

SDG commentary: services that provide opportunity for all humans

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper is part of the Special Issue series Improving Life on Planet Earth – A Call to Action for Service Research to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). This paper aims to provide the groundwork for Service Research Theme 2 – services that provide OPPORTUNITY for all humans. Service Research Theme 2 comprises SDG4, quality education; SDG5, gender equality; and SDG10, reduced inequalities and seeks to mobilize ServCollab's aspirations to reduce human suffering, improve human well-being and enable well-becoming.

Design/methodology/approach – A scoping review appraising existing service research related to SDG4, SDG5 and SDG10 was conducted, establishing interlinkages, identifying patterns within each SDG and then assembling a research agenda for service researchers.

Findings – The scoping review identifies 18 patterns in service research (six patterns per SDG) pertaining to Service Research Theme 2. Common patterns among the SDG4, SDG5 and SDG10 included underrepresentation, consumer-centricity, the absence of explicit SDG linkages, the predominance of one theoretical anchor and the preference for quantitative studies, particularly surveys. Overall, the scoping review found that service research related to Service Research Theme 2 is patchy in that it is overdeveloped in some topics, methodologies and methods yet underdeveloped or silent in others.

Originality/value – The high-level research problem of Service Research Theme 2 is as follows: How have services provided OPPORTUNITY for all humans? This paper analyzes patterns in service research and, from these patterns, assembles a research agenda that sparks and guides further research.

Keywords Education (SDG 4), Gender equity (SDG 5), Inequalities (SDG 10), Service Research Theme 2

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In this article, we provide the groundwork for Service Research Theme 2 – services that provide OPPORTUNITY for all humans (Figure 1). Service Research Theme 2 comprises the following Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG4, quality education; SDG5, gender equality; and SDG10, reduced inequalities. It aims to mobilize ServCollab's aspirations to reduce human suffering, improve human well-being and enable well-becoming. We conducted a scoping review that appraised existing service research related to SDG4, SDG5 and SDG10, identified interlinkages and assembled a research agenda for service researchers.

Sustainable Development Goals overview

Adopted by the member nations in 2015, the SDGs are a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the

planet, now and into the future (United Nations, 2023). There are 17 SDGs that can be examined individually or together, which the United Nations (UN) recommends to better reflect real-world contexts, progress knowledge and broaden solutions (United Nations, 2023). Service Research Theme 2 focuses on the interlinkages between SDG4, SDG5 and SDG10, encompassing services that provide OPPORTUNITY for all humans. The Web Appendix summarizes each SDG's targets, indicators and means of implementation.

SDG4, quality education, seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. SDG4 recognizes the critical role that education plays in creating a peaceful and prosperous world by giving people the knowledge and skills they need for employment, to stay healthy and foster tolerance. SDG4 refers to formal education systems such as schools and universities, with students from ethnic minorities, low socioeconomic backgrounds, remote areas, with disabilities and women and girls identified as priority groups, who are less likely to have opportunities to access and experience uninterrupted and resourced quality education.

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Figure 1 Service research themes



Source: Russell-Bennett *et al.* (2023)

SDG5, gender equality, seeks to empower all women and girls. SDG5 recognizes that gender equality is a fundamental human right. While women and girls represent half the world's population, they are still unequally represented in leadership, perform a disproportionate share of unpaid work, are victims of cultural practices and biases, continuously experience physical and sexual violence and are primarily deprived of access to education and health care, leading to higher mortality rates. Advancing gender equality is critical to all areas of a healthy and inclusive society, as its implications are not limited to women and girls but to all humanity.

SDG10, reduced inequalities, seeks to promote equality of opportunity and outcomes for all regardless of location and ensure equal access to essential services such as health, education and social protection, both within and among countries. SDG10 acknowledges that disparities and marginalization within countries based on income, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, religion and opportunities, inhibit long-term social and economic development and are major obstacles to sustainable development. Tackling discrimination can be realized by focusing on the needs of disadvantaged and marginalized communities within and among countries. SDG10 seeks to promote a more just and balanced world.

