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Conceptualizing service ethics for the complexity of modern service interactions

针对现代服务互动的复杂性构思服务伦理

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of digital service platforms enabled numerous interaction effects that remain largely unexplored, especially when it comes to the intended or unintended impacts on non-customers. This article conceptualises service ethics for modern interactions enabled by digital service platforms. The conceptual framework is illustrated through two narratives of non-customers intentionally and unintentionally exploited by customer interactions enabled by digital service platforms. By integrating theoretical insights with illustrative narratives, this article demonstrates the potential impact of digital service platforms on non-customer well-being, highlighting instances of exploitation and unintended consequences. This study advances service research by focusing on non-customers who might experience intentional or unintentional exploitation. Furthermore, this article outlines a future research agenda for exploring and advancing the understanding of service ethics along with implications for fostering ethical business practices and shaping ethical societal norms.

ABSTRACT

数字服务平台的出现带来了许多互动效应，但这些效应在很大程度上仍未得到探讨，尤其是对非客户的有意或无意影响。本文介绍了针对数字服务平台带来的现代互动的服务伦理概念。本文通过两个关于数字服务平台所支持的客户互动有意和无意利用非客户的故事来说明这一概念框架。通过将理论见解与说明性叙述相结合，本文展示了数字服务平台对非客户福祉的潜在影响，突出了剥削和意外后果的实例。本研究通过关注可能遭受有意或无意剥削的非客户，推进了服务研究。此外，本文还概述了未来的研究议程，以探索和推进对服务伦理的理解，以及对促进道德商业实践和塑造道德社会规范的影响。

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Introduction

Modern service interactions are enabled by digital service system platforms that can be activated using digital devices (phones, tablets, computers, and watches) (Letaifa et al., 2016; Tan et al., 2022). These new digital platforms have created a wide range of interaction effects, which have not yet been studied. Thus, a conceptualisation of service ethics that encompasses service systems and a broader service ecosystem is needed (Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2020; Letaifa et al., 2016). This study conceptualises service ethics, beginning with typical service interactions, including the intended or unintended effects of these interactions on non-customers.

The simplest form of service interaction involves a dyadic exchange between a service provider and customer (Bitner et al., 2000), which forms the focal point of many discussions in the business ethics literature (Freeman, 1994). However, service interactions extend beyond this dyadic relationship to encompass interactions with other individuals, nature, and physical environment. In the twenty-first century, ethical decisions in services have complex social impacts owing to the integration of digital service system platforms into service systems (Letaifa et al., 2016; Tan et al., 2022). These platforms have improved service delivery by enhancing efficiency, accessibility, and personalisation (Latupeirissa et al., 2024). However, they also enable digital service interactions to have a negative impact on non-customers. These changes have raised new ethical considerations that have not been explored in the service, business, or marketing ethics literature.

While the normative approach of S-D logic provides excellent perspectives on how service systems should operate in a mutual fashion, it does not explain how to create and maintain such systems or how to transform service systems that are not mutually beneficial. In their comprehensive book on S-D logic, (Lusch & Vargo, 2014, p. 117) state, 'Forced or involuntary exchange is an interesting area of inquiry, but one that S-D logic does not address'. Addressing involuntary exchange requires recognising the humane or ethical ethos of the S-D logic (Laczniak & Murphy, 2019). Furthermore, Transformative Service Research (TSR) provides the much-needed improvement logic necessary for enhancing human well-being (Anderson et al., 2013). Recently, ServCollab, a human services non-profit based on TSR, expanded its mission 'to serve humanity through research collaborations that catalyse reducing suffering, improving well-being, and enabling well-becoming.' (ServCollab, 2024b).

With more than eight billion humans sharing the precious resources of our planet, we urgently need to enable each other's well-becoming by respecting and celebrating human diversity including non-service customers (Russell-Bennett et al., 2024). Developing service ethics is necessary to transform fragile and contentious service ecosystems to resilient, harmonious, and regenerative service ecosystems. In the context of the modern economy, ethical principles of respect and dignity guide the formation and maintenance of service relationships (Warren, 2005). Our research builds upon prior conceptualisations of service and ethics to create a conceptual framework for exploring the intended or unintended societal impacts of modern service interactions enabled by digital service platforms on the well-being and well-becoming of non-customers.

This study makes three major contributions to the literature. First, it contributes a conceptual framework for the impact of modern service interactions on non-customers. The explanatory power of our conceptual framework is demonstrated through an illustration

of two thought-provoking narratives of non-customers intentionally or unintentionally exploited by customers of services provided on digital service platforms. In the first narrative, housemaids are traded via various digital service platforms such as mobile trading applications and social media. The narrative examines a contemporary form of labour exchange that features indentured servitude. The second narrative concerns the obstacles faced by a visually impaired Paralympian who experiences difficulties that prevent him from fulfilling his basic mobility needs because people dump e-scooters on sidewalks. These illustrative narratives enable the exploration of service interactions as life experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Czarniawska, 2004). These narratives exemplify the potential problems caused by modern service platforms. Our second contribution is the development of service ethics to protect non-customers from intentional and unintentional service exploitations that significantly influence their well-being. Our framework fosters social inclusion by recognising the suffering of non-customers and promoting their well-being. The third contribution outlines an agenda for future research on service ethics, along with implications for fostering ethical business practices and shaping ethical societal norms.

This study begins by introducing essential service ethics in modern service interactions and the essential concepts for building service ethics, followed by a theoretical and conceptual framework. The impact of modern service interactions on non-customers is then illustrated. Subsequently, the conceptual framework is discussed, followed by implications and a future research agenda.

Service ethics in modern service interactions

As the conceptualisation of service has expanded in the twenty-first century, the understanding of service interactions has also expanded. Today, service interactions include all the social and economic interactions between and among humans. They also include all technology-mediated interactions (Bitner et al., 2000), which may occur via digital platforms or any other technology that provides intermediary interactions (Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2020; Letaifa et al., 2016; Tan et al., 2022). Furthermore, the role of ethics in decision making should expand, as ethical decisions impact the benefits and suffering of individuals and/or groups. At the actualisation layer (societal level), ethical decisions 'relate to the social ramifications of organizational decisions and affect everyone in society' (Bridges, 2018, p. 577). We argue that ethical decisions in services should include societal impacts (Rendtorff, 2009) on both customers and non-customers.

