insights, strategic alignment and technological expertise (Kabadayi et al., 2023; Finsterwalder et al., 2024). Yet in a polarised context, this collaborative effort is undermined. Polarisation, conflict and oppositional perspectives among actors make designing and implementing effective TSIs difficult, if not impossible. For instance, a TSI aiming to improve employment options for refugees meets resistance from those who believe refugees are taking jobs from locals (Medhora, 2016). Likewise, a TSI involving safe injecting rooms that aims to reduce deaths from drug use is met with pushback by those who see these initiatives as enabling or even encouraging drug use, rather than addressing the root cause (ABC Radio, 2023).

At the heart of these moral disagreements are people’s diverse views about what constitutes a good society and what makes a good citizen (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). In the refugee contexts, opposition against designing services for refugees often stems from perceptions that they contribute to economic strain or social challenges in host societies (Medhora, 2016). Likewise, drug-users are widely believed to have made the choice to take drugs and thus are responsible for their own problems (ABC Radio, 2023). Citizenship types can be classified into three groups: the justice-oriented citizen, the participatory citizen and the personally responsible citizen (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Each of these three types is likely to react differently to TSIs in polarised contexts, affecting the design and delivery of effective TSIs. Without a shared ground of what counts as good among diverse types of citizens, it becomes harder to forge a consensus around solutions. TSIs rely on social license to operate and institutional support for scale, resources and support. As such, the design process of TSIs requires engagement with all three citizen types to achieve legitimacy for the final TSI. Legitimacy is the acceptance of an outcome by the diverse groups and arises through the process (procedural legitimacy) (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004). So, a TSI is legitimate when all three citizen types perceive that their views have been respected, understood by others in a transparent process.

Polarised contexts are characterised by an ideological divide between different groups or individuals within society, resulting in intense partisanship, gridlock and an inability to compromise on key issues (Yin, 2024), thus working against the ultimate goals of TSR and TSIs (Weber et al., 2021). The deep social and political divisions often mean that a service designed to benefit one group may be perceived as harmful or threatening

by another. For instance, safe injection rooms provide benefits for people using drugs; however, local community members living near the injection rooms perceive this intervention as causing social harm (ABC Radio, 2023). Polarisation as a research topic has only recently gained attention in the marketing literature, where it is examined for its implications on consumer behaviour, brand positioning and market dynamics (see Weber et al., 2021). Yet, despite this relevance, polarisation has not been explicitly discussed in the service literature.

Polarised contexts can significantly hinder the design and delivery of effective TSIs by creating barriers to collaboration, trust and shared understanding, core elements essential for transformative change. Deep social and ideological divisions lead to stakeholder resistance, conflicting priorities and fragmented participation, making it difficult to design and deliver meaningful, inclusive TSIs (Mulcahy et al., 2021; Ungaro et al., 2022). In line with Russell-Bennett et al. (2019), this fragmentation complicates the transformative service design phase, as service innovators must navigate competing demands and avoid alienating any group, sometimes resulting in diluted or compromised solutions that fail to produce meaningful transformation. Overall, polarisation disrupts the collaborative and inclusive processes that underpin TSIs, demanding new strategies that explicitly address division and seek to build bridges rather than assume shared ground. Thus, the purpose of this research is to address the problem of how to manage diversity of perspectives when designing TSIs in a polarised context. Exploring the design of TSIs in a polarised context is both necessary and urgent due to the escalating social, political and cultural divisions that characterise many contemporary societies. Thus, two research questions in this article will be addressed: *RQ1: How can TSIs secure broad acceptance among diverse stakeholders (different citizen types) to achieve legitimacy? And RQ2: How might we design TSIs that are oriented towards finding common ground in polarised contexts?*

To address the problem of managing diversity of perspectives when designing TSIs in polarised contexts, we draw upon ideas and tools from other relevant fields. In addition to the service ecosystem design theory, the field of deliberative democracy offers compelling insights for addressing the challenge of polarisation. Deliberative democracy is a growing area of democratic theory and practice and emphasises inclusive, reasoned and reflective discussion as a way to address disagreements stemming from value conflicts and differing conceptions of the good (Curato et al., 2017; Dryzek, 2000; Ercan et al., 2025). Deliberative democracy treats discussion on diverse topics as a productive feature of democratic life; something to be navigated through structured, thoughtfully designed forms of engagement. Integrating deliberative democratic techniques into TSI design processes can help address the divisions caused by polarised contexts. We highlight four practices that enhance the effectiveness of deliberative processes in polarised contexts: skilled facilitation, balanced information, bridging and bonding practices of communication (Powell, 2024a, 2024b). Bridging practices are intentional efforts to build understanding and relationships across social, cultural, political or ideological divides, while bonding practices strengthen connections among people who

are alike, sharing a common identity based on factors like race, religion, culture or shared experience (Powell, 2024a, 2024b).

While the field of transformative service research (TSR) provides a good starting point to explore the research questions identified, this field has not yet addressed the topic of polarised contexts. In this research, we offer a framework for effective TSI design in polarised contexts by combining insights from: the service design double diamond (United Kingdom Design Council, 2015), service ecosystem design theory (Vink et al., 2020) and deliberative democracy. Specifically, we propose that the perspectives of diverse actors, representing three citizen types, in the TSI design process can be structured and managed through bonding and bridging practices to lead to the legitimacy of the TSI. In doing so, our framework also addresses institutional practices that may inhibit legitimacy through reflexivity and reformation.

The article is structured in six sections. We first outline the background TSI literature in section 2, then justify a service design approach in section 3, we then explain the three citizen types as key actors and introduce deliberative democracy processes and practices in section 4, then offer an integrated framework for designing effective TSIs in polarised contexts in section 5, outline a future research agenda in section 6, and finally discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of the framework in section 7. The resulting framework focuses on actor roles, processes and practices, as well as intended outcomes in polarised contexts. As such, we adopt a theory synthesis approach (Jaakkola, 2020) to the problem where we integrate theories from service design with theories from deliberative democracy in a novel way. In this way, we link two distinct literature streams into a single conceptual theme to conceptualise the phenomena of TSI design in polarised contexts.