Assembling Service Research Theme 2

The SDGs are interlinked (United Nations, 2023). The UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development's 2022 review of SDG4 established the interlinkage with SDG5

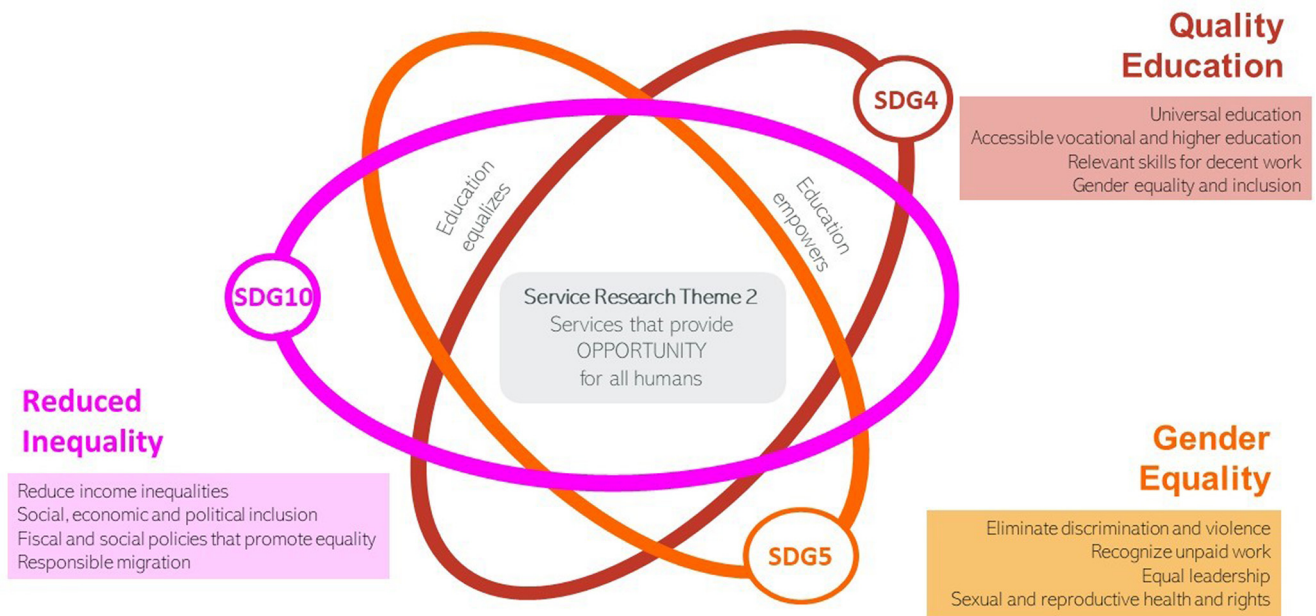
noting that "greater efforts were needed to support women and girls through education, employment, and empowerment to tackle gender inequality" (UNHLPF, 2022, p. 6). Furthermore, a review of UN reports by Naidoo (2016) for the UNESCO Technical Cooperation Group identified interlinkages with SDG10, reduced inequalities, stating that education is an inequality equalizer with almost all SDG4 targets connected to SDG10 targets. Our proposed Service Opportunities Framework for Service Research Theme 2 is presented in Figure 2.

Together, SDG4, SDG5 and SDG10 are powerful, enabling transformation that improves well-being and enables well-becoming (ServCollab Goal 3), as a well-educated population free of gender imbalance neutralizes inequalities, and provides the OPPORTUNITY (Service Research Theme 2) for upward socioeconomic mobility and the expansion of human capabilities to tackle contemporary global challenges (ESCAP, 2023; UNHLPF, 2022; Naidoo, 2016).

Scoping review

Methodology

A scoping review of services research examined how research related to Service Research Theme 2 has been conducted to identify and analyze knowledge gaps and clarify key concepts in the literature, as per Munn *et al.* (2018). The methodology outlined in the associated editorial by Russell-Bennett *et al.* (2023) was adhered to. Searches used predefined keywords and were limited to predefined service journals selected by the editorial team. Once the searches were complete, duplicates

Figure 2 Service opportunities framework

Source: Authors' own work

were removed and exclusion criteria were applied to identify eligible articles (SDG4 $n = 88$ articles; SDG5 $n = 49$ articles; SDG10 $n = 30$ articles). Details are provided in the Web Appendix. The Web Appendix also includes the findings, discussion and conclusions for each SDG in full, with an abridged summary in this article.

SDG4 findings and discussion

Six patterns were identified in SDG4-related service research:

- 1 underrepresentation;
- 2 student-focused;
- 3 higher education-centric;
- 4 public education predominance;
- 5 no explicit SDG linkage; and
- 6 theory and method preferences.

A precis of each pattern follows.