Service interactions include dyadic interactions, but also include other interactions with humans, interactions with nature, and interactions with the physical environment. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the modern service interactions enabled by digital service platforms and highlights their impact on non-customers.

As service systems are the basic abstraction of service science (Maglio et al., 2009), we conceptualise service ethics from a system flow perspective. Hence, we argue that service ethics should include the purpose of the service, the process of the service, and the outcome of the service. Further, it is necessary to consider the intended or unintended societal effects of these service interactions on others in the service ecosystem. The simplest service interaction is a dyadic interaction between a service provider and a service customer (Bitner et al., 2000). This is where most discussions on business ethics are

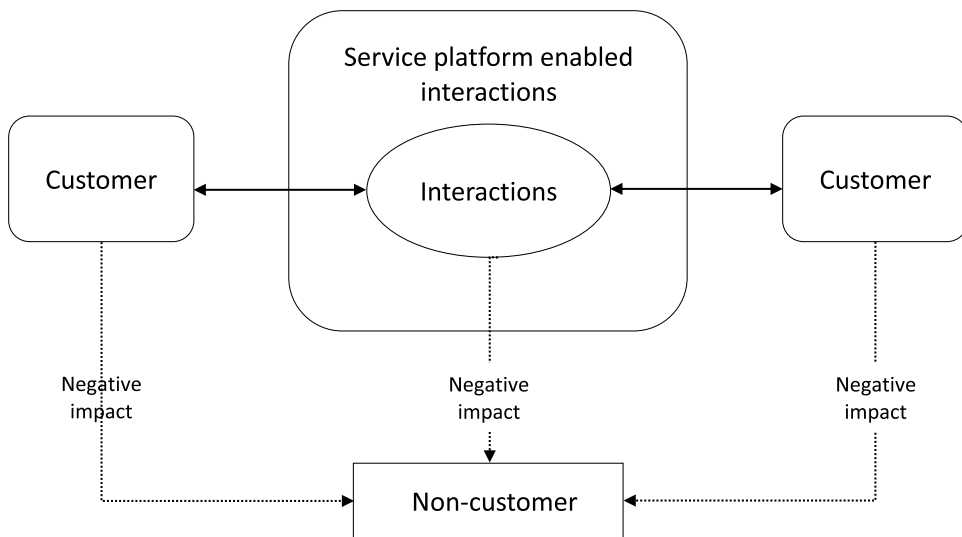


Figure 1. Modern service interactions impact on non-customers.

centred (Freeman, 1994). The purpose, process, and outcomes of service interactions are explored further in the Theoretical Framing section.

Concepts for building service ethics

This section provides foundational conceptual framing for building service ethics, based on the relationships between key concepts (Jaakkola, 2020). Conceptual framing focuses on introducing essential service ethics concepts from philosophical and service perspectives.

Philosophical perspectives on ethics

In this section, ethics are discussed from different philosophical perspectives and forms. Winkler (2022, p. 65) defines ethics as ‘a system of moral principles and norms that guide the relationships between humans and between humans and their natural and artificial environment.’ Ethics, as a set of principles guiding moral values, directs human behaviour based on considerations such as rights, fairness, societal benefits, and virtues. The inherent characteristics of culture and social history shape the necessity of good behaviours and define well-established values, traditions, religious beliefs, and other factors that influence the morality of communities and individuals (Walker & Hennig, 2004). This captures the essence of the deontological aspect of ethics, which literally translates to the ‘study of duty,’ emphasizing the focus on duties and rules (Immanuel Kant, 1724–1804). This perspective prioritises individual principles over the consequences of actions (Bridges, 2018; Cervantes et al., 2016; Van Staveren, 2007).

Over the past two centuries, ethical discourse has been characterised by a dichotomy between two broad frameworks: the deontological view and the teleological view, which focus on goals and outcomes (Yazdani & Murad, 2015). The Hunt-Vitell model suggests

that the processes or guidelines individuals employ in ethical decision making can be mapped onto these two frameworks (Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Hunt & Vitell, 2006). Various interdisciplinary scholars argue that deontological and teleological evaluations are mutually exclusive, examining how individuals adopt favourable deontological or teleological outcomes. (Friesdorf et al., 2015).

In recent decades, axiological perspectives have been incorporated into ethical discourse to evaluate the value of outcomes (Yazdani & Murad, 2015). For example, consider the value of booking an 'Airbnb' for the service customer without acknowledging the moral obligations regarding the unintended consequences, such as the potential increase in housing costs and homelessness for locals in major cities and tourist destinations. Similarly, the use of Uber may contribute to local taxi owners' joblessness. The axiology of ethics contemplates questions such as 'What should one value?' Axiological change remains a constant feature of human history as human values appear to fluctuate across time and space (Danaher, 2021). Axiology serves as a bridge between the dichotomy of values, whether seen as objective or subjective entities, and holds implications for comprehending and modifying behaviour (Danaher, 2021).

Additionally, ethical thinking, valuing, and reasoning exist along a continuum between two opposing views: ethical relativism and ethical objectivism. Relativism pertains to the acceptance of ethics and morality, which vary among individuals or societies, whereas objectivism concerns the existence of universal or objective morals (Brannigan & Boss, 2001). The ethical issues of decision making addressed in this article are inspired by normative ethics, which render judgments about what constitutes 'duty,' 'goal,' or 'moral' behaviour, its outcome and value for individuals and societies (see Figure 2 below). Based on moral actions, the ethical reasoning continuum reflects two opposing views, ethical relativism and objectivism. As discussed in this study, service ethics describes how people make decisions and the impact of customers' ethical judgments.

