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A framework for examining theoretical and empirical perspectives on definitions of service

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Abstract: In recent years, little research has considered how theoretical definitions of service relate to practice. The purpose of this study was to compare the definitions of service given by practitioners to the approaches presented in the service marketing literature. Based on a literature review, a framework was developed to illustrate changes in service marketing thinking. The framework was used to analyse empirical data, consisting of definitions of service presented by practitioners during thematic interviews conducted in Finland. The findings indicated that the practitioners' definitions reflected the diverse theories presented in the service marketing literature. However, no firm evidence could be found that, for example, practitioners' age, sex, or service sector would affect the definitions they gave. The findings indicated that both researchers and practitioners should be aware of the diversity of definitions. In companies, practical problems may be avoided by formulating well-structured common definitions.

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1 Introduction

What do we mean when we speak about a service or services? As simple as the question sounds, the answer is complex. After visiting a bank, a person could say that the service was good, meaning that the *customer service* was good. When the management team of a company discusses the company's services, they talk about the *services offered to the company's customers*. Many companies have internal services or *support functions*, such as information and communication technology (ICT) support or financial services. On the other hand, if a company decides to use service design methods to develop its services, this actually refers to development of *service operations*. Whatever the perspective, descriptions of services often suffer from a number of shortcomings, weakening their feasibility for use in service management. If employees of an organisation understand the concept of service very differently, it can be one of the hidden reasons of the day-to-day management problems.

The importance of services in economic life, and their significance in society, have increased considerably (Grönroos, 1989, 1994, 2006). Today, in the majority of national economies, most people are employed in the service sector, and the share of services in economies has grown, while that of the manufacturing sector has decreased (Buckley and Majumdar, 2018). The growth of the service sector is probably the main reason why research on services boomed in recent years, with various research disciplines turning their attention towards services. One of the key areas of service research is service marketing research, which has evolved since the 1970s from marketing studies (Ganz and Meiren, 2002). For that reason, the framework used in this research was built based on the service marketing research.

The starting point for the definitions of service presented in different service marketing theories depends on whether the service is viewed from an organisation's or customer's perspective. Industrial production has a centuries-old tradition, so theories and vocabulary based on a product-centred perspective prevailed; for example, in marketing research, a service was understood as an immaterial product (Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004; Lusch and Vargo, 2006). However, from the customer's point of view, the history of service marketing theories and their vocabulary are only a few decades old. Theoretical analyses of service- and customer-centeredness were recognised as perspectives only in the 2000s. A paradigm shift in service marketing research occurred in 2004, when Vargo and Lusch (2004) launched 'the new service-dominant logic', where service is placed in focus, and consequently all business operations can be viewed as service-oriented, and all exchanges as service-for-service exchanges (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

Despite the abundance of service-related research and literature, as well as the massive amount of service-related development work carried out in firms, organisations still face problems regarding vague employee responsibilities and customer expectations, to mention just a few examples. One obvious reason is that, as the definition of service

has become wider while moving towards service-orientated perspectives, today we face a situation which Stauss (2005, p.222) describes as: "A general definition of service that includes virtually everything defines virtually nothing."

This study examined how employees of different organisations comprehend the concept of service. The purpose of the study was to compare the interviewed practitioners' personal perceptions to the approaches presented in the service marketing literature, and thereby to discuss theoretical and empirical perspectives on definitions of service. A framework based on the service marketing literature was developed and the definitions given by practitioners were analysed in relation to it. The study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1 How do employees of organisations perceive the concept of service?

RQ2 How does the background of the employees, in terms of age, sex, or service sector, affect their personal perceptions?

RQ3 How do the definitions of service reflect the theoretical discussion presented in the service marketing literature?

The paper is organised as follows. First, the service marketing literature is reviewed and a framework is presented to illustrate the changes in the service marketing literature in recent decades regarding service thinking and focus. Thereafter, the data collection and analysis are explained and the empirical findings are presented and discussed, followed by the discussion and concluding remarks.

2 Literature review

Services have been studied from the perspectives of service innovation, new service development, engineering and design, service marketing, business management, human resources management, operations management, and similar (Ganz and Meiren, 2002). Consequently, service research has contradictory views concerning service characteristics, as Edvardsson et al. (2005) discovered in their literature review of the concept of service. They argued that most scholars see services as activities, deeds, processes, and interactions, and that most definitions underline the fact that services are provided as solutions to customers' problems. Furthermore, Edvardsson et al. (2005) conducted a survey of service experts and found that most of the experts emphasised the value given to the customer and mentioned key words such as performance, processes, and deeds. Edvardsson et al. (2005) showed that even the concepts used to define services are unclear, because activities, deeds, processes, and solutions are ambiguous. Definitions of service are thus vague and will be elucidated only when the theoretical topics discussed in the service research increase. More precise definitions will be needed, as service research matures (Brax, 2013; Edvardsson et al., 2005).

