The whole is better than the sum of the parts: a service ecosystems approach to service interaction vulnerability

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Introduction

Since the seminal article on consumer vulnerability by Baker Gentry and Rittenburg (2005), vulnerability in marketing has been scoped beyond consumers to the broader customer group (Fisk et. al. 2023). Customers and front-line service employees experiencing vulnerability is a growing area of investigation among service scholars within both the consumer and organizational context (see for example, Beatson et al., 2020; Ho and Shirahada, 2021; Johns and Davey, 2019; Koppenhafer et al., 2023; O'Loughlin et al., 2023; Riedel et al., 2022; Riedel et al., 2023, Russell-Bennett et al 2023, Raciti et al 2023). Consistent with the scope of Journal of Services Marketing as focussed on customer interactions with service organisations or front-line employees, we introduce the term service interaction vulnerability as a dyadic approach that includes both customer and front-line employee (FLE) vulnerability in a service interaction. This term refers to vulnerability that is experienced before, during or after a service interaction by either customers, front-line service employees or both.

In this special issue we seek to address the multifaceted and persistent challenges in modern socio-economic systems such as those outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the need for service researchers to contribute to these goals (see JSM editorial and articles in 2024 Vol 38 issue 2). Service researchers are increasingly recognising the limitations of traditional, isolated strategies for mitigating customer (Riedel et al., 2022) and front-line employee vulnerability (Riedel et. al., 2023). Service marketing has also extended beyond the commercial sector to be relevant to public services and non-profit services (Ostrom et, al., 2010, Russell-Bennett, Wood and Previte 2013) thus there is a need for service customer and front-line employee vulnerability research to reflect this broader application. When considering public and non-profit services, the role of the service ecosystem is particularly important given the focus of these services on intractable and sometimes intergenerational issues such as including chronic illness, drug use, fair work opportunities, racism, digital divide, violence, use of natural resources, climate change and inclusion of people with a disability.

Consumer/customer vulnerability is market failure not a failure derived from an individual trait of a person, indeed "consumer vulnerability cannot simply be seen as consumer's failure to engage with the market when markets are failing to engage with consumers" (Stearn 2015, p66). As customer vulnerability is a state not a trait (Raciti et. al. 2022), authors should use the terms "customer's experiencing vulnerability, FLE's experiencing vulnerability' rather than vulnerable consumers/customers/FLEs or 'vulnerable groups'.

Given the market-focus of service interaction vulnerability, this special issue consequently adopts a service ecosystem approach to supporting research into service interaction vulnerabilities, acknowledging the complex interplay of numerous factors and actors within the broader economic and social context for these service interactions (Leino, Davey and Johns, 2024; Riedel et al., 2022). Adopting a service ecosystem approach in addressing service interaction vulnerability enables a more comprehensive understanding of issues, fosters holistic and sustainable interventions, encourages greater strength and resilience, and promotes long-term well-being for consumers, businesses, and society at large (Kabadayi, Livne-Tarandach and Pirson 2023). In this special issue we take a strengths-based approach to customers or FLEs experiencing vulnerabilities (Kabadayi et. al. 2023, Raciti et. al., 2022), at the micro, meso, exo or macro system level. We encourage research at different levels of the service system and across the system, providing a more complete approach to supporting customers and front-line employees who

experience vulnerability.

List of Topic Areas

- The effect of context for the experience of vulnerability by customers or FLEs
- The role of individual differences in the experience of vulnerability by customers or FLEs
- The impact of service interaction vulnerability for both customers and FLEs
- What type of service ecosystem support mitigates the experience of service interaction vulnerability?
- How might actors in the service ecosystem be leveraged to support customers or FLEs experiencing service interaction vulnerability?
- What strategies do customers or FLEs use to mitigate service interaction vulnerability?
- What is the effectiveness of transformative service initiatives (TSIs) for business, customer, or employee outcomes?
- How can public policy interventions reduce the likelihood of vulnerability for customers or FLEs in service interactions?
- Systematic and meta reviews of customer or FLEs experiencing vulnerability from a service ecosystems approach
- What are the service ecosystems for customers and communities experiencing service interaction vulnerability?
- How might businesses be part of a broader societal impact to mitigate or prevent customer or FLE service vulnerability?
- How might market imbalances be mitigated or market shaping occur to reduce service interaction vulnerability?
- Beyond the dyadic relationship for service vulnerability interactions e.g., customer to service provider or customer to customer, to understand the impact of the multiple actors involved in the service ecosystem.
- Multi-actor interactions in the service ecosystem supporting individuals and communities with vulnerabilities.

- Mitigating service interaction vulnerabilities in the Global South.
- How might services marketing researchers contribute towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to support individuals and communities with vulnerabilities.
- Impact programs outlining interventions for customers or FLEs experiencing service interaction vulnerabilities using the entire service ecosystem

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Submitted articles must not have been previously published, nor should they be under consideration for publication anywhere else, while under review for this journal.

Key Deadlines

Opening date for manuscripts submissions: **30/11/2023**
Closing date for manuscripts submission: **01/05/2024**

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