Personal values and ethical decision making tend to be interrelated (Bridges, 2018) as both are learned through socialisation and exhibit the same dynamic tendency to change

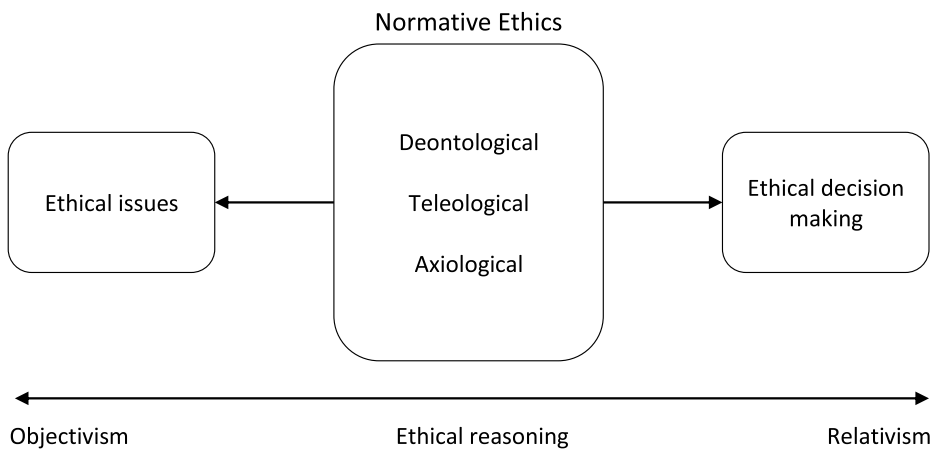


Figure 2. Ethical perspectives and reasoning for decision making.

over time in response to life experiences (Feather, 1988). Additionally, ethical behaviours are often motivated by different values (Hunt & Vitell, 2006; Laczniaik & Murphy, 2019), and individuals' value systems can offer valuable insights into the motivational aspects associated with both ethical and unethical behaviours (Bridges, 2018; Doran, 2009).

Some research suggests that not all service interactions necessitate ethical choices, ethical frameworks, or ethical systems (e.g. Bridges, 2018; Friesdorf et al., 2015). However, service interactions have ethical implications as they can lead to intended or unintended negative impacts on the well-being of non-customers who did not choose to participate. The Hunt-Vitell model of deontological and teleological evaluation processes informs discussions on ethics surrounding impact, but not on service interactions and their intended or unintended impact on non-customers. The focus of this article is to present ethical perspectives and discuss the moral issue of where a person's actions, when freely performed, may impact the benefits and suffering of individuals and/or groups (Bridges, 2018; Velasquez & Rostankowski, 1985). We seek to explicitly identify the values and implicit ethical systems that guide service customers in modern service interactions enabled by digital service platforms to promote disciplined and informed ethical decision making.

Service perspective

This section presents essential concepts for conceptualising and introducing service ethics (also illustrated in Table 1). We initiated an ethics discussion for the service research community, with the aim of designing responsible service systems. These systems require ethical considerations for modern service interactions facilitated by digital service systems. The influence of digitalisation on service experiences demands new capabilities from customers. These capabilities pertain to the style of interaction or code of conduct as practiced, rather than merely as espoused (Normann, 2001). The value of human interaction hinges on customers' expected abilities to fulfil their roles in the service process (Bitner et al., 2000), thereby influencing their preference for human interaction (Immonen et al., 2018).

Recent studies have assessed ethics in service from organizational and societal perspectives, focusing on ethical decision making (Bridges, 2018), corporate ethical values

Table 1. Definitions of key terms.

Term	Definition
Enabling	Enabling addresses acting as an 'enabler' is central in value-creation processes and focuses on the capabilities of the customer as a value creator.
Ethics	'... a system of moral principles and norms that guide the relationships between humans and between humans and their natural and artificial environment' (Winkler, 2022, p. 65).
Service Ethics	Service ethics refers to a system of moral principles, virtues, norms, values, and actions that underlies what we ought to do in relation to human interactions, and human interactions with life and planet Earth.
Service Inclusion	'... an egalitarian system that provides customers with fair access to a service, fair treatment during a service and fair opportunity to exit a service' (Fisk et al., 2018, p. 842).
Well-being	'... refers to the multidimensional concept that constitutes psychological, job-related, materialistic, social, physical, financial, environmental, spiritual, and educational aspects' (Hamdan, 2023, p. 60).
Well-becoming	Well-becoming is a concept for service system innovations that expand human potential at any service system level from micro to macro to establish new levels of human well-being over time (ServCollab, 2024a).

(CEV) (Yeşiltaş & Tuna, 2018), corporate digital responsibility (CDR) (Wirtz et al., 2023), and ethical issues in AI practice (Belk, 2021). Business ethics, marketing ethics, and public service ethics (Bowman & West, 2021) represent related areas of study from an organizational perspective that has been extensively studied and discussed. However, service ethics encompasses more than just organizational ethics, including a broader perspective of service interactions of the purpose, process, and outcomes.

Service inclusion, as introduced by Fisk et al. (2018), becomes a key element, advocating for service inclusion, the consideration of the 'full diversity of the human species.' This article emphasises the urgency of enabling well-becoming by respecting and celebrating human diversity. Based on the two illustrative narratives of real-life experiences, this article expands the scope of service ethics beyond dyadic service interaction by delving into matters of morality and right and wrong. It distinguishes ethical considerations from socio-psychological aspects and the well-being of non-service customers, enriching the discourse on service ethics. This conceptual framework proposes aligning actions with mutual benefits, inclusion, well-being, and responsibility.

Additionally, Lacznik and Murphy (2019) argue that research should be directed toward the societal, ethical, and normative aspects, concerning Vargo and Lusch's (2017) perspective on the more humane or ethical ethos of S-D logic. Transformative service research also assesses the well-being of people in service interactions; even non-service users deserve to reduce their suffering and improve their well-being (Anderson et al., 2013).