Brax (2013) reviewed key operations management publications in her thesis on industrial and knowledge-intensive services, stating that management scientists avoided providing explicit service definitions. However, the process element is common in most approaches. Brax (2013) claimed that the operations management literature identified eight different approaches to defining service:

1   exclusion approaches (definition through what services are not)

2   quasi-conceptual approaches (describing services through their characteristics)

3   implicit process approaches

4   explicit process approaches

5   outcome-based approaches (definitions through results, outputs, or outcomes)

6   experience-focused approaches (emphasising customer experience)

7   value-focused approaches (including benefits, immaterial aspects of outcomes, and co-creation)

8   institutional approaches (examining the institutional structure of service provision, mechanisms, and resource perspectives).

Furthermore, according to Brax (2013), in the tradition of service research, services have been found to be fundamentally different from physical products (i.e., goods), thus requiring different principles and operating models for service management and development. One well-known idea based on this distinction between products and services declares that intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable, and perishable (IHIP) characteristics are typical for services (Zeithaml et al., 1985). However, a common understanding of the distinctions between services and physical products and the definition of services has not been achieved (Brax, 2013). Brax's (2013, p.69) own study constructed the following modular process-based definition of services: "Services are offerings in which at least the core part of the market exchange between a provider and a customer is provided in the form of process-based components that are inseparable from their production resources and co-involve both parties."

To date, service marketing has been the major field studying the basic concepts and theories of service and it has been one of the driving forces behind service research (Ganz and Meiren, 2002); therefore, this article discusses theoretical perspectives on service in the service marketing literature. Based on these theories, a framework was developed to underpin the data analysis.

2.1   Theoretical perspectives on service in service marketing research

The evolution of service marketing research can be divided into different phases. The first phase, in the 1970s, was called the 'slow-moving' phase of service marketing, since it was a time of experimentation and seeking legitimacy of service marketing and research (Brown et al., 1994). According to Grönroos (1978) and Edvardsson et al. (2002, pp.19–20), marketing generally focused on standardised products and individual transactions, and service marketing followed the principles of physical product marketing: relatively little attention was paid to services. Shostack (1977) promoted service marketing as an acceptable field of research and separated it from product-based marketing. According to Brown et al. (1994), many researchers took the risk when writing about service marketing. The early service marketing researchers were risk takers because academia by its nature is rather conservative and new ideas and concepts gain acceptance slowly. The early service marketing became later known as goods-dominant logic (Lusch and Vargo, 2006).

Brown et al. (1994) described the second and third phases of service marketing, which occurred in the 1980s. The period 1980–1985 represented a time of high interest in service marketing. The services versus goods debate began to decrease and the foundation was laid for service marketing to flourish. Grönroos (1990, pp.53–58) and Lovelock (1983) presented a summary of service classifications, which also reflected the historical development of service thinking before the 1980s. According to Grönroos (1990), many different approaches to services were presented in the early literature (Chase, 1978; Grönroos, 1979; Hill, 1977; Kotler, 1980; Lovelock, 1980, 1983; Rathmell, 1974; Sasser et al., 1978; Schmenner, 1986; Shostack, 1977; Thomas, 1978; Vandermerwe and Chadwick, 1989), referring to the leasing of goods; type of seller and buyer; purchasing motives and purchasing practices; relationship between physical products and services; services affecting people and goods; longevity of service; physical and psychological impact; private and group services; device-related services; type of service and customers; basic characteristics of demand, content and benefits of service; and delivery and interaction in service.

According to Brown et al. (1994), service marketing theories and research increased greatly in the late 1980s. New concepts were introduced, such as market orientation, service quality, relationship marketing, supply management, value chains and resources, and networking. The 1980s can be characterised as a decade of services, since services and market supply became important and business was based on service encounters or 'moments of truth' [Grönroos, 1982; Edvardsson et al., (2002), pp.19–20]. The idea of moments of truth was that service was realised in the interaction with a customer and could not be determined in advance; hence, researchers began to study customer relationships in various markets. The Nordic School of Service Marketing was born in the 1980s, triggered by the growth of the service sector (Grönroos 1989, 1994, 2006). At that time, service-centred approaches sought a new kind of logic for the marketing of service products and, meanwhile, new services were being developed. Customers played an active role in service situations, in shaping the outcomes (Grönroos, 1994) and, therefore, in assessing service quality (Grönroos, 1982; Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988). The number of books, journal articles, conference proceedings, and dissertations dealing with service marketing issues exploded during the 1980s.

