

Transformative service research: a conceptual framework based on consumer's perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the consumer's perspective regarding the relationship between services and well-being, contributing to the knowledge base in transformative service research (TSR). More specifically the aim was to understand consumers' perceptions of the relationship between services and well-being and their views about how companies can contribute (directly and/or indirectly) to achieve the well-being.

Design/methodology/approach – To reach the research aim, the study adopts an explorative inductive design, carried out through a qualitative approach and grounded in 30 in-depth interviews with consumers.

Findings – Service sustainability represents the fundamental characteristic that determines the service ability to be transformative, requiring the implementation of the triple bottom line dimensions: social, environmental and economic. It emerged that, in the consumer's mind, the service categories that present a stronger relationship between service and well-being are as follows: healthcare, financial and transport.

Originality/value – The paper proposes a conceptual framework to describe the consumer perspective of the services' transformative role in promoting well-being, providing a theoretical lens for conducting future research and continuing to expand transformative service research (TSR).

Keywords Transformative Service Research, Consumer well-being, Service sustainability, Service systems, Triple bottom line

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The service industry is a growing sector (Edgar *et al.*, 2017), and it can be said that services dominate the economies of the most advanced countries (Bitner and Brown, 2008).

We live and work within service systems, such as families or schools (Alkire *et al.*, 2019) and consumers engage in services on a daily basis, interacting with a variety of service providers such as financial firms, healthcare providers and retailers (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, services have the potential to affect the social and economic world within which we live (Nasr and Fisk, 2019) and can have a positive or negative impact on consumer well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). In addition, services, given their pervasiveness, can also exert a significant environmental impact (Anderson *et al.*, 2013).

An emerging movement, named transformative service research (TSR) aims to understand the role of services in enhancing consumer well-being (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011).

Among the most important issues related to TSR is “designing and delivering services in a sustainable manner” and service sustainability has been identified as the most significant well-being-related subtopic (Ostrom *et al.*, 2015).



TSR has been recognized as a research priority since 2010 (Ostrom *et al.*, 2010). Over the years, there has been increasing interest in this field, but more studies are required in order to explore the relationship between well-being and services (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011; Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Anderson and Ostrom, 2015).

Given previous research opportunities, the present study aims to explore the consumer's perspective. Specifically, the purpose is to understand whether and how services are perceived by consumers as a means of contributing to their well-being. To achieve this aim, a qualitative study was adopted. In total, 30 in-depth interviews were performed to gain a broader view of the new and complex field of TSR and to deepen understanding of the consumer's perceptions about relationships between services and well-being.

Ultimately, this qualitative study answers the call for more research into TSR and contributes to the knowledge base in TSR by explaining the consumer perspective about the connection between services, service providers' activities and well-being, exploring the theme of service and sustainability and identifying the services which have the most impact on well-being from the consumer's point of view. The present research contributes to the existing literature by developing a conceptual framework that describes the consumer's perspective of services' transformative role in promoting well-being.

This paper is organized as follows. First, a literature review is provided in order to advance the aims of the research, and then the authors illustrate the methodology. The subsequent section provides the main results of the qualitative research, and then the authors discuss the main findings and illustrate their conceptual framework. Finally, conclusions, practical implications, limitations and recommendations for further research are presented.

Literature review

Sustainability and sustainable development

During the last 30 years, there have been remarkable advances in industrialization and development. It is recognized that such growth has caused problems regarding environmental, social and economic aspects, intensifying concerns about human quality of life and damage to the Earth's ecosystems (Lozano, 2008). Earth is heading for a point of no return (Carvalho *et al.*, 2013) and society has become acutely conscious of the negative impacts of industry (Mota *et al.*, 2015).

The concept of sustainable development (SD) has been identified as an approach that aims to reduce the impact of human activities (Lozano, 2008; Bilińska-Reformat *et al.*, 2019). In 1987, the Brundtland Commission defined it as a "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). Elkington, in 1997, introduced the term "triple bottom line" (TBL) – a new vision that incorporated three dimensions in the concept of sustainability: environmental, economic and social. Recently, in 2015, the 193 United Nations (UN) member states formally adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 "sustainable development goals" (SDGs). The agenda is a concrete call to action with the aim of achieving the 17 SDGs by 2030 and represents a holistic approach to understand and address modern issues (UN, 2015).

