Guest editorial: Emerging fields in service research

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609

Emerging fields in service research

Some noteworthy characteristics of service research

Right from the start, researchers on service were characterized as risk-takers (Fisk *et al.*, 1993). One reason for this is that service researchers have been known for their good relationship with practitioners and their interdisciplinary approach. Another is that service researchers seem to frequently start out from problems and challenges that organizations experience, rather than the other way around, spotting a research gap and trying to carve out and fit in an academic article. The goal is and has always been to conduct research that matters, which is also reflected in the research selected for this special issue.

The most significant characteristic of research on service is that it always focuses on the human perspective. It involves understanding humans, individuals, consumers, patients, citizens, users or whatever term is used to describe the people benefiting from organizations. For example, service research has revolved around how important satisfied customers are for a firm (e.g. Zahorik and Rust, 1993); how important frontline employees are for firm performance (e.g. Sasser *et al.*, 1997), how customers provide insights to firms on what to offer (e.g. Kristensson *et al.*, 2004), how to manage customers and form relationships with them (e.g. Grönroos, 1995), how quality in service is perceived (e.g. Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985, 1988), how to recover when a service has failed (Tax *et al.*, 1998) and more recently, how service can improve well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). All of these studies have focused on the human aspect of doing business. Service research has evolved over time and new complexities have been added, such as the growth of technology (e.g. Parasuraman and Colby, 2001), robots (e.g. Wirtz *et al.*, 2018), being a more inclusive society with research at the bottom of the pyramid (e.g. Gebauer and Reynoso, 2013) and the treatment of minorities (Bone *et al.*, 2014); however, the *core* remains understanding how to best serve humans.

Based on research (e.g. Mende and Noble, 2019), we predict that the human side will become even more important in the future and we may even move into what has been referred to as the “feeling economy” (Huang *et al.*, 2019). With more digital solutions that are becoming part of our world (e.g. the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence (AI)-based services and robots), the need to understand how humans feel, think and behave is likely to grow to become even more important in the future. This would be a major challenge for researchers in general, but especially for researchers active in service. It is even more clear now during the pandemic outbreak we are facing during 2020; we have to constantly remind ourselves what it is to be human.

We claim that service is a large part of being a human as it is to a large degree what we fill our lives doing. The origin of the word service is to offer “a helpful act”, and it later became connected to “provision of food”, but also “labor performed or undertaken for another” (etymonline.com/word/service). In present times, we assist someone who needs help and try to make their life better. As customers, we interact with companies of different kinds. As citizens, we drive children to school, fill out forms and interact with governmental agencies. We also take care of our parents or stay informed about the current norms of society, thus ensuring that patients in healthcare can return to health again soon. As employees, we serve other people, both within and outside our organization. We also collaborate with our neighbors, sharing cars and tools to enable a greener and better society. The underlying logic is that a human understanding is needed in order to help humans

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to receive what can broadly be defined as a better experience. Service cannot happen without knowledge about humans; closely related to that is humanity, which is needed in order for a society to function.

Early on, [Fisk et al. \(1993\)](#) identified service encounters, customer experiences and service design, as prominent research streams. It is notable that these areas are still active (as of 2020) and still generate a lot of interest, and can even be said to have been revitalized. Customer experience is important because everything around us always comes with an experience and thus it is part of what makes us human. We simply cannot avoid experiencing and having impressions. Companies have always been interested in walking in the shoes of their customers for the purpose of understanding the experience and to tailor offerings to customer's specific needs, and eventually creating, or designing, what they believe might pave the way for a unique customer encounter and ultimately customer experience.

At present, individuals reveal a large part of their lives through social media, enabling companies to understand online behavior and thereby propose tailoring experiences based on choices we previously made. The next frontier in this process, if we are willing to accept it, is to better understand off-line behavior in a similar way. It is possible to understand, to some degree, how and why customers behave the way they do using such technologies as tracking devices such as facial readers, eye-trackers and sociometers ([Verhulst et al., 2019](#)). These technologies all aim to accomplish service innovation in our society. For instance, enabling new ways to better stay healthy, keep connected, sustain our climate and, essentially, live a better life in a better world. One example during the coronavirus outbreak, bluetooth-based solutions were developed that track potential contagion patterns and trace people who could potentially carry the infection for the purpose of stopping the spread (<https://helsenorge.no/coronavirus/smittestopp>). Then again, these devices can also be used for purposes that may not be in our best interests. An example is China's implementation of new technology for the purpose of correcting their citizens' behavior ([Ma, 2018](#)). We have to remember that once these technologies are rolled out they may never be rolled back again. Consequently, we do need critical thinking here as to what we would like to see. We do not believe that companies develop these solutions for the purpose of spying with evil intent, but we always have to be on the look-out for misuse.