Well-being is a composite contextual state of business stakeholders that constitutes psychological, job-related, materialistic, social, physical, financial, environmental, spiritual, and educational aspects with variable weightings, depending on the micro, meso, and/or macro levels they are positioned on and is shaped by the interactions with other stakeholders. (Hamdan, 2023, p. 60)

In recent years, research on service innovation has broadened to include the exploration of service ecosystems, particularly focusing on the role of platforms in emphasising the importance of new combinations of existing resources. These platforms also facilitate collaborations that provide access to new resources and capabilities, ultimately aiding in the co-creation of services and enhancing well-being (Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2020). Well-becoming is ServCollab's concept for service system innovations that expand human potential at any service system level, from micro to macro (ServCollab, 2024a). Over time, these innovations have enabled new levels of human well-being. The label 'enabling' was inspired by (Normann, 2001). It addresses that acting as an 'enabler' is central in value-creation processes, including also value-creation communication, and also moves the focus to 'the capabilities of the customer as a value creator' (Normann, 2001, p. 36). Therefore, in this study, service ethics refers to a system of moral principles, virtues, norms, values, and actions that underlie what we ought to do in relation to human interactions, and human interactions with life and planet Earth. These ethical values and actions form the basis of what ought to be done in relation to rights, fairness principles, societal benefits, and virtues (Bridges, 2018). In Table 1, we define the key concepts used to build our conceptualisation of service ethics.

Theoretical and conceptual framing

In this section, we assess the intersection of digitalisation, ethics, and service inclusion in modern service interactions. We focus on various perspectives to highlight the evolving nature of human action, and emphasise the need for corresponding changes in ethics, particularly in the context of service research and well-being.

Ethics and digital service interaction

In the past two decades, ethical decision making in services has become increasingly intricate because of the incorporation of digital service system platforms into service systems, resulting in multifaceted social ramifications (Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2020; Letaifa et al., 2016; Tan et al., 2022). Digitalisation and digital transformation have improved service delivery by enhancing efficiency, accessibility, and personalisation (Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2020; Latupeirissa et al., 2024). Digitalization encompasses the simultaneous emergence of various technologies that significantly impact how organizations function (Karimi & Walter, 2015; Parviainen et al., 2017). From an organizational standpoint, this involves substantial changes, particularly in business strategies driven by digital technologies (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Fitzgerald et al., 2014). Digitalisation is linked to significant alterations in sociotechnical structures (Verhoef et al., 2021). To put it simply, digitalization refers to modifications in specific processes and tasks resulting from the integration of digital technologies within an organization or for individual service purposes.

Digital service system platforms have a considerable amount of responsibility attributed to customers and their behaviours in their assumed ability to live up to and/or change the dominant social paradigm (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013; Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998). These digital platforms are commonly called collaborative platforms for consumption, even though they became a buzzword for a 'collaborative economy' when Botsman and Rogers (2010) published their book. Some of the collaborative economy terminology explain the digital service system platforms phenomena of peer-to-peer sharing uses terms such as: 'the mesh' also referred to as 'social sharing' by (Gansky, 2010); 'access-based consumption' (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012); 'connected consumption' (Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015); 'hybrid economy' (Rifkin, 2015), and 'collaborative economy' (Probst et al., 2015). There are four main drivers of collaborative consumption: (1) affordability and cost-saving activities, (2) environmental concerns, (3) peer-to-peer technologies building trust among peers, and (4) a sense of community (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Collaborative customers in the digitalised world are socially constructed to consume (Baudrillard, 2016; Peattie & Peattie, 2009) and rely on the dominant social paradigm to support rationalised consumption (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013). This demonstrates that customers who use digital platforms are not guided by a neoclassical view of economic responsibility. In today's marketplace, customers assume the role of co-creators of value and resource integrators (Grönroos & Gummerus, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2014) on digital service platforms.

Responsibility for value co-creation stems from individual, collective, and social factors as well as complex interactions on digital platforms. However, we seek to expand the domain of service management from a narrow dyadic perspective on service provider-customer interactions (Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2022) to a broader context of service

interaction involving a dyadic exchange between a service provider and a customer (Bitner et al., 2000), which forms the focal point of many discussions in ethics.

The ethics concept rationally reflects moral behaviour, which is related to manners, customs, usage, habits, and decisions (Bridges, 2018; Winkler, 2022). Recent studies have assessed ethics in service from organizational and societal perspectives (Laczniak & Murphy, 2019), focusing on ethical decision making (Bridges, 2018), corporate digital responsibility (CDR) (Wirtz et al., 2023), and ethical issues in AI practice (Belk, 2021). Business ethics, marketing ethics, public service ethics (Bowman & West, 2021), and business ethics in service industries (Rendtorff, 2009) represent related areas of study from an organizational perspective that have been extensively studied and discussed.

Edvardsson and Tronvoll (2020) argue for the transformation of service ecosystems to the role of platforms driven by service innovation, where the service platform functions as an institutionalized site of resource integration and value co-creation processes constituted by shared structures, including norms, standards, and rules, together with value co-creation logic. This also relates to the role of social innovation, which can be defined as the process of creating new values and offerings to respond to a complex system of service-social benefits (Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2013; Moulaert et al., 2013). Social innovation is contingent not only on the actions of primary actors, but also on the institutional conditions that shape the intricate social systems in which they operate (Moulaert et al., 2013). The concept of social innovation, as transdisciplinary, has the potential to contribute to discussions on well-being and well-becoming in service research (Moulaert et al., 2019).

Vargo and Lusch (2017) suggested the utilisation of S-D logic as a broader framework for value co-creation through the possible extension of macromarketing, including ethics; economic, environmental, and social sustainability; and public policy. Based on this, Laczniak and Murphy (2019) argued that research must be directed toward the societal, ethical, and normative aspects of service ecosystems. In addition, service providers would need to integrate ethics into value-creation strategies within their social activities (Rendtorff & Mattsson, 2009).

A shift in the meaning of ethics from duties or work objectives to values that form the core and whole of a person and an organisation is evident from the literature on ethics (Brady & Hart, 2007). This shift has been assessed in business ethics, which treats ethics as another empirical construct linked to a firm's profitability (Chun et al., 2013; Waddock & Graves, 1997) and executive decision making (Bridges, 2018). However, this practice is in variance with research findings indicating that ethicality is embedded in human nature and that individuals are not just opportunistic in their economic pursuits (Ghoshal, 2005). Conversely, service ethics encompasses more than just organizational ethics, including the broader perspective of service interactions of the purpose, process, and outcomes.

Normative ethics concern the articulation and justification of the fundamental values and principles of how people should live and what they morally ought to do (Laczniak & Murphy, 2006; Schroeder, 2019). We built on normative ethics to understand the ethical perspectives of deontology, teleology, and axiology to discuss three specific questions in relation to modern service interactions: 1. How should customers act?; 2. What do customers think is right?; and 3. What do customers value? This is related to the purpose, process, and outcomes of the service interactions which are explained in the next section.

