
Guest editorial: The 24th excellence in services international conference – EISIC conference

Guest editorial

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, socio-economic contexts are more and more characterized by an increasing disruptiveness, vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (normally presented under the acronym DVUCA: disruptive, volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous). The extreme events coming from the opening years of 2020s such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the UK leaving the EU the USA–China trade war or the Ukraine war have demonstrated their complex and destructive compound shocks pointing out the interconnected environmental, economic, social and relational challenges that affect the dynamics of economic, political and social systems. The creeping character and deep uncertainty of such events have acted as catalysts for megatrends such as digital transformation, servitization and sustainability. These transformations are generally discussed as business opportunities. However, they also mean challenges that organizations must be prepared to address. In this regard, it is imperative for scholars to explore the possibilities offered by digital transformation, servitization and sustainability, turning them into opportunities to avoid the risk of becoming threats.

First, the continuous development of cutting-edge technologies and related applications has accelerated businesses' digitalization, bringing the emergence of new socio-economic dynamics. Digital transformation has contributed to the reshaping of the entire business dimension, calling for renovated managerial approaches able to synergically integrate cyber and social systems (Ciasullo *et al.*, 2021). Second, servitization has emerged as the need to shift from a transactional approach to a more relational one, where integrated product service solutions represent the result of synergistic interactions established among the different actors involved, by requiring innovative and collaborative efforts for intercepting new modalities for value creation. Third, the requirement for integrating social and environmental issues into organizational activities and related business processes is increasing. Thus, a sense of responsiveness toward the pursuance of sustainability and sustainable development needs to spread through organizations as one of their key strategic goals.

In this fast-changing scenario, there clearly comes up the need for organizations to develop a new mindset able to transform the challenges arisen into advantage and innovation opportunities. Quality management arises as an actionable mechanism able to handle the complexity of socio-economic transformations (Lim *et al.*, 2022), by stimulating organizations' continuous improvement, adaptation and proactiveness. In this way, quality management could mark the path for a resilient attitude in organizations. Indeed, some scholars have considered quality management as a facilitator of change that is able to influence organizations' success in transition contexts (Carvalho *et al.*, 2020), thereby reinforcing service quality management toward organizational and business excellence.

Since the initial studies on quality management, scholars have stressed the importance of quality both in service and manufacturing organizations as an enabler of promoting organizational viability (Powell, 1995; Ooi *et al.*, 2011) by combining hard and soft factors (Lewis *et al.*, 2006). However, managing quality in such vulnerable times requires new knowledge to assess strategic, tactical and operational issues.

The annual “Excellence in Services International Conference” represents an occasion in which synergistic dialog and discussion are stimulated among researchers about the search



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for excellence in management practices, particularly focusing on service organizations, such as healthcare, education, tourism and related systems.

The conference was born in 1998 as the “Toulon–Verona Conference on Higher Education” and in 2017, on its 20th anniversary, was renamed “Excellence in Services International Conference.” On the 24th Conference edition, hosted at the University of Salerno, Italy, on 2–3 September 2021, a call for papers was proposed with the aim to explore and provide new knowledge about the opportunities, issues and challenges that service organizations and systems have to face to improve business viability through quality management. Particularly, the call for papers invited new research initiatives on this topic, including manuscripts that able to propose both new managerial practices and theoretical models, adding value for practitioners and academics. Then, this special issue presents high-quality papers addressing and contributing to the debate about the main criticalities and opportunities of service quality management in the light of the emerging and inter-related socio-economic transformations.

2. Quality management in service organizations: a debate crossing digital transformation, servitization and sustainability

Quality management has always been considered as an essential priority for organizations' success and survival (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). As an important field of study in organization and in marketing research, quality management has been studied mostly in manufacturing organizations, focusing on the measurement of quality performance of manufactured products. However, the vital role assumed by service organizations in the global economy and in an evolving knowledge economy pushed scholars to deepen quality management in services. In this scenario, their intangible features have required different conceptualizations that go beyond rigorous standards and measures (Dale, 2015) because of miscellaneous factors affect the overall service quality offering. Service organizations have multiple quality challenges in offering affordable care and innovation through service design and delivery processes. These perennial quality challenges raise the questions of where we are in the quality journey and how far traditional quality management practices and methods have absorbed changes in service development stages, cycle time compression and employee effort to match demand and customer expectations.