Lubin and Esty (2010) specify sustainability as an "emerging megatrend." Today sustainability is viewed as an extremely important business goal by multiple stakeholders including customers, investors and policymakers. Companies around the world are increasingly aware of the business significance of sustainability (Sheth *et al.*, 2011). They recognize that stakeholders' expectations about a company's commitment to sustainability has become a prerequisite for its legitimacy and competitiveness (Lubin and Esty, 2010; Murphy *et al.*, 2013). At the same time, consumers can play a fundamental role in promoting sustainability because they can be agents of social change through their behaviors, and thus

influence companies' activities and political institutions. Hence, analysis of the consumer's consciousness of sustainable behaviors and consumption is an important theme (Balderjahn *et al.*, 2013).

Several authors have studied the concept of sustainability from the consumer's point of view. Choi and Ng (2011) explore the role of environmental and economic sustainability information in consumers' evaluations of companies, and their purchase intent, concluding that consumers do respond to multiple dimensions of sustainability. Balderjahn *et al.* (2013) developed a new, comprehensive approach to measuring "consciousness of sustainable consumption" (CSC) that incorporates the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability. Barone *et al.* (2020) explored consumers' association with the term sustainability, identifying that better educated and younger consumers associate sustainability with the three dimensions: social, economic and environmental, but there are also consumers who are unaware of the whole concept.

Ostrom *et al.* (2015) indicate design service as a fundamental issue "to protect the environment" and incentivize customers and employees to "to take on roles that reduce a service's negative environmental impact." In addition, in Ostrom *et al.* (2015), Anderson points out that TSR examines, among others, the social and ecological consequences and benefits of service offerings and the impact of services on well-being and sustainability. In this dynamic context it is interesting to note the role of service science in pursuing sustainability, while fostering positive impact in social, environmental and economic spheres.

The emergence of transformative service research

Service research has been called on to explore how services can enhance human lives, especially since service organizations are often criticized for ignoring or harming consumer well-being (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011; Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016). TSR was first conceptualized by Anderson in 2010 (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015), and it is placed at the intersection between transformative consumer research and service research (Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Ostrom *et al.*, 2014; Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016). TSR has been defined as "service research that centers on creating uplifting changes and improvements in the well-being of consumer entities: individuals (consumers and employees), communities and the ecosystem" (Anderson *et al.*, 2011, 2013). In 2019, Nasr and Fisk suggested adding the term "relieving suffering" to the definition of TSR, extending it beyond "improving well-being." Their reasoning is that this second idea assumes that basic needs have already been satisfied, but in some cases, such as in the global refugee context, people are unable to access basic services.

The essential concept of TSR is that humans are surrounded by service systems that have an impact on their lives, influencing people's well-being in both positive and negative ways, and TSR aims to develop service strategies, innovation and design in order to build a better future (Fisk *et al.*, 2016).

This emerging field was first identified as a key service research priority by Ostrom *et al.* (2010), and then TSR was recognized by influential service researchers as the highest priority (Ostrom *et al.*, 2015; Nasr and Fisk, 2019). During the last years, the service community has shown increasing interest in this research area (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015).

TSR distinguishes itself from other service research in relation to the outcomes that it investigates (Alkire *et al.*, 2019). TSR emphasizes the importance of indicators of increasing and decreasing well-being, like physical health, mental health, financial well-being, discrimination, literacy and access (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015). In contrast, traditional service research focuses on measures such as customer satisfaction and loyalty in order to understand factors that increase a firm's profitability (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011).

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined well-being in 1946 as “A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1946; Edgar *et al.*, 2017) and in 1997 as “a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by the person’s physical health, psychological state, personal beliefs, social relationships and their relationship to salient features of their environment” (WHO, 1997; Feng *et al.*, 2019).

Within the TSR domain, Anderson *et al.* (2013), in their conceptual framework, theorized that the interaction between service entities and consumer entities within the macro-environment affect the well-being outcomes of both. They identified two types of well-being outcomes: eudaimonic and hedonic. Eudaimonic well-being relates to the realization of human potential (Ryff, 1989). The authors provided a list of eudaimonic well-being dimensions such as access, literacy, better decision-making, individual and collective health, decreasing health and well-being disparities, consumer involvement, harmony, power, respect, support and social networks that can be applied at individual, collective and ecosystem levels. Hedonic well-being relates to the notion of happiness and pleasure (Diener and Lucas, 1999) and comprises happiness, life satisfaction and joy and the absence of negative effects such as tension, fear, strain and stress. Finally, hedonic well-being can be applied at individual and collective levels (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). More recently, Rahman (2020), through a systematic literature review on 70 studies, identified the sources and categories of well-being from the TSR domain, providing a unified framework. In particular, he identified five sources of well-being (organization, individual, collective, service system and situation-driven) and two categories of well-being (improved (reduced) capacity and functioning and elevated (lowered) subjective appraisals of life conditions).