2. Transformative service initiatives

With the aim of improving the well-being of individuals experiencing vulnerabilities and society (Boenigk et al., 2021a, 2021b), TSIs address persistent barriers to accessing essential services encountered by marginalised groups such as refugees, people experiencing homelessness, undocumented migrants and former incarcerated individuals (Subramanian et al., 2022; Blocker and Barrios, 2015; Kabadayi et al., 2023). Central to TSIs is a participatory spirit that centres the views and lived experiences of those targeted by a specific initiative. TSIs seek to empower individuals by involving them in the design and delivery of services (Boenigk et al., 2021a, 2021b; Koppenhafer et al., 2023). This approach aligns with the core principles of TSR, which prioritises quality of life and well-being through stakeholder co-creation (Fisk et al., 2020; Boenigk et al., 2021a, 2021b; Anderson et al., 2013).

The current literature on TSIs includes frameworks for implementation and assessment (Boenigk et al., 2021a, 2021b). It also identifies tensions and constraints at different ecosystem levels necessary for achieving TSI outcomes (Finsterwalder et al., 2024; Carlini, 2025). Furthermore, it details the roles of various actors across sectors, including government, non-profits and for-profit entities (Boenigk et al., 2021a, 2021b; Eslami et al., 2023) (see Table 1). Research has also examined TSIs in a variety of service industries, including health care, education and finance (Fisk et al., 2023; Meshram

and Venkatraman, 2022), while also identifying exclusionary practices that prevent or limit service usage (Ng et al., 2022). Despite this increasing body of research on TSIs, there has been no investigation of how to resolve the tensions presented by different citizen type perspectives in polarised contexts and achieve common ground. The three citizen types are critical because they represent fundamentally different political visions for how society works (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004), which affects support for how or if a TSI is designed and delivered. The distinctions between the three types explain why there is polarisation on problems such as those addressed in TSIs. The responses of the different citizen types to addressing societal problems range from individual efforts and charity to systemic critique and collective action to challenge structural injustice and solve the root social issue (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Without knowledge of how to manage these tensions, TSIs will either be limited to contexts where there is more agreement between stakeholders or will fail to achieve desired outcomes.

3. Transformative service initiatives and service design

Designing TSIs is inherently participatory by emphasising equitable participation and mutual respect, necessitating collaboration across a broad spectrum of actors within the service ecosystem (Tikkanen et al., 2023). However, these initiatives often unfold in polarised contexts (e.g. immigration and drug-use), where co-operation among stakeholders with divergent worldviews becomes more complex, thus hindering transformative outcomes (Finsterwalder et al., 2024; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2020). Polarised contexts are characterised by antagonistic rather than collaborative relationships between groups with opposing views, creating an “us versus them” dynamic in which opposing groups are perceived not merely as wrong, but as illegitimate or threatening (Weber et al., 2021). This makes the design of TSIs particularly challenging and underscores the pressing need for further research into how service actors can overcome barriers to collaboration.

Given the nascency of the TSI literature (see Table 1), there is little research to date on how to design effective TSIs. A notable exception is the seminal article by Boenigk et al. (2021a, 2021b). We call for the adoption of service design when designing TSIs. Service design is “the human-centered activity of organizing the servicescape, service operations management and social aspects of a service with the goal of improving employees’ and consumers’ experiences” (Anderson et al., 2013, p. 100). The collaborative, iterative and personalised features of service design have strong alignment with the well-being goal of TSR and TSIs (Anderson et al., 2013). We draw on the diamond service design process model (United Kingdom Design Council, 2015) and service ecosystem design theory (Vink et al., 2020) as the service design frameworks in this article. Specifically, we use the four stages of the service design project process: discover, define, develop and deliver (United Kingdom Design Council, 2015) and the relational, reflexivity and reformation elements of service ecosystem design theory (Vink et al., 2020).

A service ecosystem can be projected at three levels: macro, meso and micro (Finsterwalder et al., 2024; Vink et al., 2020). In a TSI context, the micro level includes actors such as TSI customers (i.e. refugees), frontline service employees, local

Table 1 TSI literature overview

Article	Contribution	Service industry	Vulnerability context
Boenigk et al. (2021a, 2021b)	Introduces the transformative refugee service experience framework to improve the refugee service system at the micro, meso and macro levels	Multiple (e.g. health care, education and employment)	Refugees
Boenigk et al. (2021a, 2021b)	Introduces the 3A Integration Process (Awareness, Alignment, Access) Framework for the development and implementation of TSIs	Education	Refugees
Blocker et al. (2022)	Introduces a framework for unintended negative consequences of TSIs	Multiple (e.g. health care and social services)	Multiple (e.g. nursing home residents)
Ng et al. (2022)	Identifies service exclusion practices enforced by various actors in the service ecosystem	Multiple (e.g. health care, finance and education)	Refugees
Eslami et al. (2023)	Identifies how market-based TSIs can increase service inclusion	Food retail	Refugees
Fisk et al. (2023)	Identifies service inclusion practices to address the “digital divide” (i.e. inequalities of digital access, capabilities and outcomes)	Multiple (e.g. health care, education and social services)	Customers experiencing vulnerability in digital services
Kabadayi et al. (2023)	Identifies four types of TSIs based on their approach to dignity and vulnerability	Multiple (e.g. finance and hospitality)	Multiple (e.g. undocumented immigrants, refugee camp residents and previously incarcerated individuals)
Koppenhafer et al. (2023)	Introduces the concept of service empowerment as a collaborative process beyond service inclusion	Finance	Indigenous communities
Meshram and Venkatraman (2022)	Identifies inclusive service practices that reduce caste-based exclusion in services	Finance	Dalit (low caste) individuals in India
Finsterwalder et al. (2024)	Introduces the conceptual 10-Collaborators (1°C) Framework connecting actors at the micro, meso, macro and meta levels of the service ecosystem	Multiple (e.g. health care and finance)	Multiple (e.g. base of the pyramid consumers, LGBTQIA+ community and individuals with disabilities)
Carlini (2025)	Identifies shared vulnerabilities between consumers and service providers in collaboration with TSIs	Health care	End-of-life care

Source(s): Authors' own work

community members or neighbours. At meso level involves service organisations such as the TSI delivery organisation, partner organisations and local suppliers. Finally, at macro level involves border institutions, and societal structure such as policymakers, industries and others ([Finsterwalder et al., 2024](#)). Across the three levels, both design and non-design processes interact, sometimes aligning and conflicting to shape how value is co-created within the TSI ([Vink et al., 2020](#)). These dynamics determine whether the service ecosystem functions as an enabler or a barrier to the effectiveness of TSIs ([Vink et al., 2020](#)). Without understanding the centrality of relationality ([Vink et al., 2025](#)), the design of a TSI is unlikely to achieve the transformative goals at the centre of the effort. Thus, the actors in the service design ecosystem of a TSI must be clearly identified to enable a focus on their interdependence, the dynamics of the relationships, the mobilisation of the Web of actors and incorporating an iterative approach to the development and evaluation of a TSI ([Vink et al., 2025](#)).