Recently, scholars have underlined the dynamic nature of service processes (Chen *et al.*, 2022), which requires a shift toward user centeredness and service co-creation that reshape the organizational attributes and management activities of service organizations. Particularly, they are required to implement relevant service-innovation strategies and practices to develop scalar business models, improve staff performance, manage customer experience, provide managerial process innovation and ultimately improve business excellence. Nevertheless, the value-generation capability of service systems depends on their ability to attract people and involve them in a collaborative effort, by boosting exchanges and catalyzing interactions. Thus, service organizations need to embrace servitization logic grounded on a service mindset in a total service management quality perspective (Sureshchandar *et al.*, 2001; Talib *et al.*, 2012, 2013; Palumbo *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, service organizations need to deploy collaborative and open quality practices, which allow to stimulate synergistic exchanges with stakeholders across embedded value networks (Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Vargo *et al.*, 2014). In this way, strategies, tactics and operations can be reframed to facilitate and strengthen resources integration, by creating new knowledge that enable service innovations. Then, the total service quality becomes an orientation that fosters agility and greater involvement of customers and ecosystem actors in value co-creation, by nurturing a process of continuous innovation, adaptation and learning.

Recently, scholars underlined how servitization is effectively affected by digital transformation. Indeed, from a user perspective, digital transformation has modified the way people communicate, consume and create value in servicescapes, thereby impacting the overall service quality. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly accelerated the pace of digital transformation in the service industry (Rha and Lee, 2022). Some studies demonstrated how digitally transformed services have positively affected customer experience by utilizing advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR), cloud computing and big data analytics (Tabrizi *et al.*, 2019; Vial, 2019; Palumbo *et al.*, 2021). Other studies have focused on how digitization is contributing to reinforce data quality, by transforming subjective information into objective and real-time data to allow a better knowledge of customer behaviors, so that supporting service organizations for continuous quality improvement both in the services they offer and in agile processes and business operations (Parviainen *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, some researchers pointed out the human resources empowerment in a digital environment (Jamkhaneh *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, they are more actively involved in strategic and innovative tasks and they receive better and ongoing training, reducing wasted time on repetitive jobs (Sony *et al.*, 2020). Finally, Sony *et al.* (2022) critically examine the impact of medical cyber–physical systems on the quality of healthcare service delivery systems.

Nevertheless, quality management scholars have pointed out how service companies do not have specific quality-based strategies or models to deal with the digital transition (Carvalho *et al.*, 2020; Chin *et al.*, 2023); thus, there is a lack of concentration on quality management and quality practices of digital-based companies. Indeed, the potential of service quality linked to digital transformation is still little investigated (Kobus *et al.*, 2018; Brunetti *et al.*, 2020). Then, different questions arise among service quality management research, such as what service business processes should be innovated to afford digital readiness, which soft quality levers should be mostly developed to avoid threats deriving from digital transformation, how digital technologies could improve quality practices, how to improve information exchange and service quality?

However, the aim for an organization should not only be to introduce digital technologies to improve competitive performance, but also to ensure a sustainable excellence (Sandholm, 2005). In fact, from the societal perspective, the key purpose of digital transformation is to gain progress in green and social transition with digital solutions, by also enhancing service quality. In this scenario, scholars have pointed out how the adoption of sustainable practices attains the desired level of service quality (Gupta *et al.*, 2018; Garcia-Dastugue and Eroglu, 2019; Halldorsson, 2019). The resources and sustainable processes of the organization facilitate the provision of service quality (Gupta and Singh, 2020). Particularly, scholars have deepened the relationship between sustainability and service quality, focusing on customer satisfaction (Dean and Bowen, 1994). In fact, meeting users' requirements and expectations responds to an explicit user need, thus contributing to enhance service quality. Nevertheless, still little research has investigated sustainable excellence in service systems. Then, researchers need to detect to what extent service quality can foster sustainability, which managerial practices should be stressed to embrace sustainability, how quality-driven sustainability can boost response strategies for sustainable development and how to create leadership emphasis to achieve sustainability.

3. Contributions in this special issue

Among 28 manuscripts submitted, 11 have been selected for this special issue after several rounds of rigorous reviews. They have been grouped into three areas, according to the megatrends highlighted in the previous section. The articles represent interesting advances covering a stimulating diversity in research settings and methodologies.