In the 1990s, the broadening of the service marketing research continued. Research was conducted on service quality and quality management (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; Bitner, 1992; Fisk et al., 1993), customer satisfaction [Bitner, 1990; Edvardsson et al., (2002), pp.20–21; Grönroos, 1994, 1997; Parasuraman et al., 1988], and customer encounters, with the 'moment of truth' as an example (Grönroos, 2006). Moreover, customer interactions (Bitner, 1990, 1992), the impact of the physical environment on customer experiences of interactions [Berry and Parasuraman, (1991), pp.95–98], and the role of the customer in service production (Edvardsson and Olsson, 1996) were studied. A broad research theme, concerning service in relation to service processes, also emerged in the 1990s (Grönroos, 2006), thus distinguishing process or experiential aspects and outcome or deliverable aspects of the service (Bitner et al., 1990; Tatavarthy et al., 2019). In business-to-business (B2B) markets, focusing on the core business of a customer company was seen as a competitive advantage in service marketing, resulting in relationship management and relationship marketing becoming important research topics [Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Håkansson et al., (2009), p.33, p.67]. Payne and Holt (1999) emphasised that the value of customer relationships in business markets is based on long-term relationships built over time; value was linked to loyalty and quality

concepts (Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000). The concept of value was embedded in network theories of retailers and distribution channels (Evans and Berman, 2001; Woodruff, 1997). Attention was paid to increasingly valuable perspectives, such as accumulation of relationship marketing and change relating to long-term customer relationships (Eggert et al., 2006; Ravald and Grönroos, 1996). However, these approaches only considered the perspectives of service providers, focusing on transferring value to customers.

Business has changed significantly in the twenty-first century, due to globalisation and the emergence of more demanding customer groups and leading to a sharpening of service marketing. The literature presented the idea that, if a company moves away from its customers, partners, or competitors, it loses its competitiveness (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000). Businesses could remain competitive by developing and designing services, products, and experiences that customers valued and wanted to buy. Customers became part of the enhanced network; they co-created and extracted business value. They were collaborators, co-developers, and competitors. Especially for B2B customers, new media tools were used to build relationships between customers and other stakeholders, requiring continuous learning and innovation. Attention was paid to business networks and intellectual capital that depended on creativity [Edvardsson et al., (2002), pp.20–21]. Twenty-first century studies claimed that value could only be determined by users, because its creation occurred in connection with the use of the service (Lusch et al., 2007). According to Shah et al. (2006), customer-centric service marketing involved customer service, customer relationship management, and selling customer benefits. Customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, and the value of customership were researched, customer portfolios were built, and customer information became extremely valuable. Vargo and Lusch (2004) launched the concept of service-dominant logic, which focused on the service. According to them, service marketing research should not focus on the differences between products and services, but on how value was co-created with customers: the biggest differences were between different services or different products, rather than between services and products. The prevalent idea that products were concrete and services were abstract was far too narrow to be useful in service-dominant logic. Customer involvement was vital in the service-dominant logic, since service activities were conducted with customers and customers were involved in the development of service production, leading to customers being seen as partners. Thus, a key concept in service-dominant logic was value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Tommasetti et al., 2017), and service – the process of using one's resources for the benefit of another actor – was identified as the foundation of economic and social exchange (Vargo et al., 2020). Vargo and Lusch (2004) concluded that organisations still viewed transactions primarily from the service provider's perspective, rather than from the customer's point of view. Recently, Bhatia and Bhat (2020) pointed out that organisation's service culture is one of the important elements enhancing co-creation of value with the customers. According to Grönroos (2008): there are at least three different aspects of the concept of service as it is used in the literature:

1   service as an activity

2   service as a perspective on the customer's value creation

3   service as a perspective on the provider's activities (business logic).

Edvardsson et al. (2002) predicted that, in the 2010s, competition would focus on customer value. This was linked to the idea that customer value creation should be supported; for example, by providers and customers pooling resources. As a result, all actors were involved in economic exchanges and not separated from each other as traditional approaches claimed: they all were social actors in a common value-creation process (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Gummesson, 2011). According to Gummesson (2011), the concept of the customer was also expanding: customers or operators were consumers, users, corporate customers, and other stakeholders outside and inside organisations. In the customer-dominant business logic, the customer – not the service, product, and/or production – was the focus. According to Helkkula (2010), there was a difference between talking about service as singular or plural. Service in a singular form included the entire organisation's strategic thinking, culture, and measures to provide the customer with a good experience. Services in plural meant different service products that were offered to customers. The idea was that the service was evaluated and reviewed based on customers' needs; not based on the service provider's offerings (Strandvik et al., 2011). Organisations' actions in developing services the customers wanted were peripheral, but what the customer did to achieve his goals was central. The customer-dominant business logic provided a good framework for the co-creation of service together with customers. It viewed deeper into customers' life and value was created – or not – in a customer context. According to Grönroos and Voima (2013), in the customer-oriented perspective on service business, the value of the service was assessed by the customer on the basis of his previous experiences. It further deepened the service provider's customer understanding (Heinonen et al., 2010), and appeared in settings, where the service provider utilised insights of a customer's life and ecosystem (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015; Seppänen et al., 2017).