Examples of topics in TSR studies includes vulnerable consumers (i.e. Beatson *et al.*, 2020; Ho *et al.*, 2021), employee well-being (i.e. Rahman *et al.*, 2020; Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2021), refugee crisis (i.e. Aras *et al.*, 2021; Gross *et al.*, 2021) and service design (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2021). More recently, some studies attempted to understand the impact of COVID-19 on well-being (i.e. Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020; Mollenkop *et al.*, 2020). In Fisk *et al.* (2020) presented in their work a new movement named ServCollab that aims to support service research collaborations that seek to reduce human suffering and improve human well-being.

Some services, such as healthcare and education, are transformative by design, because they have a clear transformative mission. However, some services like retailing, entertainment and hospitality (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011) have transformational potential even though they do not have an explicit transformative intent, because they might still impact people’s well-being. Indeed, in the last years, it is possible to find some studies focused on this second kind of services, such as researches in the retailing sector (i.e. Gardiazabal and Bianchi, 2021; Naveed *et al.*, 2021) or hospitality (i.e. Gallan *et al.*, 2021).

Finally, TSR calls on service researchers who want to explore the relationship between services and individual and collective well-being from a micro to a macro level (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011) and also have the opportunity to impact well-being (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015).

Methodology

In order to achieve the research’s aim, a qualitative approach was planned, adopting an exploratory inductive research design (Eisenhardt, 1989). An empirical investigation was carried out through in-depth interviews with 30 consumers to study their perceptions regarding the complex phenomenon of the transformative role of services. Indeed, this qualitative methodology was considered appropriate for exploring the new and intricate field of TSR while providing useful insights for theory development and future research routes.

Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for studying how a community or individuals “feel” about or interpret a specific issue (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015; Boulay *et al.*, 2014).

For this reason, the adopted qualitative method was guided by the inductive approach (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2013), and in line with Bluhm *et al.* (2011), the methodology was designed to investigate fully how individual beliefs, thoughts and experiences connect services and well-being in the consumer’s mind, with the aim of understanding individual perceptions and associated interpretations.

As suggested and utilized by several authors, (i.e. Dean and Indrianti, 2020; Lam and Bianchi, 2019; Edgar *et al.*, 2017; Wiese *et al.*, 2015), and considering the exploratory nature of the study, researchers decided to adopt semi-structured interviews composed of five guiding topics which were chosen, *a priori*, based on the literature analysis. In addition, ad hoc questions were developed by the interviewer during the interview allowing participants to analyze the topic in greater depth. The five topics are presented in Table 1, which provides a description and the linked literature for each one. The first topic analyzed is the *well-being concept* (1), which represents the starting point of the investigation. Then, a service focus was introduced to the interviewees with the *transition from goods-dominant logic to service-dominant logic* (2). After this general discussion on the new service logic, the interviewers initiated the core of the investigation, namely the *relationship between service and well-being* (3). For this topic, the respondents were free to propose their ideas on how services may contribute to well-being and social transformation. Accordingly, this was followed with a focus on the specific role played by the service providers in that relationship (4. *Role of service providers*). Finally, the interviews were concluded by asking which services consumers considered to have a stronger impact on, and contribution to, well-being (5. *Relevant services*).

Interviews were conducted from September to November 2019 and participants were selected through a snowball approach (Guido, 1999; Mugion *et al.*, 2018; Lucia-Palacios

Table 1.
Description of the in-
depth investigated
topics and related
references

Topic investigated	Description	Theoretical references
(1) Well-being concept	Analysis of the meaning of “well-being,” including how it is described and interpreted by consumers. Potential faces of the concept are investigated as well	Diener and Lucas (1999), Diener (2000), Ryff (1989), World Health Organization (1946), Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder (2016), Anderson <i>et al.</i> (2013), Ryan and Deci (2001), Waterman (1984), Anderson <i>et al.</i> (2013) Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2006, 2008a, b)
(2) Transition from goods-dominant logic to service-dominant logic	Introduction of the services perspective and analysis of what has changed from previous traditional logic based on goods	
(3) Relationship between services and well-being	Exploration of how the relationship between services and well-being is perceived by the consumers. Analysis of the main aspects that influence this relationship for both providers and users	Anderson and Ostrom (2015) Anderson <i>et al.</i> (2013) Rosenbaum <i>et al.</i> (2011) Ostrom <i>et al.</i> (2010)
(4) Role of service providers	Analysis of the role played by service providers in acting to guarantee and pursue well-being	Anderson <i>et al.</i> (2013), Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008a), Vargo (2011), Frow <i>et al.</i> (2014)
(5) Relevant services	Identification of the most important services where the relationship between services and well-being plays the major role	Rosenbaum <i>et al.</i> (2011)

et al., 2016). The snowball sampling method has been largely used in qualitative research (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Noy, 2008). In the current study, following the indications of Noy (2008), the authors selected the first respondent and asked him to identify one or two other informants. The researchers then contacted these individuals and asked each of them to provide one or two other contacts and so on until data saturation was reached. The final sample was composed of 18 male and 12 female participants, with age ranging from 25 to 45 years. To test the efficacy and validity of the guiding topics, a pilot interview was carried out.