Systems of exploitation & service

As mentioned earlier, our exploration of service ethics is grounded in S-D logic and TSR. These two major service research topics facilitated our efforts to transform service ethics. S-D logic has always emphasised mutually beneficial service systems (Lusch & Vargo, 2014). This normative approach offers valuable insights into the operations of service systems. However, it fails to explain how to create and maintain such systems, or how to transform service systems that are not mutually beneficial. According to Lusch and Vargo's (2014, p. 117) comprehensive book on S-D logic, 'Forced or involuntary exchange is an interesting area of inquiry but one that S-D logic does not address.'

When ServCollab was introduced (Fisk et al., 2020), it offered a framework of four categories of human interaction: conflict, competition, cooperation, and collaboration. Any of these four categories of interaction can occur in service systems. Based on the roles of the people involved, collaboration was presented as the highest form of human interaction. The roles of dominance and submission are possible in conflict, competition, and cooperation. Collaboration requires mutual benefit. Another ServCollab article (Fisk et al., 2024) presented these four interactions as a hierarchy with conflict at the bottom, rising to competition, rising to cooperation, and finally rising to collaboration. Their hierarchy also overlays the biological concepts of parasitism and mutualism, with parasitism at the bottom of the hierarchy next to conflict, and mutualism at the top of the hierarchy next to collaboration. To elaborate further, they state that service systems have evolved toward collaboration, and describe the systems of exploitation that are possible with conflict, competition, and cooperation. Based on our service ethics framework, we summarise unethical exploitations as follows:

Exploitation

Exploitation of others can be described using three concepts: purpose, process, and outcome.

Purpose – Exploiting other humans or nature is the purpose of conflict, but competitive systems can become exploitative over time. Like conflict, competitive systems are intended to have winners. Therefore, there is always a temptation to cheat. Cooperative systems can be exploited by deceiving people into supporting systems that are exploit them. This is particularly true if the people being exploited have little or no power in a cooperative system.

Process – Exploitative systems are designed to extract resources quickly or slowly from exploited humans or nature. Legal and moral systems of law and ethics have been created to control these processes. Examples include laws of war, antitrust laws, and civil rights laws. Although these laws can slow down aggressive exploiters, they rarely stop them. Of course, the worst processes of exploitation can occur when those holding legal power can easily subjugate those they exploit.

Outcome – If exploitative actors succeed, resources are extracted and transferred to the exploiters (s). If this exploitation is easily repeated, the cycle becomes vicious and oppressive.

Modern service interaction impacts on non-customers

To illustrate the practical application of the conceptual framework, a contextualisation featuring narratives of housemaids traded via various digital service platforms and the

obstacles faced by a visually impaired Paralympian is presented. These narratives leverage the explanatory power of our conceptual framework of service interaction by illustrating that non-customers are intentionally and unintentionally exploited by customers of the services provided on digital platforms. These illustrative narratives represent the common customer interactions that begin with typical service interactions but also include the intended or unintended effects of these interactions on non-service customers.

Understanding modern service interactions extends beyond this dyadic relationship to encompass interactions enabled by innovative digital service system platforms (Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2020). Ethics in the service context are conceptualised in a dialectic between theory and narratives (practice). The narrative approach is used as a method of enquiry (Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gudmundsdóttir, 1997). Narratives permit lifelike accounts of individual experiences (Pepper & Wildy, 2009) and illustrate the impact of ethical judgements and decisions on non-service customers (Conle, 2003).

Illustrative narratives contextualise the deontological and teleological discourse of ethics in service. This study also focuses on the axiological perspectives of the moral implications of individual actions that may harm or benefit others when performed freely (Velasquez & Rostankowski, 1985). Personal values and ethical judgments tend to be interrelated because they are learned through socialisation (Feather, 1988). Furthermore, ethical behaviours tend to be motivated by different values (Hunt & Vitell, 2006; Laczniaik & Murphy, 2019). In this way, the analysis of the value system of an individual provides insights into the motivational aspects of ethical and unethical behaviours (Doran, 2009).

We applied narrative as a research approach to understand how engaged actors experience the world (Huttunen et al., 2001), to represent the social reality of individual lived experiences (Czarniawska, 2004; Hyvärinen, 2008), and to recognize narratives as both creators and conveyors of reality (Huttunen et al., 2001). Using a thematic analysis approach, the team identified patterns, trends, and underlying themes within the narratives to gain valuable insights into the dynamics of the life experiences of non-customers (Glaser, 1999). The explanatory power of our conceptual framework is demonstrated in two narratives: the housemaids and a Paralympian, which illustrate the need for service responsibility to enable well-becoming by transforming service ethics.

The narratives of the housemaids

These housemaid narratives illustrate the societal influence of service customer interactions (enabled by digital service platforms) on non-customers (domestic workers). The narratives focus on migrant domestic workers caught within a sponsorship system, in which their visas are tethered to employers who function as sponsors. Sponsors, typically citizens of the host nation, hold legal responsibility for the sponsored migrants throughout their employment and oversee their repatriation once their employment period ends. Under this system, millions of migrant workers are required to obtain permission from their sponsors to leave their job or exit the country. In recent years, legislation has been strengthened to prevent sponsors from exploiting the system and the act of transferring sponsorships has become illegal. However, the digital platforms available on the Apple Store, Google Play, and Instagram enable sponsors to transfer worker sponsorship, and enabling a black market that exploits vulnerability. Domestic workers,

such as maids, are deprived of fundamental human rights, such as vacation time, the ability to communicate with their families, and keeping their passports, which are confiscated by sponsors. The narratives delve into a modern-day labour arrangement that features characteristics reminiscent of indentured servitude.

The persistence of indentured servitude casts a dark shadow on the lives of domestic workers, whose fates are intricately intertwined with those of their sponsors. This study explores a world in which the transfer of sponsorship, in the form of offers and requests, causes heart-wrenching exploitation and discrimination while skirting the edge of legality. In 2023, we collected public data from various announcements on digital platforms where sponsors either sought or requested the transfer of housemaid sponsorships. The authors collected the data and translated it into English for thematic analysis. The following sections illustrate the prejudices of indentured servitude using the examples from Appendix 1.