2.2 A framework presenting changes in service marketing thinking

Table 1 combines the temporal, strategic, and targeting dimensions of service according to the service marketing literature. It illustrates how theories have shifted from traditional product- and transaction-related thinking, and developed stepwise through strategic and targeting dimensions, to finally achieve a deeper understanding of customers' needs and customer value in relation to service and service processes (Alakoski, 2014; Edvardsson et al., 2002). The information outlined in Table 1 was used as a framework to analyse the empirical data.

In summary, the evolution of service marketing thinking can be divided into roughly three phases. The starting point and definitions of words changed when viewed through product-oriented, service-oriented, or customer-oriented perspectives. Changes in thinking could be understood by observing how definitions of service were linked to different service business logics and related service marketing theories.

For decades, the strategic focus of service marketing was associated with physical product transactions, interaction (moments of truth and service), customer relationships (service processes), and creativity and networks (co-creation of customer value). In addition, in the Nordic School of Service Marketing, competition for service value was added as a strategic focus in the 2010s, in the context of customers' needs; thus, service marketing's strategic perspective developed from product-oriented to customer-oriented thinking. The customer-dominant business logic defined value according to how a person individually defined, experienced, and valued it, emotionally and personally (Heinonen

et al., 2010); hence companies could only support value creation. Vocabularies change only when perspectives change. As business logics, marketing strategies, and customer dimensions changed, customers moved from being objects of marketing to active subjects. According to Carlborg and Kindström (2014), in a flexible service process, the customer was an active player: service process components were integrated with each other to support both service provider and customer processes.

Table 1   Evolution of service marketing understanding and definitions of service through the decades

Temporal dimension	Strategic focus	Evolution of service marketing understanding and definitions of service
1970s	Transaction (product)	Little attention was paid to services (Brown et al., 1994). Marketing focused on standardised products (Edvardsson et al., 2002). Service was perceived as abstract.
1980s	Interaction (service)	Service marketing emerged. Theories and research regarding service marketing increased (Brown et al., 1994). The 1980s could be characterised as a decade of services, since services and markets were important, and business was based on service encounters or 'moments of truth' (Grönroos, 1982, 1990).
1990s	Relationship (service processes)	Broadening of service marketing research continued (e.g., Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; Bitner, 1992; Edvardsson and Olsson, 1996; Fisk et al., 1993; Grönroos, 1994); for example, new research topics related to service quality and quality management, customer satisfaction, customer encounters, customer interactions, and the role of the customer in service production or processes. In business marketing, relationship management and relationship marketing were important research topics (e.g., Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Ravald and Grönroos, 1996).
2000s	Service-centric	Businesses could remain competitive by developing and designing services, products, and experiences that customers wanted and valued (Edvardsson et al., 2002). The focus was on service. Globalisation or the emergence of more demanding customer groups led to a sharpening of service marketing. Customer involvement increased and the customer was seen as a partner in the service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Customer-centric service marketing features included customer service, customer relationship management, and the selling of customer benefits (Shah et al., 2006). Service was an activity, service was a perspective on the customer's value creation, and service was a perspective on the provider's activities (business logic) (Grönroos, 2008).
2010s	Customer-centric	The customer was the focus and customer understanding deepened. Service needed to be co-created with customers (Heinonen et al., 2010; Seppänen et al., 2017). The service was evaluated and reviewed based on customer needs, rather than service provider offerings (Strandvik et al., 2011). The value of the service was assessed by customers according to their own experiences (Grönroos and Voima, 2013). In the customer-dominant logic, the customer was the focus; not the service, product, and/or production (Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Heinonen et al., 2010; Helkkula et al., 2012).

3 Methodology

This research used an exploratory and descriptive approach that depended on recognising emerging themes and was practice-oriented [Niiniluoto, (1997), p.26; Yin, 1994]. Descriptive research describes phenomena in practice and seeks to identify the underlying factors that facilitate understanding [Niiniluoto, (1997), p.26]. The purpose of describing the phenomena is to answer questions of what or how. Only by describing them is it possible to determine whether general assumptions can be made about the phenomena [Varto, (1996), p.87].

The previous section presented a literature review on service marketing literature illustrating the changes in the service marketing literature in recent decades regarding service thinking and focus. The literature review was needed to find an answer to research question three asking how the definitions of service reflected the theoretical discussion presented in the service marketing literature. Therefore, based on the literature review a framework was built against which the empirical data was compared.

Qualitative research methods, thematic interviews, and content analysis were employed to facilitate increased understanding of definitions of service. Qualitative research methods are especially suitable for the early stages of research, when comprehension of the reality is low and it is essential to create explanations for phenomena, or to develop and test theories (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graeber, 2007; Golicic and Davis, 2012; Voss et al., 2002). According to Silverman (2011, p.17), the qualitative research process considers the inputs and outputs of a phenomenon and can be characterised as data-driven research (Eskola and Suoranta, 2000).

