User value: Competing theories and models

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Abstract

In design research, the issues of what exactly constitutes user value and how design can contribute to its creation are not commonly discussed. This paper provides a critical overview of the theories of value used in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, business, and economics. In doing so, it reviews a range of theoretical and empirical studies, with particular emphasis on their position on product, user, and designer in the process of value creation. The paper first looks at the similarities and differences among definitions of value as exchange, sign, and experience. It then reviews types and properties of user value such as its multidimensionality, its contextuality, its interactivity, and the stages of user experience dependency identified by empirical studies. Methodological approaches to user value research and their possible applications in design are also discussed. Finally, directions for future research on user value are discussed giving particular emphasis to the need of tools and methods to support design practice.

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