4. Transformative service initiatives actors, processes, practices and outcomes in polarised contexts

We argue that in polarised contexts, the effective design and delivery of TSIs requires close attention to three dimensions: *actors* (who participates in the process and what types of citizens are included); *processes and practices* (how the initiative is structured and what additional practices are introduced to address polarisation; and *outcomes* (what the process can realistically yield, recognising that consensus may not always be possible).

4.1 Actors: The role of citizen types in polarised contexts

The different citizen types are present in actors across the service design ecosystem: macro, meso and micro. In a polarised context, we need to pay particular attention to how

these citizenship types influence the TSI design process. Achieving meaningful social change through TSIs requires collaboration among diverse actors and a humanistic approach that emphasises inclusion and shared responsibility (Tikkanen et al., 2023). While respect for diverse perspectives is central to this process, political polarisation poses a significant barrier by creating divisions that erode trust and shared vision and inhibit resource sharing. Political polarisation refers to the increasing ideological distance and affective hostility between individuals and groups who hold differing political values (Smith et al., 2024). Polarisation is deeply rooted in individual differences and manifests through greater intergroup animosity, diminished perceived commonality and heightened perceptions of moral and cultural opposition (Weber et al., 2021). In such contexts, it becomes difficult to align goals or mobilise collective action, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of TSIs. This misalignment hinders the development of a shared vision and erodes the trust necessary for transformative collaboration. Polarisation may further result in reduced access to key resources (e.g. funding and staffing), the withdrawal of social license, reputational risks and even threats to participant safety, thereby amplifying the potential harm in TSIs (Blocker et al., 2022).

Recognising the importance of individual differences in political and civic orientation is therefore essential to understand the motivations of the various stakeholders in the TSI design process. These stakeholders can be consumers, service delivery employees, managers, community group leaders, politicians, policymakers or advocates who hold different views on citizenship. Westheimer and Kahne, (2004) typology of citizenship offers insight into how people perceive their roles in addressing societal challenges. The first type, justice-oriented citizens, critically examines social, political and economic structures to identify and challenge injustice. A good citizen, from this viewpoint, works to understand the root causes of societal problems and advocates for collective action to address systemic inequalities. The second type, the participatory citizen, highlights active involvement in community and civic affairs. A good citizen participates in established systems, such as organising community events, joining local groups or engaging in governmental processes. The focus is on collective action within existing frameworks to improve the community. The third and final type, personal responsibility citizens, emphasise the role of individual character and behaviour. A good citizen is seen as someone who acts responsibly, is honest, self-controlled and law-abiding. This type of citizen contributes to the community through actions like volunteering, donating blood and assisting those in need, believing that individual efforts collectively address societal problems.

Each citizenship type brings a unique set of values, assumptions and priorities. In a polarised environment, these differences can either become sources of tension or opportunities for broader engagement, depending on how they are managed. Managing this diverse set of views requires a nuanced understanding of individual civic orientations and creating spaces where disagreements can be worked through constructively. TSIs must therefore not only acknowledge this ideological diversity but actively design for it, creating processes that respect divergent views and productive tension.

4.2 Processes and practices: Insights from deliberative democracy

We now turn to the second dimension of designing effective TSIs in polarised contexts: how processes can be structured to address the specific challenges of polarisation and the practices that can support them. To guide the design of inclusive and trust-building processes, we draw on deliberative democracy, which is a well-established and growing field of research, encompassing a range of strands and approaches (Curato et al., 2017; Dryzek et al., 2019). For our purposes, we focus on those features most relevant to polarised contexts – principles and practices that can be applied to the design of TSIs to foster mutual understanding, strengthen trust and produce outcomes that are viewed as legitimate.

Deliberation involves the exchange of reasons among free and equal citizens who justify their positions, engage respectfully with opposing viewpoints and reflect on their preferences in light of better arguments or new information (Ercan and Dryzek, 2015). In practice, deliberation can take many institutional forms, from informal community forums to structured decision-making processes (Ross, 2025). In recent years, however, its most visible expression has been the rise of citizens' assemblies, deliberative mini-publics (Paulis and Pospieszna, 2025; Curato and Farrell, 2021) and a broader set of innovations that scholars have described as a “deliberative wave” (OECD, 2020). These initiatives share a common goal: to facilitate an informed, inclusive and reflective discussion among diverse participants.

Applied research on deliberative democracy demonstrates that when designed carefully, deliberative processes such as citizens' assemblies, juries and panels can generate informed decisions and contribute to more legitimate and responsive public service delivery. Rather than merely collecting opinions, deliberative processes create structured spaces where participants can engage with expert evidence, assess competing values and develop informed opinions (Fishkin, 2018). In public service contexts, such as budgeting, policing and education, deliberative methods have been shown to help clarify priorities, identify practical trade-offs and tailor services to diverse users, particularly those traditionally excluded from decision-making processes (Fung, 2006). Evidence indicates that deliberative processes can build trust between service providers and communities, enhance the quality and accountability of collective decisions (Wampler et al., 2021).

Structured deliberative processes typically have three phases: learning, deliberating and developing options and reaching common ground (Curato and Farrell, 2021):

- 1 *Learning.* Participants learn about the issue from credible experts to build their confidence in deliberating on complex policy areas and address information deficits. It is also common to hear from stakeholders and interest groups to reflect on various perspectives, and from people most affected by the issue to understand their lived experiences.
- 2 *Deliberating and developing options.* Participants exchange and listen to each other's views and identify the most resonant arguments and considerations. Policy options are developed and prioritised during this phase.
- 3 *Reaching common ground.* Participants work through the options, identify trade-offs and amend or combine them

to identify common ground on which option best addresses the issue. Points of disagreement are also identified. An output is produced, often in the form of a report or roadmap.