1. The dilemma of dehumanizing labour

Several announcements underscore a dehumanising trend: the disposability of domestic workers within the sponsorship transfer system. When their service is no longer needed, housemaids are offered on the market for a fee, without their consent, instead of terminating their contracts and setting them free. This might include transferring or renting them to sponsors from different regions or cities. Economic considerations and the return of previous maids often dictate the fate of these individuals. This reveals the dehumanising nature of a system that treats individuals as expendable commodities.

Commentary on examples:

- Announcement 6 highlights the disposability of labour under an exploitative system, where a newcomer eager to contribute becomes a victim. It also emphasises the sponsors' right to try before deciding.
- Announcement 15 requests a domestic worker under the condition of being available for a two-week trial. This illustrates the dehumanising nature of the labour system.
- Announcement 10 pleas for sponsorship transfer or renting highlights the commodification of domestic labour and the disposability of labour in this system. The urgent request for a housemaid emphasises the need for a more objective evaluation of domestic labour.

2. Nationality-based prejudices

The data reveal a recurring theme centred on nationality, where sponsors express distinct prejudices. In various instances, sponsors explicitly state their desire for a specific nationality and signal discriminatory practices based on their national origin. This illustrates the nuanced landscape in which sponsors, driven by prejudice, make decisions that influence the lives of domestic workers.

Commentary on examples:

- The sponsor in Announcement 4 overtly expresses prejudice for a particular nationality, shedding light on discriminatory practices.

- Announcement 5 provides an example of nationality-based prejudice by stating that the reason for the transfer of sponsorship of a domestic worker is the need for another of a different specific nationality.
- Announcement 17 explicitly requests a domestic worker from one of two specific nationalities at the best price and does not specify any additional required job skills.

3. Religion-based prejudices

Religious considerations emerged as a significant factor influencing sponsor bias. In certain cases, the desire to practise religious obligations prompts sponsors to seek sponsorship transfers from domestic workers. Sponsors, in turn, express explicit prejudices based on religion, revealing a layer of control that extends beyond the realm of work.

Commentary on examples:

- In Announcement 2, the housemaid's request for regular prayers influences the sponsor's decision to seek a sponsorship transfer.
- Announcement 9 explicitly states the religion of the domestic worker as a positive specification, as it matches the common religion in the country.
- Announcement 14 demonstrates the sponsor's request for a worker with a specific cultural background, including strict adherence to religious considerations during the selection process.

4. Sponsorship transfer fees

Although not always explicitly mentioned, economic considerations play a pivotal role in sponsorship transfers. Some sponsors emphasise specific criteria, such as cleanliness, reflecting their willingness to pay a certain fee for transferring the sponsorship of housemaids who meet their standards. Most announcements mention sponsorship transfer fees and/or monthly salary.

Commentary on examples:

- In Announcement 1, the sponsor justifies the sponsorship transfer based on the return of a former housemaid and cost considerations.
- Announcement 13 requests a domestic worker with reasonable pricing as the only specific requirement.
- Announcement 12 explicitly requests the transfer of a domestic worker under the condition that the transfer fee does not exceed a specific amount.

5. Control over personal freedoms

Sponsorship transfers affect the work and personal lives of domestic workers. In some cases, sponsorship transfers occur shortly after a domestic worker arrives in the country, highlighting the instability and uncertainty that these workers may face because of systemic prejudice.

Commentary on examples:

- Announcement 7 highlights the paradox of newfound freedom turning into captivity when a domestic worker with 12 years of experience faces sponsorship transfer,

despite having worked for the sponsor for only three months and having a sibling working for the same sponsor.

- Announcement 8 showcases a young domestic worker who was brought to the country by their current sponsor and has worked for them for only 3 months. Sponsorship is offered for transfer due to the sponsor's private family arrangement, which has nothing to do with the domestic worker. The domestic worker has fallen victim to this prejudiced system.
- Announcement 3 states that a domestic worker is being transferred due to her sponsor's desire to study abroad, despite having only started the job one and a half months ago and had not yet completed the trial period. This highlights the restricted lives of the domestic workers.

Appendix 1 shows examples of announcements published on multiple digital platforms, where sponsors are looking to transfer the sponsorship of housemaids or request that the sponsorship be transferred to them.

The narrative of a Paralympian

This narrative was chosen to illustrate the daily challenges of many physically impaired and disabled individuals and others as non-customers who are impacted by the modern service interaction of customers with digital platforms. Captured through a semi-structured interview, this narrative highlights the life experience and daily challenges of a visually impaired Paralympic champion. The visually impaired individual is a gold-medallist Paralympian who normally has no problem navigating in the streets and going back and forth to his workplace. He also participated in extreme challenges beyond the Paralympic Games designed for athletes with physical disabilities to promote inclusivity. Unfortunately, the inconsiderate behaviour of electric scooter users has made their navigation of streets very dangerous. These are words from the Paralympian's letter to the Swedish Police (for which he gave us permission to publish).

The reason I am writing is that I am blind. Since the electric scooter rental started in Karlstad this summer, I have had to parry hundreds and hundreds of electric scooters that have been standing and lying on footpaths, sidewalks, along house walls, at pedestrian crossings, on boardwalks and in every imaginable place where they should of course not be standing.

This lack of consideration from customers using digital platforms jeopardises the accessibility, safety, and human rights of vulnerable non-customers, such as Paralympians.

In modern urban environments, electric scooters are increasingly utilised as transportation modes. The rapid expansion of this industry has presented several challenges, notably concerning the responsible usage and parking. His exceptional resilience and determination in daily life relies on the accessibility and safety of public pathways, emphasising the significance of urban environments that are both safe and accessible. Electric scooters often obstruct sidewalks and pedestrian pathways, creating significant obstacles for him as he navigates independently.