In terms of underrepresentation (Pattern 1), SDG4-related articles ($n = 89$) were less likely to be published in high-ranked (SCImago Journal Rank Q1 [1]) service research journals (Q2–Q4 = 53, 60.2%), reflecting an unfavorable view of education services and the systematic neglect of education context-specific research by high-ranked journals (Stremersch *et al.*, 2022; Wilkinson, 2015). Thus, the value of education as a transformative service that provides opportunities for all humans is yet to be fully realized. There was an overall upward trend in SDG4-related articles over time (1994 $n = 1$, 2022 $n = 13$); however, this will need to be accelerated to advance the SDG 2030 agenda. Of the 89 articles, 26 (29.5%) included data from the Global South (e.g. Amani, 2022), with a noticeable increase in Global South articles since 2020. Increased representation of Global South articles from a wider variety of countries is needed to establish a more comprehensive understanding of SG4.

Students were the focus of over two-thirds ($n = 60$, 67.4%; e.g. Noh *et al.*, 2021) of the articles (Pattern 2). Students are likely to have been the population of interest in most cases; however, there is also the possibility that student samples were selected due to the accessibility of the sample for service researchers and the population size that enables larger sample sizes needed for the predominantly quantitative studies. To progress SDG4, service researchers need to garner the perspectives of a greater range of stakeholders, including employers, education leaders and the general public.

Most articles focused on higher education ($n = 84$, 94.4%; e.g. Lee *et al.*, 2022) (Pattern 3). Like Pattern 2, this may be due to sample accessibility and/or the need for large samples for quantitative studies. While SDG4 encompasses all levels of education, the SDG targets emphasize pre-primary, primary and secondary education. Service researchers need to move outside their higher education comfort zone to make a meaningful impact regarding SDG4.

Public education services provided by governments are featured in around half of the articles ($n = 42$, 47.7%; Tan *et al.*, 2019) (Pattern 4). The education service context was visible in most articles' titles and abstracts ($n = 85$, 96.6%; e.g. Fine *et al.*, 2016). The predominance of public education aligns with SDG4. The visibility of the education service context is advantageous, and service researchers are encouraged to use keywords to signal alignment with the SDGs (e.g. state "SDG4" or "Service Research Theme 2").

The SDGs came into effect on January 1, 2016. No articles published after this date explicitly mention SDG4 or SDGs in general (Pattern 5). The SDG predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals, is not mentioned, nor are any other global intergovernmental organizations. Consequently, there was no mention of SDG4 targets or indicators; however, while not explicitly stated, "the environment" (SDG4 Means 4a), was

dominant in the 19 articles (21.6%; e.g. [Eszter Tóth et al., 2013](#)) focusing on service quality. These findings suggest the presence of context myopia among SDG4 service researchers who are unaware of or undervalue the centrality of education on the global agenda.

Lastly, the most frequently cited framework underpinning most educational articles was service quality ($n = 18$, 20.5%; e.g. [Chanaka Ushantha and Kumara, 2016](#)), followed by customer satisfaction ($n = 8$, 12.5%; e.g. [Kruja et al., 2021](#)) and total quality management/assurance/standards ($n = 8$, 12.5%; e.g. [Lycke and Tano, 2017](#)) (Pattern 6). Quantitative questionnaires were the preferred method of data collection ($n = 55$; 62.5%; e.g. [Németh and Deák-Zsótér, 2022](#)). From these findings, there is a pressing need to expand the assortment of service frameworks and theories used (e.g. customer engagement or service ecosystems) as well as methodologies (e.g. action research) and methods (e.g. co-design).

SDG5 findings and discussion

Six patterns were identified in SDG5-related service research:

- 1 Global North predominance;
- 2 perspective of both male and female sexes (cis-gender view);
- 3 service encounter stages;
- 4 retail sector centric;
- 5 gender differences focus; and
- 6 disciplinary insularity and limited methodologies.

SDG5-related articles are published in most of the service journals. However, the overall number of articles remains relatively small ($n = 49$), although there was an overall upward trend in SDG5 articles over time (1992 $n = 1$, 2021 $n = 7$), particularly since 2016. Nonetheless, more SDG5 service research is needed to accelerate progress. Of the 49 articles, 35 (90%) included data from the Global North (Pattern 1) mostly from the USA ($n = 18$, 37%; e.g. [Lee et al., 2013](#)). What is particularly noticeable is that only a few articles ($n = 8$, 16%) originated from Asia (e.g. [Lin et al., 2008](#)). No articles featured Arab States, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, which according to the Gender Equality Index ([GII, 2023](#)) suffer from the highest Gender Inequality dimensions.