The deliberative democracy highlights several key practices that are critical to the success of deliberation in polarised contexts. Here, we focus on four: skilled facilitation, balanced information, bonding and bridging practices of communication.

Skilled facilitation. Experimental research conducted by Grönlund et al., (2015) and his colleagues shows that when participants are guided by trained facilitators, polarised groups can move towards greater mutual understanding and sometimes even convergence of opinions. Yet in cases where the deliberative process is either unmoderated or weakly moderated, participants are more likely to fall back into entrenched positions or let dominant voices take over. Facilitation helps maintain respectful dialogue and enables participants to recognise the validity and legitimacy of opposing viewpoints (Grönlund et al., 2015). Co-design processes in the marketing field also have facilitators, but their function in addressing challenges of polarised contexts remains underexplored/implicit.

Balanced information. Equally important is that deliberative processes provide participants with balanced and reliable information. This is especially critical in the learning phase of deliberation, where access to expert input and evidence can raise the quality of discussion (Fishkin, 2009). Yet facts and figures alone are not enough. Testimonies and stories from those with lived experience of the issue at stake are also crucial. Returning to the earlier example of refugees, it is crucial that common assumptions and stereotypes are challenged not only through accurate data but also through narratives that allow participants to see the issue from the perspective of those directly affected.

Bridging practices. Polarisation often locks people in fixed identities and positions. Yet, intentional efforts can create opportunities to engage with individuals or groups who differ in views, values or identities (Heydemann and Powell, 2020). Bridging practices focus on reframing divisive issues around shared values, such as fairness or safety, and encourage participants to identify points of convergence. For example, in deliberations on climate change, groups divided along political lines can move away from partisan conflicts by reframing the debate in terms of shared concerns for future generations. Deliberative processes can involve various group activities that can help to forge bridges across differences. Heydemann and Powell (2020) define bridging practices in contrast to othering, which reinforces division and exclusion.

In contexts characterised by polarised views, communicative practices such as storytelling and empathetic listening help to build bridges across differences. Storytelling can spark reflection in ways that unsettle binary thinking and push deliberation in new directions. Empathetic listening focuses on understanding the other side, before rushing to collective decisions (Powell, 2024a, 2024b). Bradbery and Johnston (2023) similarly describe bridging as a means of moving beyond binary thinking, using shared values and active listening to foster connection. Programmes designed to bridge partisan divides (e.g. Braver Angels and One Small Step in the USA)

apply these principles through structured dialogues that help participants recognise each other's common humanity. The goal of these practices is not to eliminate conflict or impose consensus but to strengthen the capacity to engage across differences. In this way, bridging offers a pathway to counteract polarisation – not by avoiding disagreement, but by transforming how it is addressed.

Bonding practices. Bonding is about strengthening connections among people who are alike, sharing a common identity based on factors like race, religion, culture or shared experience (Powell, 2024a, 2024b). Bonding is the social glue that strengthens a group from the inside, reinforcing shared values and norms.

While bonding with like-minded people builds a strong sense of community, ironically, it can also become a driver of polarisation when groups turn inward. This isolation can foster an “us versus them” thinking, transforming simple differences into deep distrust and making it much harder to find common ground with outsiders (Powell, 2024a, 2024b; Putnam, 2000). Here, we suggest bonding practices of communication particularly for marginalised groups who may need safe spaces to talk with like-minded others before mixing with the larger group and diverse perspectives. This approach, often referred to in the literature as “enclave deliberation” in the literature (Abdullah et al., 2016), allows participants to build confidence and develop a shared language around their experiences.

4.3 Outcomes: Procedural legitimacy and meta-consensus

While deliberation is sometimes described as a consensus-oriented approach, it does not necessarily require consensus to be achieved. Its democratic legitimacy rests instead on the quality of procedural arrangements and the design of the process. As Gutmann and Thompson (2004, p. 11) argue, “[d]eliberation cannot of course make incompatible values compatible, but it can help participants recognize moral merit in their opponents' claims”, thereby fostering a shared sense of legitimacy, a *procedural legitimacy*. This legitimacy “rests on all participants understanding and accepting how and why a particular outcome was reached”, even if they continue to disagree on the substance of the issue (Smith, 2003, p. 60).

In this context, the concept of *meta-consensus* merits particular attention, whereby emphasis is placed on reaching “agreement about the nature of the issue at hand, not necessarily on the actual outcome” (Niemeyer and Dryzek, 2007, p. 500, see also Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006). In practical terms, meta-consensus means recognising the validity or legitimacy of others' values and viewpoints on the issue at stake. Rather than framing issues as battles between opposing views, a well-designed deliberative process encourages participants to recognise the complexity of the problems and the validity of different viewpoints.

Applied to TSIs in polarised contexts, meta-consensus offers a way to move forward without erasing disagreement. It enables participants to accept the coexistence of competing perspectives, to better understand the reasons behind divergent positions and to ground collective decisions in a sense of fairness and mutual recognition. In this way, deliberation contributes not to the elimination of conflict but to its constructive management, creating procedural legitimacy that

can endure even amid deep divisions. This means even if people disagree with the outcome of the process, they view the outcome as legitimate, as they trust that the process was inclusive and they were listened to. In polarised contexts, establishing this sense of legitimacy is crucial for the success and sustainability of transformative initiatives.

5. Towards an integrated framework for designing effective transformative service initiatives in polarised contexts

We draw together the three phases and key practices from deliberative democracy (Ercan et al., 2025) with the service design double diamond process (United Kingdom Design Council, 2015) and elements of service ecosystem design theory (Vink et al., 2020) to propose an integrated framework for effective TSIs in polarised contexts (see Figure 1). We have selected elements of service ecosystem design (Vink et al., 2020) and the four stages of the double diamond for theoretical and pragmatic reasons. These frameworks have co-creative processes that bring together different groups with divergent perspectives, needs and values. The core contribution of our proposed framework is the identification of bridging and bonding practices as the key mechanisms for creating procedural legitimacy of a TSI in a polarised context.