Data saturation principles for theory-based interview studies were applied (Francis *et al.*, 2010). Data saturation refers to the extent to which predetermined themes are adequately represented in the data (Lam and Bianchi, 2019). The decision to collect more data is based on the non-emergence of new themes (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). Hence, the data collection continued for 30 interviews until data saturation was reached. The sample size is appropriate for qualitative analysis where the analysis of a wider sample (more than 30) may become too complex to manage (Boddy, 2016), and indeed Marshall *et al.* (2013) suggest a range of 15–30 for qualitative interviews (Arasli and Arici, 2019).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed and, once this process was concluded, the authors analyzed the transcriptions through content analysis. Text analysis software (MAXQDA18, VERBI Software GmbH, Berlin, Germany) was utilized to study, code and interpret each phrase. To guarantee the rigor of the research, multiple investigators were involved in the coding activity (Barratt *et al.*, 2011; Di Pietro *et al.*, 2018).

As suggested by Altinay *et al.* (2014) and Arasli and Arici (2019), similar concepts were coded and grouped into categories and first-order issues were identified. Subsequently, data were interpreted and classified by the researchers in second-order themes. As observed by Aal *et al.* (2016), through a thematic analysis (Luborsky, 1994) it is possible to detect categories that can catch and represent the “nature of each individual view” (Aal *et al.*, 2016). Finally, second-order themes were merged in aggregate dimensions.

Results

In total, 30 in-depth interviews lasting from 45 min to 1 h were performed face-to-face. The sample was composed of 18 male and 12 female participants, with age ranging from 25 to 45 years.

The results are presented as follows. First, services considered as priorities for their ability to contribute to well-being are analyzed. Second, the detected first-order issues are described. Third, the second-order themes are introduced and outlined. Finally, the explanatory relevant dimensions are discussed.

Type of service and contribution to well-being

During the interviews, most respondents identified more than one service, but it emerged that the three which were most frequently mentioned and perceived by the respondents as presenting a stronger relationship between service and well-being were healthcare (Freq. 19), transport (Freq. 13) and financial services (Freq. 9). In the context of healthcare services, cleanliness, a professional and competent operator and an easily accessible, fast and affordable service were identified by interviewees as the main features that can impact the well-being of end-users. In the case of transport services, the respondents highlighted that well-being can be guaranteed by a transport network that connects the whole city with punctuality and reliability, safety, cleanliness and affordability. According to interviewees, financial services can contribute to well-being when they are fast, customized, accessible, online and have professional operators. Supplementary mention was made of the services as follows: public services, education, tourism and social services.

Identification of first-order issues

The authors analyzed the transcriptions and, utilizing the coding activities and their interpretations, they categorized the opinions and thoughts of respondents into 12 first-order issues that are reported in [Table 2](#) together with two examples of quotations for each issue.

The central issue that emerged from the interviews is the importance of service sustainability and its connection with the well-being. In fact, it is seen as the fundamental service feature required ensuring human welfare.

During the research, interviewees provided different definitions of well-being. Some respondents related the concept to personal psychological, physical and economic conditions and the simplification of the daily life of individuals. Others identified well-being as a broader concept incorporating future generations, political stability and society's economic growth. Another important aspect that emerged is the need for government regulation to make services safe, reliable and transparent.

Respondents expressed the need to preserve biodiversity and non-renewable resources for future generations. In order to reach this goal, a value was given to collective actions. From the respondents' point of view, cooperation between citizens can help achieve well-being in society and improve the human quality of life, and they cited, for example, services like car-sharing and bike-sharing.

Respondents stressed the role of companies in ensuring community well-being. They also affirmed that firms must satisfy the needs of not only of the final customers, but also of their employees. Emphasis was placed on the role of both internal and external communication. The objective of internal communication must be to disseminate corporate culture and educate managers to adopt sustainable behaviors. The aim of external communication must be to inform the final consumer about the company's sustainable actions and their commitment to enhancing social well-being.

In addition, interviewees identified innovation and new technologies as fundamental practices and suggested that activities such as recycling and reuse could be further developed to reduce environmental impacts and apply a circular economy model.