Most articles took the perspective of both male and female sexes denoting cis-gender identity ($n = 46$, 93.8%) (Pattern 2), with only one article focusing on women and girls ([Gurrieri and Drenten, 2019](#)). To progress SDG5 targets and indicators, more work should focus on expressing in-depth female perspectives and experiences.

Most articles addressed differences in shopping preferences and behaviors among genders. These articles could be placed in three categories:

- 1 pre-service (e.g. [Singh et al., 2022](#));
- 2 during-service (e.g. [Rod et al., 2016](#)); and
- 3 post-service encounter (e.g. [Ryu, 2020](#)) gender differences (Pattern 3).

In the pre-service category, gender differences concerning shopping platform choice, task allocation and decision-making were prominent. In the during-service encounter category, articles explored front-line employee relatedness and service delivery. In the post-encounter category, studies focused on how different genders evaluate the service encounter through satisfaction, service quality,

engagement and loyalty. The predominance of shopping behavior-related topics speaks to the relatively superficial approach to studying gender equality in service research, as the purpose is to study how different genders make decisions and go through service rather than how different genders are treated during a service encounter. Service researchers are encouraged to expand their topics of inquiry to address SDG5 more purposefully. For example, gender-based service roles and nonmonetary service work undertaken by women.

Most articles focused on the private service industry ($n = 48$, 98%; e.g. [Luo et al., 2021](#)) with an overarching emphasis on the retail sector (Pattern 4). No article openly addressed policies or legislation concerning gender equality in service.

Given that most of the articles used gender to “differentiate” (e.g. behaviors, preferences) between genders rather than “unite” genders (Pattern 5), it is not surprising that no articles mention SDG5. Consequently, there was no mention of SDG5 targets or indicators. These findings suggest either service researchers’ ignorance of gender inequality in service, or an inherent discomfort in addressing sensitive topics. This trend could be turned around with the assistance of journal editors and organizations such as ServCollab, ServSig, and the American Marketing Association advocating for research addressing these gaps.

Several service frameworks and concepts were used to underpin the research (e.g. service quality, service loyalty, satisfaction, complaint behavior and attitude formations). Methodologically, quantitative questionnaires were preferred ($n = 34$, 87%) (Pattern 6). These findings show the need to expand the assortment of theories used by adopting an interdisciplinary approach and investigating established gender theories (e.g. [Fredrickson and Roberts \(1997\)](#) Objectification Theory) from other fields (e.g. gender studies, women studies) and journals (e.g. *Journal of Gender Studies* and *Gender and Society*). Similarly, methodologies that help explore and analyze the specific experiences of women and girls are encouraged and methods such as service design, diary studies and ethnographies are needed to ensure a broader contribution to the domain.

SDG10 findings and discussion

Six patterns were identified in SDG10-related service research:

- 1 recent and in high ranked publications;
- 2 Global North predominance;
- 3 consumer retail centric;
- 4 transformative Service Research approach and quantitative method preference;
- 5 country-specific focus; and
- 6 emphasis on inclusion and ending discrimination.

The scoping review of the literature relating to SDG10 highlights the growing focus in this space. In total, 29 of the 30 articles (96.7%) have been published in SCImago Q1-ranked services journals with 13 articles (43.3%) published between 2021 and 2023 (Pattern 1). None of the articles mentions SDG10 or SDGs broadly, but all address reducing inequalities.

Most articles had a Global North perspective with the highest representation from the USA ($n = 7$; e.g. [Edwards et al., 2018](#)) (Pattern 2). A recent article with a comparative study using data from the USA and Australia ([Fisk et al., 2022](#)) was the only SDG10-related article with an across-country investigation. Future service research could address inclusion across countries to develop global perspectives and solutions.

Consumers are the focal perspective taken with the research to date with 47% ($n = 14$) of the articles addressing the consumers' view, most within retail contexts ($n = 10$, 33%; e.g. [Dodds and Palakshappa, 2022](#)) (Pattern 3). There is an opportunity for more SDG10-related research examining multiple service sectors like [Ali et al. \(2022\)](#), to help provide a holistic investigation into reducing inequities rather than a siloed approach which may not necessarily provide the full scope of insight into inequality.