When I was walking on one of the footpaths in the city, the night before I had noted with the white cane that there were two electric scooters parked on the right side of my footpath. Therefore, I was extra active with the white stick this morning to feel on the right side so

that I could identify the bikes and not bump into them ... But, I tripped over a scooter that was absolutely in the middle of the footpath, i.e. on my left and which I could not detect with the cane because I was busy keeping track of the two scooters on the right so I wouldn't hurt myself on them

a visually impaired Paralympian says.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ensures equal transportation and public space access for individuals with disabilities. Irresponsible electric scooter placement violates these rights, impacting not only the visually impaired Paralympian but also many others with disabilities. Although laws govern scooter use and parking, their enforcement is challenging. Irresponsible parking violates laws that affect safety and accessibility. Balancing the interests of different urban groups, including people with disabilities, scooter users, and pedestrians, is crucial for an inclusive urban environment.

Service ethics takes a broader perspective than organizational ethics by including the purpose, process, and outcome of service interactions. As shown in [Table 2](#), exploitation is characterised by conflict-driven intentions, potentially leading to cheating and oppressive cycles, as in the case of indentured servitude. Legal and moral systems seek to control exploitative processes, but may not prevent aggressive exploitation, as presented in the narratives. By contrast, ethical services rooted in mutualism benefit both humans and nature. Mutualistic service systems are designed for careful resource exchange and prevent exploitation by allowing participants to leave. The outcome involves sharing resources in the present and protecting them in the future, aligned with the principles of maintenance, preservation, and conservation. The text emphasises the importance of designing systems that promote mutual benefits and safeguard resources for present and future well-being.

The relationship between service customers and providers in collaborative service platforms, emphasising value co-creation, is central to contemporary service management, and has added significance when viewed through the lens of service ethics. Value co-creation moves away from the traditional model of passive customers receiving services from

Table 2. Comparing exploitation narratives versus service ethics.

	Purpose	Process	Outcome
Intended exploitation of non-customers	A system that primarily benefits service users by exploiting non-customers.	Systematic exploitation	Indentured service workers are systematically exploited and forbidden their basic human rights
Unintended exploitation of non-customers	Exploiting service systems. Neglecting the scooters in a way that is harmful for non-customers.	Neglectful exploitation of resources Not respecting the rules	Exploiting competitive service systems Misuse of the scooters
Ethical service practices	Ethical practices of service customers. Organizations trying to prevent exploitations through service platforms, protecting the customers, non-customers, and the public.	Collaboration that mutually benefits sponsors and workers and enables the well-becoming of workers. Mutualistic service systems Respecting the user of the sidewalk Organization monitoring how their platforms are being used	Employers getting the services they demand in a system that enables workers well-becoming and preserves their rights. Mutual benefit in service interactions: Respecting every user of the sidewalk. Organizations prevent exploitation.

providers, recognising that value is collaboratively generated. This shift promotes collaborative, ethical, and socially responsible practices, considering fairness, transparency, empowerment, and a commitment to well-being. The service co-creation process, viewed through the prism of service ethics, fosters dynamic and mutually beneficial interactions, and promotes shared responsibility and ethical engagement. By prioritising service ethics, collaborative platforms can establish trustworthy and responsible relationships with customers, positively impacting both individual well-being and broader societal contexts.

Implications and research agenda

Ethical concerns pervade human societies. We address the implications of our conceptualisation of service ethics in three areas: research, practice, and society.

Implications for research and practicing service ethics

The relationships between customers, providers, and collaborative platforms are vital for assessing the societal and managerial implications of this study. Emphasising collaboration and ethical practices in value co-creation, the focus is on fairness, transparency, and empowerment for individual and societal well-being. In a collaborative economy, responsibility includes ethical considerations such as transparency, fairness, and environmental sustainability. Social responsibility is crucial for service providers on collaborative platforms, covering inclusivity, fairness, and support for well-being. These ethical considerations extend beyond financial transactions to include community building and sustainability, thereby fostering a more ethical and sustainable digital economy. The identified issues highlight the potential consequences and ethical challenges within the relationships among service customers, service providers, and collaborative platforms. [Table 3](#) illustrates recommendations for future research, focusing on perspectives, implications, and future studies.

By addressing these implications, service researchers, practitioners, and policymakers can contribute to service ethics thinking, and develop ethical guidelines, regulatory frameworks, and best practices to foster a more inclusive, transparent, and sustainable digital economy.

Implications for practicing service ethics

Nasr and Fisk (2019) shed light on the crucial aspect of understanding human suffering within the realm of service provision. Recognising and addressing suffering aligns with ethical imperatives and underscores the moral responsibility of service providers to promote well-being. This underscores the need for service practices that prioritise empathy, compassion, and proactive measures to alleviate suffering. Service ethics play an important role in service research by shaping how service interactions unfold on service system platforms. This study highlights the following points for fostering ethical business practices:

- The development of service ethics within the service research field is essential for enabling the design of ethical interactions on service system platforms.

Table 3. Recommendations and implications for future research.

Service systems	Perspectives	Implications	Future Study
Mitigating exploitation of vulnerable populations	Understanding the vulnerabilities of different populations and how technology may exacerbate or alleviate these vulnerabilities	Understanding the vulnerabilities of different populations and how technology may exacerbate or alleviate these vulnerabilities	Further exploration into the effectiveness of different regulatory approaches and the long-term impact of technological interventions on vulnerable communities.
Research experience of exploited individuals	Amplifying the voices of exploited individuals to inform policies and interventions	Collaborating with relevant agencies can lead to more targeted and effective support for exploited populations	Longitudinal studies to track the effectiveness of interventions and to understand the evolving needs of exploited individuals over time
Ethical considerations in language use	Recognizing the power dynamics inherent in language use on digital platforms and its potential for harm or empowerment	Developing guidelines for responsible language use could foster more ethical communication and content creation online	Continuous monitoring and adaptation of guidelines in response to evolving digital communication trends and technologies
Addressing discrimination in automated systems	Acknowledging the risks of algorithmic discrimination and its societal implications	Interventions and regulations are necessary to ensure fairness in digital marketplaces	Developing metrics to measure the effectiveness of anti-discrimination measures and identifying areas for improvement in automated systems
Algorithmic accountability in search engines and platforms	Recognizing the power and potential biases inherent in algorithmic decision making	Ethical frameworks can promote transparency and fairness in online service provision	Evaluating the impact of algorithmic accountability measures on user trust and platform effectiveness
Service systems and Eco-system services	Perspectives	Implications	Future Study
Exploitation of life and the environment	Recognizing the moral agency of non-human entities and their right to ethical treatment	Developing frameworks for responsible environmental stewardship can promote sustainability in digital economies	Assessing the feasibility and scalability of implementing ethical frameworks across different sectors and industries
Environmental externalities and planetary exploitation	Understanding the interconnectedness of digital platforms and environmental impact	Encouraging service providers to adopt sustainable practices can mitigate environmental harm	Quantifying the environmental footprint of digital platforms and assessing the effectiveness of sustainable practices in reducing it

- Ethical and collaborative value creation is imperative for both social and digital interactions.
- In the modern era, ethical decision making requires anticipating and addressing potential ethical challenges in both direct and indirect service interactions facilitated by service systems.