Detection of second-order themes and aggregate dimensions

Starting with analysis of the identified first-order issues and their content, the researchers grouped them and detected second-order themes characterizing the relation between services and well-being. In particular, the authors identified six main themes ([Table 3](#)).

The first theme, *individual well-being*, included issues that are connected with the respondents' vision of well-being as a concept relating to their personal and unique conditions (psychophysical stability, economic stability and simplification of daily life). The second theme, *collective well-being*, contains issues where respondents expressed well-being as a broad concept embracing the whole of society (future generations and political and economic stability). The third theme, *institutional arrangements*, connects with the need to guarantee, through regulation, safe, transparent and reliable services. The fourth theme, *environmental well-being*, incorporates issues associated with the need to preserve the environment and actions that can help to achieve this aim (preservation of biodiversity/resources and consumer cooperation). The fifth theme, *service providers' role*, refers to issues related to respondents' vision regarding the role of companies in ensuring community welfare (employees and end-users, communication and education and innovation and technology). The last theme, *service sustainability*, seems to link directly to the sustainability issue and indirectly connect with all the other themes.

Finally, the analysis of existing relations among the second-order themes led to the definition of four aggregate dimensions that describe and synthesize the transformative power of services in contributing to well-being. Four dimensions were detected: social,

Issue	Quotation	TSR based on consumer's perspective
Sustainability	<p>(1) "I believe that sustainability is the most important social benefit to pursue, improving the lives of human beings, plants, animals, society and the ecosystem" (Respondent 3)</p> <p>(2) "I think it all comes down to sustainability. What has happened in Australia and in Amazonia in the last months is incredible. The companies will have to do something about it, otherwise there will be an apocalyptic scenario" (Respondent 7)</p>	<div>147</div> <div>Table 2.</div> <div>First-order issues and quotations</div>
Safety, reliability and transparency	<p>(1) "A service must be reliable and secure and regulations should ensure it" (Respondent 15)</p> <p>(2) "I believe that we should have regulations that oblige companies to manage their services in a better way and to be transparent and promote social welfare" (Respondent 20)</p>	
Communication and education	<p>(1) "To increase social well-being, companies can organize communication campaigns to raise consumer awareness, in addition to those aimed at their employees" (Respondent 30)</p> <p>(2) "Companies should educate consumers and employees through communication to generate more conscious consumption" (Respondent 10)</p>	
Economic stability	<p>(1) "In my opinion, well-being is the opportunity to guarantee a proper economic condition for myself and my family" (Respondent 1)</p> <p>(2) "I think that well-being means my economic stability and that of my family" (Respondent 8)</p>	
Preservation of biodiversity/resources	<p>(1) "The preservation of the environment today is a central theme, and therefore acts in respect of the planet and future generations. Safeguard the surrounding environment and all beings" (Respondent 9)</p> <p>(2) "The conservation of natural habitats and non-renewable resources is certainly important in order to guarantee the same rights to future generations" (Respondent 12)</p>	
Simplification of daily life	<p>(1) "A service must necessarily be useful for everyday life; an example is efficient public transport" (Respondent 4)</p> <p>(2) "A service must simplify the personal life of each of us. For example, a service needs to be customized to provide what the user needs" (Respondent 25)</p>	
Future generations	<p>(1) "I think of my personal well-being but also of the community and it's important to guarantee to meet the needs of both me and future generations" (Respondent 13)</p> <p>(2) "... It's also important to guarantee the same rights for future generations and safeguard their well-being" (Respondent 2)</p>	
Innovation and technology	<p>(1) "I think that managers need to adopt sustainable attitudes. And then they need to promote a sharing culture, with the digitization and use of more technological methods, which allow us to save and recycle resources" (Respondent 11)</p> <p>(2) "To improve environmental well-being, managers could study new methods to avoid their impact on the environment and on society. For example, to improve a service, I would try to apply a circular economy system or implement policies of reuse and recycling of raw materials. Of course, it is important to convey these policies not only internally but also externally in order to raise awareness among citizens and consumers" (Respondent 16)</p>	
(continued)		

