Design Thinking Method: The Most Underestimated Research Method for Wicked Problems?

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Opinion

In an era where humanity faces unprecedented complexity, it is striking that Design Thinking Method (DTM) remains one of the most underestimated qualitative research methodologies. While it has gained traction in innovation and business contexts, its value as a rigorous, systematic approach to research remains largely underappreciated. Unlike other methods, DTM uniquely addresses the multi-causal, systemic, and behavioral dimensions of today's wicked problems - those that are deeply complex, socially embedded, and resistant to traditional problem-solving techniques [1,2]. Given the increasing urgency of global challenges such as climate change, inequality, and governance failures, the research community can no longer afford to dismiss DTM as merely an applied, practitioner-driven tool. Instead, let it be recognized for what it is: a powerful, iterative, and collaborative method uniquely suited to tackling the world's most pressing issues.

The Case for Design Thinking Method as a Serious Research Approach

Unlike traditional methodologies that assume stable, well-defined research problems, DTM thrives in ambiguity and emergence. It aligns with pragmatist philosophy [3], which posits that knowledge evolves through iterative cycles of action and reflection. Pragmatism's emphasis on abductive reasoning [4] is central to DTM, as it enables researchers to generate and refine hypotheses dynamically, rather than rely solely on deductive or inductive logic [5]. The method's iterative structure - empathizing, defining, ideating, prototyping, and testing - ensures that inquiry remains responsive to the evolving nature of complex social systems [6].

Traditional qualitative research methods, such as ethnography and grounded theory, offer deep insights into human behavior and social structures but often lack the iterative problem-solving dimension required for wicked problems. Action research, while participatory, is typically constrained within specific organizational or community contexts and lacks the broader applicability and adaptability of DTM (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). By contrast, DTM actively integrates stakeholders as co-creators, ensuring that research is not only analytically rigorous but also actionable in real-world contexts [7]. This participatory, abductive approach makes it uniquely capable of bridging the theory-practice divide that has long plagued social sciences and management research [2,8].

Addressing Wicked Problems: The Strength of DTM

Rittel and Webber's [1] seminal work on wicked problems underscores that these challenges cannot be definitively formulated, lack clear stopping points, and require iterative solutions shaped by stakeholder engagement. DTM, with its human-centered and collaborative ethos, excels in precisely these conditions. In political science, for example, Fendt [7] demonstrates how DTM enables researchers to navigate contested and value-laden policy landscapes by co-creating insights with policymakers, citizens, and other stakeholders. Similarly, in strategic management, DTM has been used to tackle grand societal challenges such as economic inequality and sustainability by iteratively testing and refining systemic interventions [9].

The necessity of fundamental behavioral change in addressing global crises further underscores the need for DTM. Climate change, for instance, is not merely a technical issue but a deeply entrenched socio-political problem that requires shifts in norms, practices, and institutional structures. Traditional methodologies, which often analyze behaviors retrospectively, struggle to generate solutions that actively reshape human action. DTM, by contrast, integrates behavioral experimentation into its core process, enabling real-time adjustments based on stakeholder feedback and lived experience [2,6].

Methodological Rigor: Overcoming Skepticism

Critics often argue that DTM lacks the rigor of established qualitative research methodologies. However, this perception is rooted in a misunderstanding of what constitutes rigor in the context of wicked problems. Traditional research methods emphasize replicability and control, yet these criteria are ill-suited for studying dynamic, context-dependent challenges [3]. Instead, rigor in DTM

stems from its structured abductive process, systematic iteration, and stakeholder validation [5,7]. The approach has been successfully adapted into formal research frameworks that ensure transparency, reproducibility, and theoretical contributions [7]. Moreover, its alignment with complexity science [10] ensures that findings remain sensitive to the nonlinear, emergent nature of real-world problems.

A Call for Academics to Matter

The role of academics needs not be confined to the passive dissection of "what is" but could extend to the bolder terrain of "what could be." Herbert Simon [11] famously declared that, "the proper study of mankind is not how things are but how they might be." Too often, scholarly work remains tethered to analysis rather than imagination, observation rather than intervention. Theoretical rigor is indispensable, but rigor without relevance is sterile. In a world overwhelmed by crises that demand urgent action, academics must reclaim their mandate not only as analysts but as architects of possibility. As Schön [12] emphasized, the role of the reflective practitioner is to engage with uncertainty, to shape it rather than merely document its effects. If we fail to do so, if we retreat into the comfort of critique without the courage of contribution, we risk rendering ourselves irrelevant.

The Future of Design Thinking as a Research Method

As societal challenges become increasingly intricate, research methodologies must evolve to remain relevant. DTM represents a crucial paradigm shift away from static, observational research toward dynamic, interventionist inquiry [12]. It is time for the academic community to recognize the depth and power of Design Thinking Method, not just as an applied framework but as a robust qualitative methodology that can drive meaningful, systemic change. The future of research lies in its ability to engage with complexity, foster collaboration, and translate insights into action - capabilities that DTM uniquely provides.

By embedding DTM within the broader discourse of qualitative research, scholars can harness its full potential to address the world's most urgent problems. The dismissal of DTM as a non-rigorous method is no longer tenable. Instead, we must embrace its iterative, collaborative, and human-centered nature as the methodological foundation needed for tackling the grand challenges of our time.

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