DESIGN THINKING AS A CATALYST FOR INNOVATION IN THE DIGITAL BANKING ECOSYSTEM

Daria Maria Sitea[1*], Ioana Andreea Bogoslov[2], Alexandra Gabriela Marina[3]
[1)2)3)] *Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Sibiu*

Abstract
The rapid digital transformation of the banking sector, intensified by FinTech competition and evolving customer expectations, has increased the need for innovation-oriented product development approaches. A persistent challenge for banking institutions is identifying methodologies that support the design of customer-centric digital services while minimizing implementation risks. Therefore, this paper addresses the problem of integrating user-centered innovation practices into traditional banking processes. The main aim of this research paper is to explain the applicability and effectiveness of the Design Thinking methodology in developing digital banking products, and to evaluate its contribution to improving customer experience and innovation capability within the banking ecosystem.
The study employs a qualitative exploratory research design, combining an extensive review of recent academic and industry literature with a conceptual case-based analysis of the five Design Thinking stages – Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test. During the Empathize stage, structured interview activities were conducted by student teams using predefined guiding questions to explore user expectations, concerns, behaviours, and perceived barriers related to in-car banking. The responses were organized through empathy mapping and subsequently used to inform the Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test stages. The study is conceptual and exploratory in nature, with the workshop serving as an illustrative application of the Design Thinking methodology rather than as a representative empirical investigation of banking customers.
The results suggest that adopting Design Thinking enhances banks' capacity to identify latent customer needs, supports interdisciplinary collaboration, and improves the relevance, usability, and adaptability of digital financial services. Furthermore, the iterative approach contributes to reducing product development uncertainty and accelerates innovation cycles. The findings highlight that embedding Design Thinking into banking strategies strengthens customer-centric business models and supports long-term competitiveness in the digital economy.

[*] Corresponding author, **Daria Maria Sitea** – daria.sitea@ulbsibiu.ro

Keywords
Digital Banking, Design Thinking, Innovation, FinTech.

JEL Classification
G21, O30, M20.