Issue	Quotation
Employees and end-users	(1) "A company, in order to guarantee social well-being, must guarantee the well-being of its human resources, who are now a fundamental element of a company" (Respondent 5) (2) "I would like to see companies that take into account not only profit but also the social well-being of citizens; I would like to see a more united and less consumerist community" (Respondent 21)
Political and economic stability	(1) "It makes me think of being comfortable with oneself and with others. Let's say I thought more than anything that well-being is something individual, but I now think it can also be extended to the community, like having political and economic stability in the country" (Respondent 18) (2) "It is important that economic well-being and social tranquillity are guaranteed, with the possibility of living in a country that is stable politically and economically" (Respondent 24)
Consumer Cooperation	(1) "I believe that we are going towards a new globalization, a new way of living. Collective actions can lead to a lesser impact on the environment and improve our well-being" (Respondent 24) (2) "Sharing services and consumers' collaboration can help reduce environmental impacts" (Respondent 16)
Psychophysical stability	(1) "Well-being in my opinion means having a psychophysical stability that allows you to feel good with yourself and with others" (Respondent 15) (2) "For me well-being is linked to a situation of stability such as the fact that there is something to eat, there is good health" (Respondent 29)

Table 2. Note(s): Translated from Italian by the authors

Dimension	Theme	Issue
Social transformation	Individual well-being	Psychophysical stability
		Economic stability
	Collective well-being	Simplification of daily life Future generations
Environmental transformation	Institutional arrangements	Political and economic stability
	Environmental well-being	Safety, reliability and transparency Preservation of biodiversity/resources
Economic transformation	Service providers' role	Consumer cooperation
		Communication and education
Service sustainability	Service sustainability	Innovation and technology
		Employees and end-users Sustainability

Table 3. Relations between aggregate dimensions, second-order themes and related first-order issues

environmental, economic attitude and service sustainability (Table 3). An explanation and interpretation of the four dimensions is presented in the following section.

Discussion and theoretical framework

The current study detects three significant services where the relationship between service and well-being seemed to play a major role in the respondents' minds: healthcare, financial and transport services. Healthcare is defined as a service that is transformative by design and has received attention from different research fields (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011). There are already studies concerning the connection between financial services and well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Brüggem *et al.*, 2017). However, transport seems to emerge as a new

service linked with consumer's well-being. Moreover, respondents provided a list of the main features for each type of service that, in their opinion, have a direct impact on the well-being.

As a result of the transcription analysis, the authors categorized the respondents' opinions into 12 first-order issues, grouped in 6 themes, which are related to 4 dimensions.

From the analysis it emerges that service sustainability is identified as the essential issue to guarantee the well-being. This is probably in line with increased social consciousness of the negative impacts of industry (Mota *et al.*, 2015) and sustainability being recognized as an extremely important business goal by customers, investors and policymakers (Sheth *et al.*, 2011). However, although there are several studies analyzing the concept of sustainability from the customer's point of view (Choi and Ng, 2011; Balderjahn *et al.*, 2013; Sheth *et al.*, 2011), there is a lack of discussion on sustainability in TSR (Guyader *et al.*, 2019). Shirahada and Fisk (2011) define service sustainability as "satisfying the needs of current providers and recipients to engage in mutual value co-creation without decreasing the quality of future value co-creation."

The analysis of the results reveals that *service sustainability* is strongly linked with the other three dimensions identified: social, environmental and economic transformation. This finding highlights the existence of a connection between TSR and the triple bottom line (TBL). Indeed, the TBL (Elkington, 1997) recognizes that organizations have to consider the multi-dimensional impact of their strategies. In light of this, it is possible to apply the lens of the TBL to better explain service sustainability.

The *social transformation dimension* is connected to the social sustainability dimension. The social aspect of sustainability is a non-economic form of wealth concerned with the well-being of people and communities (Choi and Ng, 2011). Indeed, the social dimension relates to human aspirations: equity, inclusion and health (Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010). The social environment aims to safeguard the basis of the existence of individuals, and it can deteriorate just like the natural environment (Pawłowski, 2008). The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) defines the social dimension of sustainability as one that "concerns the impacts the organization has on the social systems within which it operates" (GRI, 2013). During the interviews, respondents emphasized different interpretations of well-being that authors categorized into two concepts: *individual* and *collective well-being* (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, interviewees recognized the important role of all potential actors, especially policymakers, in ensuring transparency, reliability and safety during service provision (*institutional arrangements*). Norms, rules and habits need to be respected but also changed as required to foster the service's power to drive transformation. This is in accordance with Anderson *et al.* (2013) who affirm that in TSR it is crucial to understand which actions both businesses and governments should plan in order to increase service sustainability. In addition, as observed by Di Pietro *et al.* (2018), through institutionalized norms and rules that create shared meanings (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), it is possible to create values that resonate (Edvardsson and Enquist, 2009, 2011) with the community. In accordance with the social dimension features identified by authors so far (Choi and Ng, 2011; Pawłowski, 2008; Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010; GRI, 2013), they classified the themes individual and collective well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2013) and institutional arrangements (Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Edvardsson and Enquist, 2009, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Di Pietro *et al.*, 2018) into the *social transformation dimension*.