During the last decade the service field has progressed from a traditional research approach, where an infinite number of variables have been investigated related to profit, to also embrace research that supports ways to improve society. American Marketing Association is promoting this type of research to a large degree and we do find contribution on this area in this special issue. Another such initiative that has received support among service researchers and is growing globally is Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM). RRBM seeks to promote research that enhances knowledge on poverty alleviation; access to food, clean water and education; sustainable consumption and responsible use of natural resources; greater gender and social equality; inclusion; growing prosperity; fair wealth distribution; and a responsible and resilient financial sector (<https://www.rrbm.network>). We predict that this will impact the type of research that will be large on service research. Consequently, we look forward to seeing service research in areas such as how Agenda 2030 will become a reality, how more citizens can experience the benefits of digital healthcare and recover more quickly; how marginalized groups can make their voices heard; and how segregation and polarization in our society can be decreased, leading to an overall increase in well-being.

Reflections on openness and innovation in service research

Services started out as a niche field, with the underlying thought that services are different from goods (e.g. [Shostack, 1977](#)). Since then, service research has been an unusually open,

welcoming and inclusive field, with a strong belief that it needs to be interdisciplinary. This idea simply based on the idea that service is something that cuts across all disciplines and should be important to all industry or public organizations, regardless of country and context (Gustafsson and Bowen, 2017). This is part of the reason why service, as research area, remains vibrant, vital and growing 50 years after it started (Fisk *et al.*, 1993, indicated that the field started around the 1960s).

In a vibrant and vital research group, the focus of research shifts as it matures and evolves. Initially service research paid a lot of attention to what was considered a service and what was not. With the current situation in almost all countries, where all businesses in any sector compete on service, it makes little sense to treat service as a special case; all businesses are essentially service businesses. This has led to the active and influential research stream that views service as the dominant logic of how organizations manage their business (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

Service research as a discipline does not have many theoretical frameworks that we truly can call our own as we all tend to borrow from other areas. However, service logic (emanating from the Nordic school) – or service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) – is a recent very strong theoretical concepts we can claim to our field. New theoretical concepts, frameworks and models that challenge the tradition is a form of innovation within academia. It is perhaps one of the toughest of innovation challenges, as many academics have shown a stubborn tendency to cling tight to previously published research articles and thereby avoid adopting new ways to perceive or describe our world. Such behavior is not positive because, at a general level, good theory helps advance new knowledge, guides research toward important questions and enlightens practice outside academia (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2016). Thus, we need innovative attempts so we can retain our dominant position. Therefore, we hope that research on service logic, service dominant logic or any other new innovative theoretical initiative will survive the challenge and expand through trials of verification and validation. In turn, we hope that this research will eventually become useful for practitioners, with its own chapters in standard business or societal introduction textbooks, just as other concepts have been. We also hope that service research will have a greater impact in general, if for not else, it focuses on what being human is.

The importance of a network

It is traditional within academia to allow researchers to present and debate their ongoing work at academic conferences and other types of open network constellations. These events are opportunities not only to present new ideas but also to provide platforms to develop the field and form new ideas on what is beneficial to be developed. Conferences are also a forum for trend-spotting and understanding what problems researchers are trying to solve. At a more individual level, conferences represent a context that spawns new research collaborations and where researchers come together and work to make progress on their research. The friendly and caring relationships among researchers have provided a foundation for researchers to share ideas. Conferences have always been especially important to service researchers as the topic, at least in its early days, was not considered a smart career path for an up-and-coming scholar. Consequently, it was a safe place to express novel and untested ideas and find new collaboration opportunities.