3.1 Data collection

Empirical data was collected to find answers to research questions one asking how the interviewed practitioners perceived the concept of service, and two asking how the background of the employees, in terms of age, sex, or service sector, affected their personal perceptions. Furthermore, the framework built based on the literature review was used to find an answer to research question three asking how these definitions of service reflected the theoretical discussion presented in the service marketing literature.

The data was collected through thematic, semi-structured interviews [Silverman, (2011), p.162]. Polaine et al. (2013, p.50) argued that interviews are the most effective way of encouraging interviewees to pay attention to their own context and helping them to express how they see things. Interviewees' interpretations of the topic under investigation, and the meanings they attach to it, are vital outcomes of thematic interviews.

Face-to-face thematic interviews were conducted by 95 master's students from service business courses at Turku School of Economics and Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Finland. Service businesses, companies, and organisations provided the context of the study. The students were asked to identify suitable interviewees from different organisations. The most important criterion in choosing interviewees was that the interviewees were employed, and therefore had hands-on experience, in services. Moreover, many of the students were familiar with service businesses, having studied service management and worked in service organisations. The interviewees' and students' workplaces were located in southern Finland.

The thematic interviews consisted of only a single open theme: "describe, in your own words, what a service is." The theme was kept as open as possible, and no ready-made options were given to the interviewees, to ensure that they shared their own spontaneous definitions. The assumption was that a spontaneous response best describes how the respondent comprehends the concept of service. However, if necessary, the students were instructed to guide the interviewees: "Please do not list your own company's services or use Google. Every answer is correct."

The interviews were conducted from October to December 2017 and the results were collected in the Webropol online survey system. The data provided background information on the interviewees, as well as descriptions of what service meant to them. Altogether 110 people responded and the descriptions were documented verbatim. The name of the service company or organisation, and the position, age, and sex of the interviewee, were documented as background information, together with the interviewer's name and e-mail address and the date of the interview.

Of the 110 interviewees, 58% were female, 41% male, and 1% of unknown sex (Table 2). The interviewer estimated the age of the interviewee according to three categories: under 30, 30–49, and 50–70. Most interviewees (44%) were under 30 years of age (Table 3) and the lowest number of interviewees (20%) were aged 50–70 years.

Table 2   Interviewees by sex

Sex	Number of interviewees	Proportion (%)
Female	64	58
Male	45	41
Unknown	1	1
Total	110	100

Table 3   Interviewees by estimated age

Age	Under 30 (years)		30–49 (years)		50–70 (years)	
	Number of interviewees	Proportion (%)	Number of interviewees	Proportion (%)	Number of interviewees	Proportion (%)
Female	28	44	23	36	13	20
Male	19	42	17	38	9	20
Unknown	1	100	0	0	0	0
Total	48	44	40	36	22	20

The interviewees worked in various positions in different kinds of service organisations, representing 16 different sectors (Table 4). Most of them (54%) worked in four sectors: well-being (18%), tourism (14%), retail (12%), and catering (10%). Both sexes worked in all sectors, except those of event organising, education, and safety. Most men worked in the retail, tourism, and/or catering sectors, while well-being and tourism were the main sectors for females.

Table 4 Interviewees by sector

Sector	Number of interviewees	Proportion (%)
Well-being	20	18
Tourism	15	14
Retail	13	12
Catering	11	10
Finance and insurance	9	8.2
Planning and consulting	7	6.4
IT services	6	5.5
Manufacturing	5	4.5
Logistics	5	4.5
Event organising	4	3.6
Education	3	2.7
Energy	3	2.7
Maintenance	3	2.7
Security	3	2.7
Public sector	2	1.8
Unknown sector	1	0.9
Total	110	100

3.2   Data analysis

Qualitative research is usually inductive, case-based, and data-driven [Tuomi and Sarajärvi, (2009), p.95]. At different stages of research, deductive and inductive research logic can be combined, which is known as abductive reasoning [Eriksson and Kovalainen, (2010), p.23; Gummesson, (2000), p.64]. Abductive reasoning is characterised by the combination of deductive and inductive research logic and the dialogue between theory and empirics, thus creating a hermeneutic circle. In abductive reasoning, new theoretical insights emerge from the combination of old knowledge and new experience; in other words, reorganising old information and combining it with new experiences can generate new ideas (Erzberger and Prein, 1997).

The data analysis in this research comprised different phases, namely coding and content analysis. In the first phase of the analytical process, the interview data was coded and 'typified'. Coding is a process of data organisation and simplification, which raises the level of abstraction of the data. The foundation of classifying codes is 'typification': a process that merges codes according to 'typical' connections, which can be examined against a framework to a certain extent [Hirsjärvi and Hurme, (2011), pp.174–175; Vaismoradi et al., 2016]. The coding was undertaken by a single researcher. The initial coding phase provided only a preliminary understanding of the data, by which the diversity of concepts was identified. However, the first phase helped to define the method of analysis for the next phase.