The *environmental transformation dimension* of service sustainability refers to the environmental aspect that, as described in the literature, relates mainly to the conservation of nature and biodiversity (Goodland, 1995; Lozano, 2008; Pawłowski, 2008; Morelli, 2011). Moreover, the conservation of nature is linked indirectly with the shape of the spatial order, and, in this way, it is also connected with social relations between people (Pawłowski, 2008). Environmental sustainability has become increasingly important to the consumer since the 1980s when natural issues such as climate change and rising sea levels gained urgency (Choi

and Ng, 2011). It is recognized that services given their pervasiveness, can have a large environmental impact (Guyader *et al.*, 2019). In their work, Guyader *et al.* (2019) focused their attention on the notion of green service that they defined as “service provision aimed at improving the well-being of the natural ecosystem in order to better the quality of life of present and future generations.” Therefore, they stated that green service focuses not only on satisfying customer needs but also on improving environmental benefits. In the current research study, respondents observed the relevance of ensuring the preservation of non-renewable resources and the natural ecosystem for future generations through the service provision, in accordance with the main definition of sustainable development (SD) (WCED, 1987) and the importance of cooperation between citizens in order to achieve society’s well-being (Pawłowski, 2008). Authors grouped these findings in the concept of *environmental well-being* (Pawłowski, 2008; Guyader *et al.*, 2019), and considering the environmental sustainability concept definition (Goodland, 1995; Lozano, 2008; Pawłowski, 2008; Morelli, 2011), this theme was included in the *environmental transformation dimension*.

The *economic transformation dimension* is linked with the economic impact of sustainability. Due to the global economic recession, consumers and society, fearing job losses, insecurity and financial risks have become increasingly concerned with economic sustainability (Choi and Ng, 2011). In their work, Sheth *et al.* (2011) affirmed that the economic dimension of sustainability is composed of two aspects: the first one is related to the financial performance of the firm; the second is related to “economic interests of external stakeholder, such as a broad-based improvement in economic well-being and standard of living”; hence, it is linked with a firm’s contribution to society (Choi and Ng, 2011). In the present study, it emerges that companies are viewed as fundamental actors in ensuring community well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). Respondents identified the importance of satisfying the needs of both end-user and employee. Some studies have already analyzed employee well-being and/or its connection with consumer well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Sharma *et al.*, 2016; Huang and Lin, 2020). Moreover, interviewees enlightened the relevance of internal and external communication and seen service providers as drivers of innovation. Even the firms themselves recognize that their legitimacy and competitiveness is based on stakeholders’ expectations about the company’s commitment to sustainability (Lubin and Esty, 2010; Murphy *et al.*, 2013). Authors classified the previous concepts in the *service provider’s role* theme, and in accordance with the literature analyzed (Lubin and Esty, 2010; Sheth *et al.*, 2011; Choi and Ng, 2011; Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Murphy *et al.*, 2013), it was grouped in the *economic transformation dimension*.

To synthesize the presented findings, a conceptual model is proposed in Figure 1. In accordance with Anderson *et al.* (2013), the analysis of consumers’ perceptions confirmed the

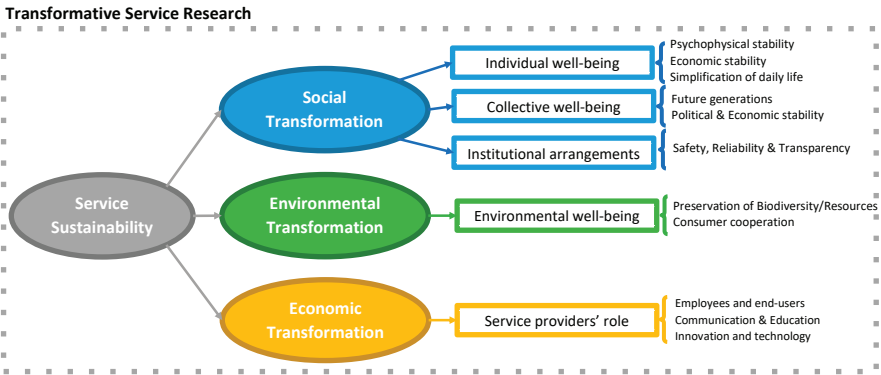


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework
explaining customers’
perceptions of services’
contribution to
transformation

existence of a strong relationship between service sustainability and fostering TSR. Service sustainability emerged as the fundamental characteristic determining the ability of the service to be transformative and to have an impact on the well-being (Ostrom *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, the results highlight that service sustainability integrates the TBL, namely social, environmental and economic dimensions, to achieve the well-being. The three dimensions elucidate the spheres in which the transformation should be expressed.

