Editorial: When service technologies and human experiences intersect

Mark Scott Rosenbaum

Graham School of Management, Saint Xavier University, Chicago, Illinois, USA, and

Rebekah Russell-Bennett

School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to identify future research opportunities that address human–technology service interactions.

Design/methodology/approach – This editorial is based on the author's personal reflections and conceptualizations of ideas from past previous research and theory.

Findings – The authors identify three opportunities for further research on technology and humanity: service technology and social interaction and service technology and societal prosperity.

Research limitations/implications – Service researchers need to realize that topics such as technology, robots, artificial intelligence are not mutually exclusive from topics that seek to improve the human condition, such as transformative service research. We encourage service researchers to explore how digital technologies in service domains impacts consumers, communities, and even, global humanity.

Practical implications – Researchers have guidance on areas in which pioneering theoretical and methodological opportunities abound.

Originality/value – This editorial offers new perspectives on technology and humanity considering the effect of the global pandemic.

Keywords Well-being, Digital, digitalization, Transformative

Paper type Editorial

Introduction

Service researchers appear to be at a crossroads with groups of researchers calling for investigations into two primary areas; these are technology-focused or humanity-focused. By reading through the publications in the major service journals and social media posts, one may surmise that two groups of researchers exist whom are grappling with the overarching topic of human–technology service interactions.

One group of service researchers seek to understand the impact of service industrialization i.e. robotics, artificial intelligence, digital services cloud, big data and biometrics; (Wirtz *et al.*, 2018) on productivity, including the role of technologies on front-line employees and on service industries. In contrast, a second group of service researchers seek to understand how services, service providers, and service ecosystems can work in a manner that reduces human suffering, improve human well-being (Fisk *et al.*, 2020) and transform the human experience (Azzari and Baker, 2020).

Although these two investigatory areas seem to be at opposite ends (technology versus humanity), we suggest that they are not so and in the wake of COVID-19, technology and humanity have come closer than ever. All aspects of services, including technology, still influence individuals, organizations, communities, nations and the planet. Therefore, an integrative approach to understand how technology and humanity intersect.

In this editorial, we give an overview of the need for technology–humanity intersection in services research and then propose three potential areas for future research, particularly considering the global pandemic, that we would like to see at *Journal of Services Marketing*. These three areas are the following: service technologies and human well-being; service technology and social interaction; and service technology and societal prosperity.

An overview of technology and humanity intersection in service research

What is the future of services research? As editors of *the Journal of Services Marketing*, we believe that pioneering theoretical and managerial research opportunities exist to delve into how technology may enhance or alter service productivity, including the potential effects on societal, organizational and customer productivity (both positive and negative). Productivity is typically understood in economic terms and examines the relationship between the use of resources and output (Productivity Commission 2021), when output grows faster than the use of inputs, the result is productivity. However, productivity when viewed through a service lens should also incorporate social and environmental inputs and outputs to go beyond economic indicators. So, this would mean service productivity considers the social and environmental impact of using resources and the social and environmental output.

We recently saw the impact of the novel coronavirus on service productivity whereby organizations were unable to use their resources efficiently and devastating consequences occurred ranging from death to unemployment and a surge in the use of disposable plastics which harm the environment. Technology emerged as a productivity catalyst during this crisis with many service providers, including professional service providers, such as education, real estate and medical service providers, forced to digitize through Web-based and mobile applications. Even when the COVID-19 global pandemic is controlled, many of these digitized services will remain; permanently shifting many services to virtual realms.

The impact of the acceleration in digitized service delivery on service industries, employees, customers, and on societies remains unclear and worthy of future investigations. Indeed, it is doubtful that employment practices and roles in service industries will return to a pre-COVID state, which has public policy implications for reskilling the workforce as many service employees will need retooling for in-demand occupations. Resultantly, we encourage researchers to explore how service technology, including robotics, artificial intelligence and digitization, will permanently alter services to the extent that the discipline's foundational theories and conceptual frameworks may need to be overhauled (Rosenbaum and Russell-Bennett, 2020).