Four articles were conceptual (13.3%; e.g. [Finsterwalder et al., 2021](#)), and of the remaining, there was a preference for quantitative investigations ($n = 10$, 33.3%; e.g. [Kralj et al., 2019](#)) mostly in the form of surveys ($n = 6$, 20%) (Pattern 4). The dominant conceptual paradigm was Transformative Service Research ($n = 10$, 33.3%; [Dickson and Darcy, 2016](#)), often combined with other bodies of literature, including consumer vulnerability, well-being and co-creation. Other conceptual domains included service inclusion ([Fisk et al., 2022](#)) and disability identity and agency ([Dodds and Palakshappa, 2022](#)) (Pattern 4). The prevalence of frameworks, theories and conceptual domains focusing on inclusion and diversity aligns with SDG10's targets of promoting universal social, economic and political inclusion (SDG10.2) and ensuring equal opportunities and an end to discrimination (SDG10.3).

The scoping review revealed a country-specific focus (Pattern 5). In total, 25 articles (83.3%) addressed within-country perspectives. While it could be argued that if the research was generalizable, the findings could be applied across countries; however, several of the research findings were focused on specific elements of countries. For example, [Davey et al. \(2021\)](#) investigated religious charities in Zambia, and [Meshram and Venkatraman \(2022\)](#) examined caste-based discrimination within microlending in India. These articles contribute to ensuring equal opportunities and ending discrimination within these nations (SDG10.3); however, there is still much more work needed to ensure equality between nations and people.

Helping to contribute knowledge to the SDG targets though did emerge through the alignment with specific targets. Although no article mentioned specifically SDG10 or even SDGs, the article topics did align with areas relating to the targets such as inclusion (SDG10.2) and ending discrimination (SDG10.3) (Pattern 6). In total, 13 articles (43%) focused on aspects of inclusion including broad aspects of service inclusion ($n = 5$, 16.6%; e.g. [Edwards et al., 2018](#)) and disability inclusion ($n = 2$, 6%; e.g. [Dickson and Darcy, 2016](#)). In total, 13 articles (43%) focused on drawing attention to ending discrimination specifically, age, gender, culture, sexual orientation and weight (e.g. [Quach et al., 2017](#)). Issues relating to migration (SDG target 10.7) were addressed in one article by [Finsterwalder et al. \(2021\)](#).

Research agenda for service research theme 2

The purpose of this article is to provide the groundwork for Service Research Theme 2, which comprises SDG4, SDG5 and SDG10 and seeks to mobilize ServCollab's aspirations of reducing human suffering, improving human well-being and enabling well-becoming. The high-level research problem of Service Research Theme 2 is *How have services provided*

OPPORTUNITY for all humans? Our scoping review identified 18 patterns in related service research that we have assembled as a research agenda.

SDG4 scoping review conclusions and research agenda

Two overarching conclusions arose from the findings related to SDG4. First, service researchers sought to uplift university students' experiences by identifying areas of institutional underperformance. Second, service researchers sought insights into the relationship students have with their education service provider to improve educational outcomes. Overall, the SDG4 scoping review revealed many silences and gaps in the literature which translates into opportunities for service researchers to more fully embrace SDG4, consciously framing their research to achieve the stated targets by examining a wider range of countries and levels of education using an expanded assortment of theories, methodologies and methods. Guided by the scoping review, the following research questions are offered for service researchers:

- RQ1. What are the points of parity and points of difference of educational institutions that have advanced SDG4 Targets in the Global North and the Global South?
- RQ2. How and why do relationships between educators and students in pre-primary, primary, secondary and vocational education improve educational outcomes such as literacy, numeracy, critical and creative thinking, academic achievement, skill development and completion rates?
- RQ3. How can commercial education services effectively communicate the value of their offerings to diverse student populations, particularly those from marginalized communities?
- RQ4. How can education services foster greater collaboration and partnership with other stakeholders, such as employers, policymakers and community organizations, to promote lifelong learning opportunities and encourage individuals from diverse and marginalized backgrounds to continue to invest in their education over time?

SDG5 scoping review conclusions and research agenda

Conclusions drawn from the findings of the SDG5 scoping review indicate that the current stock of knowledge is incomplete. Service researchers appear to have a limited understanding of gender inequality and gender studies broadly, and typically use gender (namely, cis-gender) in superficial terms as a demographic segmentation variable. Service researchers are falling short in addressing SDG5. There is an opportunity to reverse this trend and progress SDG5 in a manner that expands the current boundaries of the service research field. Service research that examines gender fluidity, for example, is needed. Drawing on these conclusions, the following research questions are offered for service researchers:

- RQ5. What and how can service providers actively contribute to ending discrimination against all women and girls?