Implications for society

In the context of this article on service ethics, it is imperative to underscore the significance of integrating the principles of social inclusion into service practices, as emphasised by (Fisk et al., 2018). This integration goes beyond merely addressing the needs of diverse individuals to actively bridge social divides and nurture a sense of belonging within the community. By adopting inclusive strategies, service providers can not only uphold ethical standards, but also contribute to fostering a more equitable and cohesive society.

New technologies such as the digital service platforms described in this article are ethically neutral. However, they present new choices and ethical hazards for humanity. Ultimately, human decision making determines whether the use of these technologies is ethical or exploitative. Therefore, human societies must adapt and cultivate ethical behaviours to responsibly navigate the evolving technological landscape.

Conclusion

This study explored the ethical complexities of service interactions in the modern era. While service interactions are typically conceptualised as dyadic, our research broadens the conceptualisation of service interactions to consider the impact of services on non-customers who are intentionally or unintentionally affected by the service. The integration of digital service platforms into modern life has expanded the range of service interactions and has created new ethical challenges.

Our service ethics conceptualisation suggests a virtuous path toward resilient, harmonious, and regenerative service systems, ensuring ethical considerations in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world. Service interactions should be mutually beneficial. Service interactions in the digital age can be unethical and contradict the modern conceptualisation of service, as developed in S-D logic. In future service interactions, individuals should adhere to the principles of mutualistic logic, which will result in their collaborative behaviour becoming inherently ethical and encouraging others to engage in similar collaborative behaviour.

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Appendix 1: Public data of customer interactions on digital service platforms exploiting non-customers

Offering sponsorships

1. 'Transferring sponsorship a (nationality), 24 years old, 6 months experience, monthly salary (amount): A housemaid from (nationality), have had her for 6 months, salary (amount), very kind and willing to serve. Reason to transferring the sponsorship is that my previous housemaid is back, for (amount) net despite the fact that she cost me way more than that, God is my witness.'
2. '(Nationality) housemaid for transferring sponsorship, 47 years old, salary (amount). The reason is that she wants to go to prayers once every month/other month'
3. 'Transferring sponsorship of a (nationality) housemaid: Transferring sponsorship A housemaid from (country). Very good at household work, very calm and good with children, monthly salary (amount). Educated and speaks English well. Reason for transferring the sponsorship is that there is no need for her anymore due to traveling abroad to study. She is willing to work for 2 years, started a month and a half ago, and hasn't finished the trial period yet. Location: (city). Price for transferring sponsorship is (amount).'
4. 'I have a housemaid to transfer sponsorship, location (city), good at household work and (country) cuisine, warm hearted with kids, understands (local language), 27 years old, salary (amount), reason for transferring her sponsorship is that we got another from (region) and so we don't need her anymore.'
5. 'I have a (nationality) housemaid, 27 years old, good at household work but needs more training. Salary (amount). Reason is the need for another nationality.'
6. 'A housemaid available, new in the country science 6 months. Loving children and willing to work. Reason is that there is no need for her services, you have the right to try. Price (amount) excluding fees. Location: (city).'
7. 'A (nationality) housemaid, 37 years old, 12 years of experience. She started with us 3 months ago and her sister is also working for our family. We are transferring sponsorship because we don't need her services any more as our (nationality) housemaid is back from vacation.'
8. 'A (nationality) housemaid is available for transferring sponsorship. The reason is that my elderly grandmother refuses to get helped. The housemaid has been in (country) for 3 months, the contract is newly signed. It is her first time in (country) and still young. Honestly, she is very patient and caring with elderly people and loving to children, warm hearted and fast. She cleans the whole house even if it is a large one. Location (city), price of transferring (amount). (Phone number).'
9. 'A housemaid is available for transferring sponsorship, in (city). Her nationality is (nationality), she is a (religion), 36 years old. She arrived 3 months ago and has a resident permit for a year. Very good at household work and clean, salary (amount). Her contract was transferred to me to care for my mother, the reason is that we don't need her now. Please contact me only on WhatsApp.'

Requesting sponsorships

10. 'Requesting a housemaid for transferring sponsorship or renting, from (country) or (country) Urgent request of housemaid for transferring sponsorship or renting, the most important criteria is cleanliness.'
 11. 'I am looking for a (nationality) or (nationality) housemaid for transferring sponsorship in (city). Must be 35 years old or more and loving to children.'
 12. 'Requesting a housemaid from (country), price can't be more than (amount). Location: (city).'
 13. 'I would like a housemaid at a reasonable price, should be in (city). If you have an offer, please send a private message with the details, amount and phone number.'
 14. 'Requesting a housemaid from (region), experienced with the work and must be (religion). Salary (amount) and for a reasonable sponsorship transferring amount.'
 15. 'Requesting a (nationality) housemaid for transferring sponsorship directly from the contractor. Must be good at cooking and household work. Must be available for a 2 weeks trial period. Contact only on WhatsApp.'
 16. 'I would like a housemaid for transferring sponsorship, directly from the contractor, good with children.'
 17. 'Requesting a housemaid (nationality) or (nationality) for transferring sponsorship for the best price.'
 18. 'Requesting a housemaid (nationality) or (nationality), I have a one year old daughter.'
 19. 'Greetings. I need a (nationality) housemaid for monthly services or transferring sponsorship.'
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