Even though services embody the human experience, from the production and use of, services daily, history has shown that they have often fostered unfairness. This unfairness stems from customers often lacking access to services, systemic bias, customer vulnerability and discrimination during service interactions; essentially fostering "service exclusion" (Fisk *et al.*, 2018). As a response to the realization of service exclusion and to understanding that service research is inextricably linked to the human experience, many service researchers formed the transformative service research paradigm. As a research paradigm, transformative service research focuses on creating uplifting improvements in consumer well-being, via service design, front-line and service provider training, developing service networks that simultaneously work together to relieve, or minimize, consumer suffering that often transpires during service encounters, and so forth (Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2019). Building on the transformative service research foundation, service researchers are also encouraging investigations that expose service's role in the violation of human rights (Fisk *et al.*, 2020), which has been overlooked in the services marketing discipline. Overall, pioneering research opportunities abound in exploring how humanity in general may prosper via an overhaul in services.

Although this discussion seems to support a dichotomization of service research, technology or humanity, we suggest that a relatively unexplored area in services research is the impact of service technologies, such as robotics, augmented reality and digital services, on the human experience, including their roles as customers, employees, parents, managers, public officials and so forth.

Opportunity 1: service technologies and human well-being

Service technologies refer to the electronic delivery of information including data and content across multiple platforms and devices like websites or mobile applications as well as physical devices such as robots, machines and monitoring tools. Prior to COVID-19, digital services, such as e-commerce, fantasy sports, e-books, cloud-based software, websites, streaming music, online entertainment and so forth, were increasingly shifting consumers' consumption experiences from physical to virtual domains. Service researchers' understanding of both positive and negative outcomes associated with digital service technologies, including Web-based and mobile applications, is limited.

Since the onslaught of COVID-19, many educational institutions and organizations have turned to video-conferencing software, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, to deliver classes or host meetings, respectively, while many consumers had to turn to e-commerce due to governmentally forced lockdowns. Although digital service technologies have won many accolades for helping educators through the pandemic, a dark side to these technologies is emerging. That is, issues such as security and privacy threats have arisen in the Zoom application, and researchers are beginning to conceptualize term, "Zoom burnout." Indeed, researchers have long espoused that the human ability to focus on a single stimulus for extended periods and to do so while ignoring competing stimuli requires the use of internal resources that may be depleted with overuse and lead to symptoms associated with mental burnout and fatigue (Kumar *et al.*, 2020). Online streaming, meetings and conferencing may also change the hospitality industry as pundits have forewarned that the success of video conferencing will be the demise of business travel and thus of business hotels (Suau-Sanchez *et al.*, 2020).

We put forth that this relatively unexplored dark side to digitized service technologies exists and that its impact on humans, as consumers, parents, government officials and so forth, is worthy of investigation. For instance, as consumers spend prolonged periods on their computers and mobile devices, many are beginning to suffer negative physical and mental side effects, including internet addiction, depression and decreased self-esteem (Allred and Atkin, 2020). Indeed, plastic surgeons are increasingly seeing patients aspire to look like their filtered selfies to the extent that this trend is being terms as "Snapchat Dysmorphia" (Ramphul and Mejias, 2018). Further, investigations may also include relationship between availability and viewing of online pornography with deteriorating relationship quality and divorce (Peery and Schleifer, 2018).

Despite the apparent commercial benefits that digital services may offer consumers, all too often, evidence also shows that consumer and public health officials unaware of and unprepared for the negative consequences that can emerge from commercial Web-based and mobile applications. Thus, research is needed to investigate how to achieve well-being with service technologies and address questions such as how can humanity and technology be balanced to achieve well-being? What are the well-being trade-offs that occur when there is an over or under emphasis in either technology or humanity? How do different consumer segments or different types of service organizations manage well-being for technology or humanity?