5.1 Justification of theoretical frameworks

The selection of the theories was guided by the question of how the disagreement between conflicting parties can be explained in polarised settings (citizenship types) and what should be done about it (normative theory of deliberative democracy focusing on the question of “should”). Furthermore, there are clear synergies between deliberative democracy and service design frameworks (United Kingdom Design Council, 2015; Blomkamp, 2018), but these synergies have not been reconciled systematically. Both approaches share the same starting point: addressing complex political, social and environmental issues (where no one person has the required knowledge and skills) needs a collaborative approach. Yet the

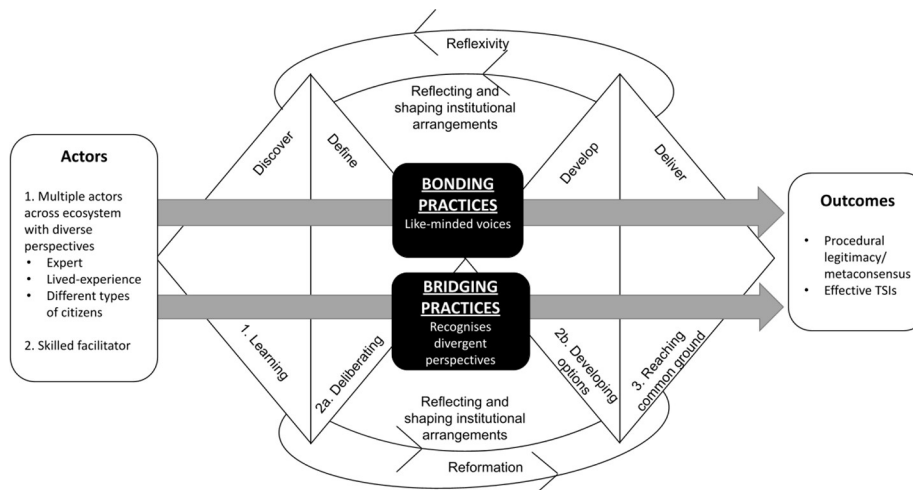
deliberative democracy and service design framework have different outcomes for this collaborative approach. Service design aims to optimise the experience and efficiency of a service for a seamless service ecosystem that offers value creation (Patricio et al., 2018). The deliberative framework is usually considered to be suitable for contexts such as public issues or policies requiring collective discussion and decision-making (Ercan et al., 2025). Bringing a deliberative approach to the design of service delivery in a polarised context helps to enhance the legitimacy of decisions made over service delivery. A deliberative approach also speaks directly to the “transformative” aspect of the TSI as it holds the promise of transforming ideas, preferences and attitudes even in polarised/divided contexts, the service design process does not necessarily assume transformation.

Possible alternatives to these frameworks to the problem of achieving consensus and legitimacy when designing TSIs in an increasingly polarised world may include: technocratic decision-making (Gaus et al., 2020), where a small group of experts determine what is the best course of action or public opinion research through surveys or focus-groups (Dryzek et al., 2019; Rothwell et al., 2016) However, neither of these approaches is designed to actively mediate the tensions among diverse stakeholders, particularly when disagreements are rooted in competing values or lived experiences. In polarised settings, what is needed is not the collection of opinions or imposition of expert judgement, but an interactive process that enables stakeholders to listen and reason together. Effective service design and delivery depend on stakeholders reaching an agreement on the course of action and sharing ownership of the decisions. Deliberative democracy offers a promising pathway to achieve this.

5.2 Proposing a new framework

The service design process outlines four stages of discover, define, develop and deliver that assist managers to design a TSI (see Figure 1). While Vink et al (2020) criticise the double diamond process for being linear, by adding in feedback loops of reflexivity and reformation from their service ecosystem

Figure 1 Integrated framework for effective TSIs in polarised contexts



Source: Authors’ own work

design approach, the four stages become more collective and acknowledge constraints of existing institutional arrangements. The three phases of deliberate process outlined: learning, deliberating and developing options and reaching common ground, align with the four stages of service design and are shown in Figure 1. The use of bonding and bridging practices (Powell, 2024a, 2024b) throughout the service design process exemplifies the role of relationality in the service design process (Vink *et al.*, 2025) and recognises both like-minded and divergent voices. The outcome of the framework is procedural legitimacy of the TSI and an increased likelihood of the TSI being effective by mitigating the effect of polarisation.

5.3 Bonding and bridging practices in designing effective transformative service initiatives

Bonding and bridging practices are used in each of the phases. The discovery phase identifies the root causes of polarisation for each citizen type and can uncover potential common ground. The define phase identifies the potential bonding and bridging pain points, benefits and user problems of the TSI for different citizen types (using personas). The development phase encourages divergent thinking and the generation of creative TSI concepts and prototypes that meet the needs of different citizen type problems. The deliver phase involves iterating hi-fidelity prototyping and testing with different citizenship types to identify likely TSI features that will enable bonding and bridging. By recognising the differences in citizen perspectives, bridging practices mitigate polarisation by creating a shared identity across those divides, thereby establishing the broad-based trust and collaboration required to develop more effective TSIs. Examples of specific deliberative practices for each of the four TSI service design phases for bonding and bridging are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

5.4 Constructs, outcomes and mechanisms of the framework

This framework creates structured spaces for deliberative engagement among diverse stakeholders, enabling the co-creation of outcomes that are perceived as legitimate even in polarised contexts. The framework intentionally embeds bridging and bonding practices into the double diamond co-design framework, ensuring that participants are not only invited to contribute ideas but are also supported to gain balanced information, engage across differences and arrive at shared commitments. A summary of the constructs, mechanisms and outcomes in the framework is shown in Table 4.

An illustrative example of the framework in action could be designing a refugee TSI for women to gain employment. The key actors include women refugees with lived experience of seeking employment, local employers, government employment agency representatives and community resettlement organisations. In a TSI design session, a skilled facilitator from a neutral organisation would guide the group through the co-design process. Women refugees can form one group, using bonding practices. This would enable them to openly and safely discuss their needs and shared challenges, such as a lack of childcare, unrecognised foreign qualifications or fear of job interviews. The bonding group would work together to discover and define their common needs, creating a collective voice to bring to the wider group. They can then join a larger group (bridging group) composed of diverse stakeholders

and adapt bridging practices to engage with each other. Together, the bridging group would deliberate on women's needs, government agencies' procedural requirements and employers' hiring criteria. This group would learn from each other, with the government and employers gaining insight into the real-world barriers the women face, and the women understanding the institutional and business constraints.