Social transformation describes the need to pursue both individual and collective well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2013) with service provision. Furthermore, services must be provided following the principles of safety, reliability and transparency, consistent with institutional arrangements (Edvardsson and Enquist, 2009, 2011; Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Di Pietro *et al.*, 2018). Environmental transformation is characterized by the ability of the service to guarantee environmental well-being, through preservation of resources and invitations for citizens to act to reduce their impact (Goodland, 1995; Lozano, 2008; Pawłowski, 2008; Morelli, 2011; Guyader *et al.*, 2019).

Economic transformation refers to service providers' ability to innovate the service provision by introducing new sustainable technologies and take care of both workers and end-users, by educating them and fostering sustainable development (SD) (Lubin and Esty, 2010; Sheth *et al.*, 2011; Choi and Ng, 2011; Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Murphy *et al.*, 2013; Sharma *et al.*, 2016; Huang and Lin, 2020).

Conclusion and implications

Services dominate the economies of the world and can create serious environmental impact (Bitner and Brown, 2008; Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Nasr and Fisk, 2019). Since TSR has been identified as a research priority (Ostrom *et al.*, 2010, 2015) and service sustainability has been appointed as the most significant well-being-related sub-topic (Ostrom *et al.*, 2015), we have responded to the call to broaden this field and contribute to understanding and exploring issues related to the well-being (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011; Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Anderson and Ostrom, 2015). The present research contributes to the knowledge base in TSR by developing an empirical study and explaining the consumer's perspective of the relationship between services, service providers' activities and well-being.

First, the present research identifies healthcare, transport and financial services as the services which, from the consumer's point of view, have the strongest impact on well-being. Second, the present paper contributes to the existing literature by proposing a conceptual framework aimed at elucidating how services foster the transformation to contribute to the well-being. A relationship between TSR and the TBL emerges in the study, specifically which respondents believed service sustainability to be the main aspect that could influence consumer well-being, particularly in the three transformative dimensions defined by the TBL: social, environmental and economic.

Moreover, the study supports the progress of the 2030 Agenda by contributing to SDG 12 "Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns" by emphasizing the pivotal importance attributed by consumers to service sustainability in promoting well-being.

In addition, the present research suggests some practical implications. Our research has shown that, from the consumer's viewpoint, service providers play a fundamental role in ensuring sustainability and well-being. Respondents seem to attribute to organizations a heavy responsibility for the effects of their activities on society's welfare. Therefore, industries should be careful about the impact of their actions and find ways to communicate their commitment to sustainable development (SD) and the 2030 Agenda. Accordingly, for companies, it becomes crucial to implement strategies that suitably direct their actions, maximizing the organization's positive impact while minimizing its negative impact on stakeholders and the environment. In the consumer's mind, innovation and technology could

both contribute to alleviating the consequences of human activities on the environment and the community. For this reason, policymakers, companies and citizens should collaborate in identifying new tools and strategies to ensure a more sustainable society. In addition, the interviewees stressed the duty of the government to guarantee safe and transparent services. Therefore, policymakers should strive to develop regulations to control companies' activities and ensure proper service provision. Finally, governments could also launch awareness-raising campaigns to help the population fully understand their role in achieving the common goal that is human well-being.

This analysis was developed before the global health emergency caused by the spread of the COVID-19 disease and, in our opinion, the pandemic has made even more evident the imperative to understand how to improve and contribute to human welfare. COVID-19 has undoubtedly shown that all humans and nations are interconnected, forcing us to rethink ways of living and consuming.

Limitations and future research

This exploratory qualitative research study contributes to existing knowledge with the proposal of a conceptual framework that provides a theoretical lens for conducting future research and further investigations. Despite this, as with all empirical research, the present study has certain limitations. First, the research involves only one country. Thus, future research should extend the study to a larger sample selected from different geographical areas to understand if the vision of the relationship between services and well-being changes from group to group in different social contexts. Second, the study adopted a qualitative method to inform theory and provide a lens for further investigations. Accordingly, future research should continue the analysis by adopting quantitative methods for testing the model. Moreover, future research should investigate whether consumers in other countries identify different services where the relationship between service and well-being plays a major role. For example, there could be different views regarding transport services in different cities. In future research, it may be profitable to explore fully the reasons behind consumers' perceptions of service sustainability as the most significant feature in making a service transformative. In addition, the analysis was carried out before COVID-19 emergency so future research should explore if and how consumers' viewpoints have changed. Finally, future research should also focus on investigating service providers' perspectives and the entrepreneur's point of view regarding the transformative role of services.

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