In the second phase, content analysis was used. The data collection and interpretation were constantly compared to the related theories, which required the theoretical background to be re-examined according to the results and the interpretation of the

answers. Systematic reading of the data facilitated the construction of classifications, and the diversity of the educational backgrounds and experiences of three researchers supported the clarification and analysis of issues from different angles.

The empirical data was compared to the framework presented in the literature review section, and shown in Table 1, for the content analysis. Three researchers were involved in the interpretation of the content and determination of the best possible interpretations. Initially, the researchers individually evaluated the definitions provided by all the interviewees, based on their content, and decided which dimension of service marketing theories they fitted into. In about 30% of cases, all the researchers agreed on the preliminary decision and, in roughly 70% of cases, two researchers made the same decision. There were no cases for which the preliminary decisions of all three researchers differed. If the researchers had contradictory interpretations, these cases were discussed until a consensus on the interpretation was achieved.

4   Empirical findings

The analytical coding clarified that the interviewed practitioners' personal perceptions of definitions of service were diverse. The interpretations revealed how the word 'service' was perceived by the interviewed practitioners and their attitudes toward their work. No interpretation was deemed to be incorrect and all the definitions clarified how definitions of service were constructed and used in everyday working life. In the first phase of the analysis (i.e., the coding phase), the answers were assigned to 12 groups. The interviewees defined a service as:

1   an intangible product

2   a job done for a customer

3   customer-centricity or customisation

4   finding a solution to a customer's problem, or helping and guiding a customer

5   fulfilling customers' needs or expectations

6   a value creating process

7   value, quality, or customer satisfaction

8   customer experience

9   customer service

10 offerings or product-service systems (PSSs)

11 skills or expertise offered to a customer

12 cooperation, co-creation, or interaction.

Moreover, some interviewed practitioners pointed out that a service is different for different customers and in different contexts.

Figure 1   Word clouds made of service definitions given by interviewees working in,
(a) well-being (b) retail (c) tourism (d) catering sectors (see online version for colours)

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Some examples of the definitions given by the interviewees are presented below:

"Service is something for which the customer is willing to pay, without necessarily getting anything concrete in hand." (Male, 50–70, retail)

"Service is the act of serving customers." (Female, under 30, well-being)

"Service is customized activity for a customer." (Female, 50–70, well-being)

"Service is helping another person or a customer." (Male, under 30, well-being)

"Service is understanding and responding to customer needs." (Female, 30–49, well-being)

"Service is an interactive process." (Male, under 30, retail)

"Service means an experience sold to a customer, either as a supplement to a product or, alternatively, as the experience itself." (Female, under 30, tourism)

"Face to face service; meeting another person." (Female, 50–70, tourism)

"Service is how a product is delivered to a customer." (Female, 30–50, restaurant)

> "Knowledge, information, things. Know-how about how a person should be faced." (Male, 50–70, tourism)

> "Service is something that rises in value in service situations and does not exist before or after using the service." (Female, under 30, tourism)

Relationships between definitions were sought by comparing the definitions from the four larger service sectors: well-being, tourism, retail, and catering (Table 4). The definitions were then turned into word clouds (Figure 1). To reveal the actual defining words, the word 'service' was deleted from the definitions. The word 'customer' was prevalent in all the four word clouds, and the word 'product' predominated in those for well-being and catering. The word 'experience' was dominant only in the tourism sector and the words 'intangible', 'needs' and 'process' only in the retail sector.

From the first phase of the analysis, an assumption emerged that differences in different interviewees' interpretations and personal perceptions of definitions could be due to their different backgrounds, training, and experiences; therefore, in the second phase of the analysis (i.e., the content analysis based on the answers to the question "describe in your own words what a service is") were compared to the age, sex, and service sector of the interviewees (Table 5). Furthermore, since the content analysis phase compared the empirical data against the framework presented in the literature review section, the findings showed that most answers (72%) were based on the theories from the 1980s (37%) and 1990s (35%). It was clear that the oldest goods-dominant approaches from the 1970s (13%), and the newest customer value approaches from the 2000s (13%) and 2010s (2%), had roughly the same proportions of answers.

The grey cells in Table 5 show which definitions the interviewees were expected to use, assuming that they had gone straight from high school to university and that they had been taught definitions of service drawn from the latest theories: those under the age of 30 years had studied in the 2010s, those aged 30–49 years in the 1990s and 2000s, and those aged 50–70 years in the 1970s and 1980s. There seemed to be no link between the definitions and the age, sex, or sector that the interviewees represented; in other words, age, sex, and sector seemed to have no connection to the theoretical lenses the interviewees used.