- RQ6. How do service marketers create organizational cultures and design and implement services that promote ending violence, exploitation and harmful practices against women and girls?
- RQ7. How can the service workplace be redesigned to accommodate the needs of working women, promote women in leadership and ensure a healthy service environment and healthcare access to all women and girls?
- RQ8. How can service providers measure and evaluate their impact on advancing gender equality and promoting women's empowerment within their organizations and the broader community?

SDG10 scoping review conclusions and research agenda

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the findings related to SDG10. First, there is a growing focus within the services domain of research addressing reducing inequalities in high quality services journals. While researchers may not explicitly state a link with SDG10, their research addresses this disparity. Second, the research focuses on country-specific contexts and largely within the retail sector. While this is useful, it would also be advantageous to see this expanding to include more investigations among/between countries and across broader service contexts, and with specific mentioning to SDG10 to guarantee this important research field receives adequate attention. With the SDG10 focus on leaving no one behind, answering the following research questions can help advance service knowledge in this area:

- RQ9. How can researchers ensure that research relating to reducing inequalities within service systems and delivery is generalizable beyond one country and one global location?
- RQ10. How can Transformative Service Initiatives be applied within service ecosystems to reduce inequalities, and what are the key barriers and enablers to their successful implementation in various contexts?
- RQ11. How can service providers in various industries reduce inequalities in access to services and resources, particularly for marginalized and disadvantaged communities?
- RQ12. How can service providers measure and evaluate the impact of their services on reducing inequalities within the broader community?

Service Research Theme 2 conclusions and research agenda

The overarching conclusion drawn from the research is that more needs to be done. It is strongly encouraged that deliberate efforts are made to conceive, progress and manifest sustained OPPORTUNITIES for all humans in service research aligned with SDG4, SDG5 and SDG10. Hence, the following future-focused,

high-level research problem that unifies the three SDGs is proposed.

SRT2-RP. How can services provide *more* OPPORTUNITIES for all humans?

Maintaining this high-level focus and leveraging the commonalities across SDG4, SDG5 and SDG10, the following research questions are suggested:

- RQ13. How can service providers advance educational outcomes for women and girls to reduce inequalities across borders?
- RQ14. How can women be supported through vocational education to ensure equal future opportunities when entering/re-entering the workforce after parental interruptions?
- RQ15. How can novel technology and digital platforms be designed and used to create accessible and flexible educational opportunities for groups experiencing vulnerability, particularly women and girls, thereby contributing to narrowing the digital divide and advancing more inclusive societies?
- RQ16. What innovative approaches and best practices from different regions and countries can be leveraged to improve access to high-quality education for girls and women from underprivileged and marginalized communities, leading to improved social mobility and reduced inequalities?
- RQ17. How can educational institutions better integrate sustainable development principles into their curriculum and research, to empower students and recent graduates to address global challenges collectively?

For easy reference, a consolidated research agenda for Service Research Theme 2 is provided in the Web Appendix.

Summary

This article seeks to spark further research into how services might provide more OPPORTUNITIES for all. Service research has the power to contribute to global agendas that uplift others' quality of life, making research more fulfilling and impactful. Service researchers whose work aligns with Service Research Theme 2 are encouraged to progress the research questions' agenda posed in this article and signal this alignment to like-minded researchers via their selection of keywords (e.g. "SDG4" or "Service Research Theme 2"). Also, dissemination to nonspecialist audiences via blogs, media and free webinars, for example, will ensure that research is accessible to all, including policymakers.

Note

- 1 SCImago Journal & Country Rank (www.scimagojr.com/) is a publicly available portal that includes the journals and country scientific indicators developed from the information in the Scopus® database (Elsevier B.V.). Journals can be compared separately and grouped by subject area (27 major

thematic areas), subject category (309 specific subject categories) or country. Citation data are drawn from over 34,100 titles from more than 5,000 international publishers. The journals are divided into four equal groups, four quartiles, with Q1 comprising the quarter of the journals with the highest values, Q2 the second highest values, Q3 the third highest values and Q4 the lowest values.

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Further reading

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Supplementary materials

The supplementary materials for this article can be found online.

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