Opportunity 2: service technologies and social interaction

Perhaps it goes without saying that most service interactions are social interactions. Traditionally these social interactions transpired in physical, or built, consumption settings however COVID-19 disrupted social interactions and introduced terms such as social distancing to the global lexicon (Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2020). Indeed, many service researchers have explored the role that "third places," which refers to commercial and non-profit establishments such as libraries, fast food restaurants, bookshops, pubs/wine bars, coffee shops, shopping malls, health centers that foster pure sociability, association for its own sake, between and among customers and employees (Alexander, 2019). Given that third places often become natural forums for their customers' social relationships, many consumers form close attachments to favored third places as the support that they receive in these establishments often transforms their well-being.

Yet, since COVID-19, many third places have shuttered, and it is unclear as to how many of these smaller-sized, independently owned establishments will survive government-ordered lockdowns or constrained capacity. Resultantly, we question how consumers who often depend on third places for social interaction and life-enhancing supportive resources including older-aged and elderly consumers, teenagers who need a place to meet friends and new mothers needing social connections outside the home, will cope with the impact of the loss of third places. Will new third places emerge after the global pandemic ends? Do online third places serve the same role in consumers' lives as social support obtained in physical settings? Can artificial intelligence and service robots enhance third places, or do they distract? We encourage future researchers to explore how consumers are impacted by the loss or change in third places and the extent to which they are finding places anew, either in physical or virtual realms.

Opportunity 3: service technologies and societal prosperity

Service-driven global economies will not emerge unscathed from the COVID-19 pandemic; that is, these economies will be forever changed with prosperity rising in some service industries while in others plummeting. Prior to COVID-19, e-commerce retail sales were expanding by double-digits, while retail sales in traditional outlets, such as department stores, were expanding in low single digits. Since the Covid-19 outbreak, consumers have been conditioned, either voluntarily or involuntarily, to avoid crowded spaces, maintain social distancing in retail stores and shop alone when possible, and to avoid touching public surfaces. Additionally, employees are keenly aware of the dangers involved in their working in enclosed consumption settings, such as in stores or in enclosed shopping malls (Voorhees *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, we believe that many economies will see dramatic permanent decreases in retail employment, which will lead to government officials having to reconsider how to stimulate new industries, new jobs as well as retrain low-skilled workers.

In addition to loss of retail tenants, many commercial real estate properties may see the loss of corporate office space due to COVD-19. Although many organizations permitted remote working as a response to government mandated lockdowns, many organizations have realized that they can relinquish some of their expensive commercial office-space in favor of having employees continue to work remotely (Tanrıvermiş, 2020). In a similar vein, institutions of higher educations are seeing students leave physical campuses in favor of online, and often less expensive, educational offerings (Garrett, 2021). Digital service providers, such as Coursera and EdX, are permanently changing the higher education industry, which, in turn, impact entire towns that often rely on physical campuses, and student enrollment, for employment and tax revenue. Thus research is needed to address questions such as how can societies, organizations and customers prosper through technology without sacrificing humanity? What public policies are effective in stimulating reskilling service employees for technology-driven jobs?

Conclusion

Service technologies have altered the contemporary human condition creating tensions and potentially an adversarial battle. In this editorial, we suggest that service technologies, primarily digital service technologies, have influenced human well-being positively and negatively (e.g. internet addiction as well as enabled access to services) human social interaction (e. g. access to social support and diminished physical contact) and societal welfare (e.g. unemployment levels as well as opportunities for reskilling). All these areas represent under-explored intersections of technology and humanity research opportunities that emerge from service technologies impacting the human experience. As editors of the *Journal Services Marketing*, we encourage service researchers to realize that pioneering opportunities reside in this novel and emerging area – the relationship of service technologies with human experiences.

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Corresponding author

Mark Scott Rosenbaum can be contacted at: dr.markrosenbaum@gmail.com