For the youngest age group (under 30 years), it was presumed that these interviewees would be familiar with the latest theories, since these theories were probably taught to them during their studies in the 2010s; however, despite 44% of the interviewees being under 30 years of age, only one person belonging to this age group described a service according to the latest service marketing theories. The definitions in this age group included theories ranging from the 1970s to the 2010s and, therefore, did not corroborate the idea that younger interviewees would know the most modern theories (Table 5).

Table 6 presents some examples of the 110 answers given by the interviewees, categorised in the content analysis phase according to the service marketing theories from the 1970s to the 2010s. As mentioned earlier in the methodology section, all three researchers were involved in the content analysis phase, individually evaluated the answers, and reached a consensus-based interpretation.

Table 5 Responses to the instruction "describe in your own words what a service is", reflecting the service marketing theories of each decade, combined with the sectors, sex and estimated age categories of the interviewees

Estimated age		Under 30	30–49	50–70
Number of interviewees	110	48 (44%) 28 F; 19 M; 1 U	40 (36%) 23 F; 17 M	22 (20%) 13 F; 9 M
A decade of the service marketing theory		*Under 30*	*30–49*	*50–70*
1970s	14 (13%)	8 Well-being FU Catering F Finance and insurance FFM Planning and consulting M Manufacturing M	4 Tourism M Catering M IT services MM	2 Well-being F Logistics M
1980s	41 (37%)	16 Well-being FFM Tourism FF Catering FM Retail F Finance and insurance M Event organising F IT services M Maintenance F Planning and consulting F Security M Energy M Manufacturing F	14 Well-being FF Tourism FFFM Catering F Retail FM Education F Event organising F IT services F Security M Energy F	11 Well-being F Tourism FMM Catering F Retail M Finance and insurance FF Planning and consulting M Public sector FM
1990s	39 (35%)	14 Well-being FF Tourism FF Catering MM Retail FFFM Finance and insurance F Education F IT services M Planning and consulting M	17 Well-being FFFM Tourism FM Catering FFM Retail F Finance and insurance F Education F Event organising F Logistics MMM Unknown sector F	8 Well-being FFFF Retail F Maintenance M Energy M Manufacturing M

Notes: Grey cells indicate the theory that was assumed to be taught during the interviewees' studies. F = female, M = male, and U = unknown.

Table 5   Responses to the instruction "describe in your own words what a service is", reflecting the service marketing theories of each decade, combined with the sectors, sex and estimated age categories of the interviewees (continued)

A decade of the service marketing theory		*Under 30*	*30–49*	*50–70*
2000s	14 (13%)	9 Well-being F	4 Event organising F	1 Planning and consulting F
		Tourism F	Maintenance M	
		Retail MM	Security M	
		Finance and insurance F	Manufacturing M	
		IT services M		
		Logistics F		
		Planning and consulting FM		
2010s	2 (1.8%)	1 Manufacturing M	1 Retail M	0

Notes: Grey cells indicate the theory that was assumed to be taught during the interviewees' studies. F = female, M = male, and U = unknown.

Figure 2   Word clouds made of service definitions given by interviewees based on theories from the, (a) 1970s (b) 1980s (c) 1990s (d) 2000s (see online version for colours)

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Table 6 Examples of definitions given by the interviewees, categorised by the researchers according to the service marketing theories from the 1970s to 2010s

Decade	Strategic focus	Examples of definitions of service
1970s	Transaction (product)	Information, sales, and benefits provided for the customer.
		A so-called 'product' that is sold to the customer: a service is the product in this case.
		A service is what the company provides to the customer.
1980s	Interaction (service)	A service is something that serves our customers.
		A service means responding to the customer's expectations and needs; answering questions, selling good products with professionalism, and creating a good customer experience.
		A service means good communication skills and situational awareness.
1990s	Relationship (service processes)	A service is a process that involves both the customer and the company. Good service can promote customer relationships and sales.
		A service is an entity that is offered and sold by a company. It starts with customer contact or an advertisement and ends with a post-purchase action or a potential re-purchase/contact.
		A service refers to a process that depends on communicating with the customer.
		In a service, it is important to strive to meet the customer's expectations.
2000s	Service-centric	A service is something that is neither physical nor concrete, but creates value for customers.
		A service is a way to help customers achieve their goals and improve their businesses.
2010s	Customer-centric	A service is something you experience, that also provides value, and you can use it to compete (other than on price, for example).
		At its best, being the most impressive and something in which you can evolve, just like in sales.
		A service is a way for a company to redeem its value proposition.

The examples presented in Table 6 illustrate how a mix of service marketing theories were reflected in the answers given by the interviewees. Transaction-focused perceptions emphasised the selling of services and compared services with products, perceptions focusing on service interactions emphasised communication and responding to customers' needs, and more customer-oriented perceptions highlighted long-lasting customer relationships and service processes. Service-centric perceptions emphasised value to the customer and customer-centric perceptions competing with service value.