One of the longest running conferences in service research is Quality in Service (QUIS). The QUIS conference was established in 1988 by Bo Edvardsson, Evert Gummesson, both representing Karlstad University, and Stephen Brown from the Arizona State University and it was held for the 16th time in Karlstad in 2019. QUIS16 was attended by close to 300 participants from around the globe. As all the founders of the conference have recently retired or are close to retiring, the organizers of QUIS felt it appropriate to celebrate by having many

of the most influential researchers in the field at the conference. We asked them to look forward by looking back to the start of service research, and much of what came out is the result of what we have discussed above. The plenary presenters, many of whom participated at the first QUIS conference, included Mary Jo Bitner, Leonard Berry, Ruth Bolton, David Bowen, Roderick Brodie, Stephen Brown, Lawrence Crosby, Bo Edvardsson, Ray Fisk, Christian Grönroos, Evert Gummesson, A. Parasuraman, Stephen Vargo and Valerie Zeithaml. These presentations are available on YouTube at the Service Research Center's channel (CTF Service Research Center at Karlstad University – QUIS16 June 10–13, 2019).

This special issue

The papers that are included in this special issue were considered representative of what are regarded as upcoming novel areas, but also some areas that presently have a lot of research activity. They were selected based on quality, novelty and as a display of variation in the field. From the last QUIS16 we noted several pieces of research that rendered interest, but were also the result of novel and creative initiatives. As you will see, these areas include how the collaborative and sharing economy can help create sustainability, and an area or research that previously has not been covered: luxury services. We also see a great focus on customer experience, a concept that has expanded beyond the definition stage to the contextualization stage.

As previously mentioned, a lot of research focuses on aspects of human well-being, which is why we found it natural to select two papers on this area. The first paper, and the introduction to this special issue, is titled “*Elevating the Human Experience (HX) Through Service Research Collaborations: Introducing ServCollab*” (Fisk *et al.*, 2020). The purpose of this article is to introduce a service collaboration effort called ServCollab, which is supported by a large number of service researchers. The general idea is to collaborate in order to reduce human suffering and improve human well-being. ServCollab seeks to raise the aspirations of service researchers, expand the skills of service research teams and build mutually collaborative service research approaches that transform human lives.

The second paper, “*The transformative service paradox: The dilemma of wellbeing trade-offs*” (Russell–Bennett *et al.*, 2020), nuances the well-being debate and concludes that well-being is itself a multidimensional concept. The norm is to assume that all dimensions are equally important but in reality, they may not be. The paper develops a new framework that identifies the paradox of competing well-being dimensions for both individuals and others in society in order to show the complexity of well-being.

The special issue also contains what can be seen as emerging areas of research: research on luxury services and research on collaborative economy. These are areas that we judge are growing in research interest or have not been on our radar before. *Luxury services* (Wirtz *et al.*, 2018) is an area that has not previously been in focus in service research. The purpose of this article is to define luxury service and develop the theoretical and conceptual foundations for luxury services. The article also shows how luxury services differ from both luxury goods and from ordinary (that is, nonluxury) services, and highlights how customer behavior differs on different key service characteristics for luxury services compared to luxury goods.

The paper entitled “*Two-directional convergence of platform and pipeline business models*” (Wirtz *et al.*, 2018) contributes to the research on platform businesses (such as Uber and Airbnb) and their underlying business models. The paper assumes that pipeline businesses (linear series of activities and network effects-driven platforms) take a series of different paths which is conceptualized in the contribution. The focus is on business models for different types of platform businesses.

Finally, the special issue contains three papers on customer experience: two related to understanding customer experience in relation to technology and one that dives deeper into

the interplay of goals with customer experience. *Understanding the customer experiences of smart services* (Gonçalves *et al.*) addresses how technology impacts customer experience. As technology becomes more complex, or smart, it involves some decision support and can act on information. Customer experience with smart services typically involves a vast array of interactions with multiple actors, such as service providers, technology artifacts and other customers, which in turn enable different kinds of activities and interactions, from transactions to social information sharing.

AI feel you: customer experience assessment via chatbox interviews (Sidaoui, Jaakkola and Burton) addresses artificial intelligence as an emerging area that we know little about, but that we believe is promising. The research can be seen as a case study for the purpose of understanding how to use AI to understand customer experience while communication with technology. The research helps us understand what happens when customers interact with technology, which happens frequently now and will occur even more in the future.

Finally, *Toward a goal-oriented view of customer journeys* (Becker, Jaakkola and Halinen) builds on the notion that most of the customer experience research has focused on the firm or product, rather than what a customer wants to accomplish and the underlying mechanisms in this process. In doing so, the authors also take a more comprehensive and complex approach and add cognitive and behavioral processes into the analysis. The research also adds to the transformative service research area in that it applies customer journey approaches to an important context: making a significant change in life – in this case, recovery from alcoholism.

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