3.1 Digital transformation

The contributions grouped in this cluster investigate the role that digitalization plays in (1) boosting learning activities for human capital development (Barile *et al.*, 2023), (2) improving the digital service quality process (Brunetti *et al.*, 2023), (3) detecting user satisfaction (Magno and Dossena, 2023), (4) service quality practices (Schiavone *et al.*, 2023), (5) increasing quality assurance of automated hand hygiene monitoring service through the ISO certifications (Ortiz and Karapetrovic, 2023) and (6) fostering antifragility in the context of small and medium-sized service companies (service SMEs) (Corvello *et al.*, 2023).

By starting from an analysis of the Kirkpatrick model, Barile *et al.* (2023) debated about the actualization of this model and then they focused on identifying corporate training drivers, by discussing how they should be incorporated into an integrated framework of learning for human capital development. The authors conducted a constructivist grounded theory, by considering the main criticalities embraced by an Italian corporate training company. The dynamic interaction of the five key categories identified allows to propose an enlarged Kirkpatrick model toward a meta-learning ecosystem. Particularly, the key roles of digital technology, personalization and quality culture are detected in integrating hard and soft sides of learning.

Brunetti *et al.* (2023) explored academics' awareness about digital services for the academic publication process and detected how digitalization affects it, by considering the perspective of management scholars. Providing an overview of the digital professional services dedicated to academic research, this work highlighted that digitalization emerged as pervasive throughout the entire scientific research publication process. A qualitative approach was performed through direct observations of websites regarding digital professional research services and in-depth interviews with national and international management scholars. Findings showed positive and negative impacts of using digital services and software for academic research. This article contributes to service management literature by providing suggestions both for scholars who engage in academic research and digital services and software providers.

Magno and Dossena (2023) focused on detecting customer satisfaction and users' relationships with brands when they interact with virtual service agents (i.e. chatbots). More in depth, the impact of the perceived hedonic and utilitarian attributes of chatbots on customer satisfaction is investigated. A questionnaire-based survey has been conducted among Italian consumers. A quantitative methodology has been performed through a partial least squares structural equation modeling. The study showed that both hedonic and utilitarian attributes of chatbots positively influence customer satisfaction and improved customer relationships with the brands.

Schiavone *et al.* (2023) discussed about total service quality and digitalization, by updating quality studies mostly focused on manufacturing organizations. In this regard, by considering the total quality management philosophy, the authors actualized it in service organizations that operated in a digital environment. An illustrative case study in the healthcare sector is conducted for developing a framework that drew the main quality service practices integrated with digitalization. The study represents the first attempt to combine quality, services and digitalization, by providing a model that is able to identify the different levers of quality in digital-based services organizations.

Ortiz and Karapetrovic (2023) proposed an integrated management system based on augmentative quality and privacy management standards to support the implementation of an IoT-based hand hygiene monitoring technology (HHMT). Based on a multi-layered methodology, the findings showed that the identification of an informed consent form is a critical resource for the fulfillment of privacy-related codes for healthcare workers satisfaction. From a theoretical point of view, this study contributes to the research on the integration of augmentative quality systems with the systems based on augmentative standards from other fields, such as information security, for instance, the ISO 10001 and

ISO/IEC 27701 pairing, while from a managerial perspective, the synergies obtained through such integration include the utilization of a resource (i.e. the consent form) for multiple purposes, also contributing to the establishment of efficiency.

Corvello *et al.* (2023) investigated the variables that foster antifragility, by analyzing service SMEs. A qualitative exploratory methodology was embraced, detecting how they changed their business models facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings showed that the ingredients of antifragility ability include entrepreneurial orientation, context insightfulness and operational dexterity. Particularly, the article highlights the role of digital technologies to foster antifragility, by pointing out the need to develop digital competences to train SMEs' preparedness. Such technologies acted as facilitators and the setting within which the firms are operating.

3.2 *Servitization*

The papers included in this cluster explore how service delivery is affected by service quality management in (1) servicescape to achieve students' satisfaction (Gabbianelli and Pencarelli, 2023), (2) improving service innovation to enable healthcare well-being (Megaro *et al.*, 2023) and (3) in fostering feedback mechanisms, by including customers in service offering processes (Binci *et al.*, 2023).