With the support of a skilled facilitator, the bridging group would engage in deliberation to explore different perspectives, generate options and work towards common ground and meta-consensus. The outcome of such a process is not necessarily a unanimous agreement, but rather a shared commitment to a way forward that all parties can accept. This could include an agreement to develop a pilot programme that offers job training alongside a childcare subsidy. The final TSI would be considered legitimate by all parties because the process was fair, inclusive and transparent, even if every individual did not get exactly what they wanted. The TSI would then be more likely to be effective at helping women refugees find employment because it was co-designed to address both the institutional and lived-experience barriers.

5.5 Scope conditions

This framework is best suited for contexts where multiple actors with different perspectives, such as those with expert knowledge, lived experience and varied backgrounds, need to work together. The process is most valuable when stakeholders hold divergent views and common ground is not easily found. It is less critical for groups that are already in agreement. The process is most applicable when the end goal is to create a collective outcome, such as designing a new policy or programme, rather than simply exchanging information. Finally, the success of this process depends on the willingness of all key actors to participate in structured deliberation and to remain open to revising their views considering new information and group discussion. A common obstacle arises when participants enter the process with strong anti-refugee sentiments. Rather than excluding such views outright, deliberative practice calls for carefully managed inclusion: these perspectives must be heard so they can be understood and challenged. This again underscores the crucial role of facilitator and their ability to guide the discussion towards shared problem-solving and decision-making.

5.6 Potential risks and mitigation strategies for deliberative service design of effective transformative service initiatives in polarised contexts

While deliberative practices are considered useful in addressing polarisation when designing TSIs, there are risks which need to be considered. Firstly, excessive bonding can also lead to the development of "social echo chambers", a phenomenon in which similar views and ideas are being exposed to individuals and groups (Nguyen, 2020). This can create unintentional homogeneity in which interaction is undertaken between like-minded others, restricting exposure to different others (Bourdieu, 1986; Recuero *et al.*, 2019). A potential mitigation strategy is to balance bonding practices with bridging practices in ways that induce critical reflectivity and enable people to seek diverse perspectives to achieve the most effective outcomes (Panke and Stephens, 2018).

Table 2 Proposed bridging practices for each TSI service design phase

Service design phase	Proposed practices in polarised contexts	Implication for TSI design	Empirical examples of practices
Discover phase (situational analysis and organisational problem)	<i>Practice: Intergroup story-sharing dialogues</i> The TSI convenes small, structured dialogues where people from different and potentially conflicting, groups (e.g. long-term residents and new immigrants, youth and police officers) share personal stories related to a common theme (Herzig and Chasin, 2019)	This practice moves beyond simple data collection to create a space for direct, human-to-human understanding across lines of difference, breaking down stereotypes and building a foundation of empathy	<i>One Small Step, Dining Across the Divide in the UK</i> Projects such as One Small Step in the USA and Dining Across the Divide in the UK put strangers with contrasting social or political views together not to debate, but to share experiences and find points of connection (StoryCorps, 2025; The Guardian, 2025)
Define phase (persona development, pain points, empathy maps and user problem)	<i>Practice: Cross-community sensemaking and problem framing</i> The TSI brings representatives from the diverse groups who participated in the dialogues into a shared workshop. Together, they analyse the collective stories and co-author a problem statement that reflects their multiple realities and interdependencies (Gastil and Levine, 2005)	Prevents the group's definition of the problem from dominating and forces the creation of a more holistic, shared understanding. This collaborative framing is a critical step in depolarising an issue	<i>Forward Together</i> The project Forward Together in the USA provides local government leaders with a toolkit to organise collaborative forums and workshops with diverse community members, including events focused on developing a shared frame of public problems (National Association of Counties, 2024)
Develop phase (ideation, concept and prototype development)	<i>Practice: Intergroup collaborative design event</i> The TSI hosts a collaborative design event where a diverse mix of community members, service providers and civic leaders work together in small, mixed teams to brainstorm and prototype solutions that serve a common good (Sanders and Stappers, 2012)	This shifts the dynamic from competing interests to collaborative creation. Stakeholders are forced to negotiate and build solutions that work for more than just their own in-group, creating buy-in across divides	<i>The Rapid Research for Agile Policymaking Project</i> This project in Uganda involves LGBTQIA+ individuals, software developers, academics and government officials in design meetings to develop a platform aimed at supporting data-driven advocacy (Participedia, 2025a; Voice, 2025)
Deliver phase (feasibility, viability and implementation plans)	<i>Practice: Shared governance and implementation council</i> The TSI establishes a formal governance body for implementation and oversight composed of representatives from all key stakeholder groups. This council holds meaningful decision-making power over the initiative's budget, priorities and evaluation (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2006)	This institutionalises power-sharing and long-term dialogue. This structure ensures the TSI remains accountable to the entire, diverse community it serves, preventing it from being captured by a single interest group over time	<i>The Participatory Budgeting Initiative</i> This initiative in Porto Alegre, Brazil, relies on a council composed of delegates and councillors elected in public assemblies who participate in planning and supervising the municipal budget cycle (Participedia, 2020). Similar models were adopted globally (Participedia, 2021)

Source(s): Authors' own work

Secondly, there is also the potential of group-think phenomena (Mpeera Ntayi et al., 2010) as a result of bridging and bonding. The bridging-bonding practices can create pressure to conform to the ideas of significant people in the group that can lead to poor decision-making and limited exposure to both critical thinking and diverse perspectives (Riccobono et al., 2016). A potential mitigation strategy is the development of an open communication ecosystem in which members willingly present alternative ideas for potential decision-making rather than confirm the dominant nodes of the network (Mueller et al., 2022).

Thirdly, if not carefully designed, the participatory efforts risk contributing to consultation fatigue, where communities feel over-engaged without seeing meaningful outcomes. Similarly,

when communities feel their voices are not heard or that an initiative is being imposed, it can breed resentment and social discord (Forester, 1999). This erodes trust not only in the specific TSI but also in the organisations and institutions behind the TSI, making future development efforts even more challenging. In such contexts, a TSI that is unable to effectively bridge divides may inadvertently perpetuate existing inequalities by reinforcing established power structures. For instance, a project might disproportionately benefit one group over another, which further marginalises already vulnerable populations. A potential mitigation strategy is to embed authentic, and not tokenistic, co-design processes that give diverse community members substantive power throughout the project's lifecycle.

Table 3 Proposed bonding practices for each TSI service design phase

Service design phase	Proposed practices in polarised contexts	Implication for TSI design	Empirical examples of practices
Discover phase (situational analysis and organisational problem)	<i>Practice: Founding cohort identification and convening</i> The TSI’s discovery work involves actively seeking out and bringing together a “founding cohort” of individuals from the target community. Through focused listening circles and story-sharing sessions, participants begin to see their individual struggles and aspirations reflected in others (Parker, 2018)	This practice creates the initial nucleus of the community the TSI aims to serve, transforming isolated individuals into a unified group with a budding collective identity	<i>IndigenEd</i> These initiatives in Canada focus on lifting female Indigenous voices through storytelling workshops and arts (IndigenEd, 2025; Participedia, 2025b)
Define phase (persona development, pain points, empathy maps and user problem)	<i>Practice: Community-led problem definition workshop</i> The TSI facilitates a process where the founding cohort from the Discover phase collectively analyses their shared experiences to define the problem in their own words. They co-create their own journey maps or collective narratives of the challenge (Cornish et al., 2023)	This solidifies the group’s collective identity by creating a shared analysis and a unified voice. The act of defining their own reality strengthens their sense of “us” and their ownership over the initiative	<i>The Start Network</i> This network of aid agencies developed a toolkit to support community-led innovation, including problem definition and risk mapping tools (Start Network, 2025)
Develop phase (ideation, concept and prototype development)	<i>Practice: Peer-to-peer solution generation</i> The TSI creates a safe and empowering space for the community cohort to brainstorm solutions for themselves, based on their unique insights and shared lived experience. The focus is on what they can build and contribute, rather than what can be given to them (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1996)	This builds collective efficacy. Generating solutions together reinforces their identity as capable agents of their own transformation	<i>Together UK</i> In this project, peer support is designed, developed and delivered by those with lived experience of mental distress. The agenda is determined by those giving and receiving support (Together for Mental Wellbeing, 2025)
Deliver phase (feasibility, viability and implementation plans)	<i>Practice: Peer support networks and community rituals</i> Reinforcing the bonds formed earlier. This can take the form of peer mentorship programmes, regular community meals or shared rituals that celebrate milestones and provide continuous mutual support (Wenger, 1999)	This embeds the social connection directly into the service model, ensuring the community sustains itself and provides ongoing support, which is often the most transformative aspect of the TSI	<i>The PARSA sisters for sisters</i> This group offers a mentorship programme for empowering vulnerable Afghan girls for education and work (Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, 2021; PARSA, 2025)

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Table 4 Constructs, mechanisms and outcomes

Construct	Mechanism	Expected outcomes
Actor perspectives	Bonding practices	Procedural legitimacy
Expert Lived experience	Provide safe spaces, especially to marginalised groups, to talk with like-minded others before mixing with the larger group and diverse perspectives	Metaconsensus
Different types of citizens	Bridging practices	Effective TSIs
	Focus on reframing divisive issues around shared values and encourage participants to identify points of convergence	

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Fourth, resistance to new ideas and the lack of diverse perspectives inherent in blocked social capital can stifle a TSI’s ability to innovate and adapt to changing circumstances (Granovetter, 1973). This can result in static, ineffective programmes that are not responsive to the evolving needs of the very communities they aim to serve. A potential mitigation

strategy is to institutionalise the role of “network weaving” by creating structures that intentionally connect different groups to introduce novel ideas and resources.

For TSIs to be successful in polarised environments, it is not enough to simply promote bonding and bridging. The framework for their design and implementation must be strengthened by a realistic assessment of the dynamics that can block these processes. It calls for an adaptive approach, remaining open to revising the framework as new, context-specific challenges emerge. Equally important is understanding the power structures at play, actively working to build trust where it has been eroded and developing strategies to navigate the inevitable resistance that will arise in polarised contexts. Being aware of and addressing these risks helps to strengthen the TSI framework and make it better equipped to foster genuine transformation.

5.7 Summary

This framework outlines bonding and bridging practices as the key mechanism for addressing convergence and divergence of actor perspectives when designing a TSI in a polarised context. These practices can help to develop shared concerns, develop a

common ground and/or achieve meta-consensus and thus provide the ground for more legitimate and effective TSIs.

6. Proposed research agenda for designing transformative service initiatives in a polarised context

Each of the elements in the framework provides opportunities for further research, as well as the entire framework. These opportunities are outlined in Table 5 along with example research questions.

While this paper lays a conceptual foundation, future research should focus on empirically validating the proposed framework. This could involve using qualitative methods, such as in-depth case studies of successful and unsuccessful TSIs in polarised settings or conducting participatory workshops with diverse stakeholder groups to co-create and test service design interventions. Additionally, comparative analyses across different polarised contexts could illuminate the framework's generalisability and identify context-specific nuances in its application. Such empirical investigations are crucial for refining the framework and developing actionable guidelines for designing effective TSIs.

7. Discussion

The purpose of this conceptual article is to propose an integrative framework for the design of a TSI that engages diverse voices, including those from different citizen types in polarised contexts. The problem of managing diversity of

perspectives when designing TSIs in a polarised context was addressed by identifying bonding and bridging practices as key processes. The research questions of *How can TSIs secure broad acceptance among diverse stakeholders (different citizen types) to achieve legitimacy?* and *How might we design TSIs that are oriented towards finding common ground in polarised contexts?* have been addressed by combining insights from the stages of a service design project within a service ecosystem, with processes, practices and outcomes suggested by the field of deliberative democracy. The article makes three theoretical contributions to the service literature through the conceptual method of theory synthesis (Jaakkola, 2020).

This new framework offers a path for researchers by encouraging a shift from a common “gap-spotting” approach to a more challenging “problematization” perspective, where the research speaks to an actual problem, rather than a gap in the literature. The framework speaks directly to the problem of polarised settings and suggests a productive way of bringing diverse stakeholders together in a structured and facilitated forum to achieve legitimate outcomes. By focusing on the crucial role of “bonding” and “bridging” practices in polarised settings, the framework helps to further advance the traditional co-design processes, and generate rich, nuanced data on how groups can build trust and find common ground and generate legitimate outcomes. In doing so, this research facilitates the cross-fertilisation of fields that have rarely been connected before, such as deliberative democracy and transformative service design.