Gabbianelli and Pencarelli (2023) examined students' satisfaction by focusing on on-campus accommodation service in higher education. The SERVQUAL framework has been applied for measuring service quality. Primary data were collected through an online questionnaire for students attending the University of Urbino. A stepwise multiple regression analysis was employed to measure the impact of the on-campus accommodation service quality dimensions on students' overall satisfaction. The study outlined how each service dimension affects students' satisfaction. In this direction, some recommendations are provided.

Megaro *et al.* (2023) investigated the healthcare system wellbeing, through the theoretical lens of service ecosystem. The aim was to analyze if AI-based systems could effectively enable healthcare ecosystem well-being, by generating patients' service innovation. A qualitative methodology was carried out, conducting a case study of two health systems in southern Italy, analyzing the patients' perception of data quality provided through AI systems. Findings showed patients' resistance in adopting AI systems. The main implication of the study was the need to embrace a patient-centered approach to neutralize doubts in terms of data privacy. Then, the authors argued about the contribution of AI-based service innovation in healthcare for the healthcare ecosystem well-being.

Binci *et al.* (2023) explored, through a grounded approach five different agile-oriented companies, to detect how agile adoption shows both emergent (exploration-oriented) and planned (exploitation-oriented) tensions. Findings showed that five main categories, such as approach, objectives, boundaries, leadership and feedback loops, capture the tensions between planned and emergent issues. A comprehensive integrated multilevel framework is proposed, which combines exploitation processes, such as planning and control activities, together with exploration ones, such as searching, emergent iterations and user stories, by illustrating that they are distributed, recursive and overlap. Managerial implications pointed out the need to engage users in service offering processes by reinforcing both feedback mechanisms and shared leadership styles.

3.3 *Sustainability*

In this cluster, the included contributions focused on (1) the understanding of sustainability and sustainable development through quality science and quality management (Ramanathan and Isaksson, 2023) and (2) operationalizing sustainability and sustainable development by understanding, defining and measuring it (Isaksson *et al.*, 2023).

Ramanathan and Isaksson (2023) explored quality science and quality management as mechanisms to solve the challenges of corporate sustainability reporting (CSR) by requiring a common understanding of sustainability and sustainable development. Secondary data were collected both from key documents released by regulatory institutions working at the intersection of sustainability, corporate reporting, measurement and from academic papers on quality science and quality management. A theoretical framework, Quality for sustainability (Q4S), derived from *TQM* was conceptualized to better align sustainability reporting with stakeholder needs. Theoretically, the paper contributed to a better understanding of the key reporting challenges; managerially, the need to analyze sustainability stressing social implications emerged.

Isaksson *et al.* (2023) focused on stressing the need to well define sustainability and sustainable development depending on different value chains. Then, by adopting an outside-in perspective, the authors intervened to operationalize sustainability, by understanding, defining and measuring it. The study showed that assuming an outside-in perspective effectively increases the understanding, defining and measuring of sustainability, pointing out the need for organizations to extend *TQM* from a customer focus to stakeholder's needs focus.

4. Conclusions

This special issue explores the key opportunities and criticalities in reaching service excellence through quality management in vulnerable and uncertain contexts, addressing three actual megatrends: digital transformation, servitization and sustainability. By adopting quantitative (regression analysis and structural equation modeling) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews and direct observations) analysis, the overall studies enrich the research agenda on service quality management by providing significant insights on the development of a quality orientation in service systems.

From a theoretical standpoint, the studies contribute to reconceptualize service quality management from a systemic point of view, by assuming it as a viable mechanism able to shape renovated managerial practices to face business uncertainty and vulnerability.

Form a managerial standpoint, the development of a cohesive quality culture can empower service managers to proactively assess strategic, tactical and operational issues, by supporting processes of knowledge management and value co-creation strategies to foster the development of service innovations, to advance continuous improvement in digitized servicescapes and to embrace not only economic challenges but also societal and ecological trials.

Finally, we are confident that this special issue will serve as a forum for the exchange of new research results in service quality management, starting from the awareness about total service quality as a new management theory based on three core values, such as co-creating value with ecosystem actors, harnessing creativity and innovation and shaping a sustainable future.

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Further reading

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