Table 5 Research agenda for designing TSIs in polarised contexts

Framework component	Description	Potential research questions
Actors-Citizenship types	The three types of citizenship, i.e. responsibility, justice and participatory oriented, tend to view society through different lenses. Such lenses can contribute to a completely diverse view on a problem, contributing to polarisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the role of citizenship types, i.e. responsibility, participatory, justice-oriented, in exhibiting polarisation in society? How might we “deal with” polarised citizenship types that inhibit the effectiveness of a TSI?
Polarisation	A phenomenon in which society is divided into groups exhibiting homogeneous characters within groups exhibiting heterogeneous characters when compared with others, both groups possess a significant size in terms of membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can service ecosystems in polarised contexts be designed for effectiveness? How does polarisation affect the design and delivery of services, marketing activities and processes? What are the motivations and barriers among different demographic cohorts for polarised perspectives?
Collaboration	A phenomenon in which different citizenship types explore an opportunity to reduce the divide in society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can diverse citizenship types collaborate using bridging and bonding practices?
TSIs	Services aimed at improving collective wellbeing of individual and groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do TSIs reflect and shape institutional arrangements? What is the effect of TSIs on relationships between diverse actors in a service ecosystem? How does deliberative practice facilitate procedural legitimacy for a TSI? What are the success factors for an effective TSI?
Bridging	Bridging refers to social capital that forges a connection between diverse groups for more inclusivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under what conditions do bridging and bonding practices vary?
Bonding	Bonding refers to the phenomena of closer ties within group members that foster trust and loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do actors at different levels of the service ecosystem participate in bridging and bonding practices? How might bridging and bonding practices facilitate reflexivity and reformation in service design?
Methods	This conceptual framework necessitates empirical grounding to test its propositions and insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What mixed-methods approaches can effectively validate the framework? How can comparative analyses across different polarised contexts shed light on the generalisability and applicability of the framework?

Source(s): Authors' own work

The framework serves as a practical, structured guide for practitioners who facilitate stakeholder engagement or TSI design, especially in highly polarised or complex situations. By clearly delineating and creating space for “bonding” from “bridging” practices, it helps ensure that all voices – including those from marginalised groups with “lived experience” – are heard and valued, which leads to improved outcomes. Our framework shows how a carefully designed and skilfully facilitated deliberative process can help build procedural legitimacy for the final decisions, increasing the potential uptake of new policies or services across society.

Finally, the framework offers clear societal benefits by directly addressing the challenge of polarisation, thereby supporting social cohesion. While TSIs are valuable interventions, they can encounter resistance and setbacks in polarised settings. This framework provides a way to overcome that barrier by creating the conditions for constructive engagement across differences.

7.1 Theoretical contributions

Firstly, we have introduced the concepts of polarisation and deliberative democracy to the transformative service literature, particularly to the design of TSIs. While prior literature has addressed hostile service systems and service inclusion practices to overcome barriers such as discrimination, social isolation and digital divides (Boenigk et al., 2021a, 2021b; Fisk et al., 2023; Meshram and Venkatraman, 2022), no research has explicitly examined polarisation and its implications for service design to date. Likewise, no TSR has previously drawn on deliberative democracy practices to address disagreements that arise in difficult contexts.

Secondly, we have identified the role of bridging and bonding practices within the TSI design process and showed how these practices can help recognise diversity of voices and achieve common ground. This contributes to the transformative service principle of recognising the dignity and individual strengths of all those collaborating in TSIs (Kabadayi et al., 2023; Finsterwalder et al., 2024). In contexts characterised by value conflicts, it is unrealistic to expect the TSIs to be grounded in the consensus of conflicting parties. In many cases, consensus may simply be unattainable. Yet, this does not make the outcome of a TSI design illegitimate. Our paper demonstrates that carefully designed participatory processes can establish procedural legitimacy and foster meta-consensus, even without full consensus. By introducing these concepts to the TSI literature, we highlight their potential to strengthen the legitimacy of outcomes and open new avenues for future research.

Third, we have integrated the elements of relationality (Vink et al., 2025) and feedback loops (Vink et al., 2020) with the linear stages of service design. This addresses criticism of service design as ignoring institutional factors, iteration and actor roles across the ecosystem (Vink et al., 2020). The new framework offers both practicality to designers of TSIs in terms of four progressive steps while taking into account the theoretical need for the reshaping of service design processes and interactions between actors of divergent voices.

7.2 Managerial implications

Firstly, while existing literature discusses polarisation and its effects (Weber et al., 2021; Yin, 2024), our framework provides practical tools for managers and policymakers to better

understand and engage with polarised groups. By categorising these groups based on distinct citizenship types (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004), leaders can more accurately interpret group motivations and the underlying drivers of polarisation. This allows for more targeted engagement strategies when developing or implementing TSIs.

Secondly, previous studies have highlighted how polarisation creates gridlock in the design and execution of TSIs (Finsterwalder et al., 2024; Weber et al., 2021). Our framework addresses this by offering a structured, iterative process for overcoming these barriers. Specifically, it recommends that managers and policymakers adopt a four-step deliberative process – discovering, defining and delimiting, developing and delivering – to foster dialogue, build common ground and bridge divides (Heydemann and Powell, 2020; Ross, 2021). This process encourages inclusive stakeholder involvement and expert consultation, helping to reduce resistance and facilitate agreement across polarised groups.

Thirdly, our framework recognises that polarisation is not static; it evolves with societal changes. To remain adaptive, managers and policymakers should integrate reflexivity and reformation from the service design ecosystem into their deliberative practices (Yardi and Boyd, 2010). These elements help identify and overcome institutional and social barriers that hinder collaboration. They also embed the four-step deliberative process as a repeatable organisational practice, ensuring preparedness for future polarisation-induced challenges (Wroblewski and Palmén, 2022; Alexander, 2005).

Finally, building long-term capacity to manage polarisation effectively may require additional investment in financial, human and social capital. Organisations should be prepared to allocate resources for training, stakeholder engagement and structural adjustments that support bonding and bridging activities as a way of enriching traditional co-design methods.

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