Moreover, the definitions based on theories from different decades (except 2010s) were again turned into word clouds (Figure 2). The word 'customer' was prevalent in all the word clouds, 'product' in the word clouds of 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and 'needs' in the word clouds of 1980s and 1990s, while 'value' only in the word cloud of 2000s.

5   Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of the study was to increase understanding of the variety of ways that practitioners perceived service and clarify the reasons for those perceptions. Interviews were therefore conducted, which instructed practitioners: "describe in your own words what a service is." Service marketing theories were selected as a basis against which to compare the perceptions of practitioners. Theoretical perspectives drawn from the service marketing literature were compared with the empirical interview data.

The purpose was approached via three research questions. The first research question asked how the interviewed practitioners perceived the concept of service, whereas the third research question asked how these definitions reflected the theoretical discussion presented in the service marketing literature. In the empirical data, similarities between definitions were found when they were compared to the service marketing literature. The interviewees often mentioned problems and solutions, customer service, experience, benefits, or value in their definitions of service. A few interviewees specifically mentioned that service is difficult to define or that it always means different things to different customers.

The main contribution of this study to the service marketing research is the combining of a scientific perspective with the actual practices of organisations. This is one of the rare studies combining theoretical and empirical perspectives to frame definitions of service. In recent decades, in the service marketing discussion, service and the perspectives relating to it have undergone major changes, such as shifts from product-centric approaches (Edvardsson et al., 2002; Grönroos, 1978; Shostack, 1977), through service delivery and interaction (Lovelock, 1983) and service-centric understandings (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004), to a customer-centric focus (Heinonen et al., 2010). Based on the interviews, the researchers concluded that the theoretically complex definitions of service are also, in practice, rather obscure and reflect a wide range of perspectives. An explanation might be that, since theories are typically derived from practice, the more complex practice becomes, the more complex the theories become. Novel services, such as ICT services, and operational models involving global networks and alliances, increase complexity; thus, new theories are developed. Nevertheless, older theories remain valid for many services, resulting in a prevailing and constantly increasing plurality of theories used concurrently.

In addition, new theories take time to become institutionalised; for example, the Nordic School of Service Marketing was founded only in the 1980s, in line with the growth of service marketing research (Grönroos, 1989). At the individual level, some older employees with long work experience, who were not familiar with the new service- or customer-centric service marketing theories, could be rather concrete in their definitions. While younger generation employees were assumed to have studied the new theories and be able to apply the ideas to practice, they had little work experience to enable them to reflect upon these theories. At the organisational level, in order to put new service marketing theories into practice, strategic changes in management thinking would be necessary (Heinonen et al., 2010; Grönroos and Voima, 2013).

The second research question asked how the background of the interviewees, such as their age, sex, or service sector, affected their personal perceptions. Even in the detailed content analysis of the empirical data, no firm connection was found between these variables and the definitions of service.

Nevertheless, the research findings exemplified the mixed terminology that organisations and employees must cope with in their everyday working lives. As mentioned, all perceptions were held to be valid, but in internal organisational communication, it is important to be aware of, and remember, that people may use and understand service-related concepts quite differently. Regardless of whether service concepts and their content are defined in companies, service is what each employee understands it to be.

5.1 Implications for theory and practice

Saarijärvi et al. (2017) pointed out that the concept of service has changed since service marketing evolved as a discipline (Berry and Parasuraman, 1993; Fisk et al., 1993), and it is still changing, as today such concepts as value co-creation, value-in-use and interaction are included in the discussion around services (e.g., Zacharia et al., 2011). Further, Edvardsson et al. (2005) suggested that at a general level, service definition is a perspective, but at lower abstraction levels, there is no general service definition: service must be determined by taking into consideration the specific time, company, service, and perspective. However, as service research matures, more fine-tuned definitions will be needed in research (Brax, 2013; Edvardsson et al., 2005).

The findings of this study showed that employees in service organisations defined the concept of service in numerous ways. The definitions they gave cannot be explained with their age, sex or the sector they work in. This fact should be better understood and the wording clarified in the management of service organisations. Focusing on more fine-tuned definitions is needed in organisations, where problems may arise if the concept of service is used loosely, as an umbrella term. An umbrella term or a perspective as Edvardsson et al. (2005) describes it, is not detailed enough. In each context, it should become clear if the concept used in practice refers to a service sold to customers, a service offered to users, or customer service, internal service, etc. If the word service is used too loosely, it affects the internal functionality of the organisation. This kind of problem usually is not as significant in product-selling organisations, because their services are limited to, for example, customer services or internal services.

Many interviewees in this study seemed to be, at least to a certain extent, aware of the scientific discussion, based on the definitions they gave, in which practice-oriented concepts seemed to mix and interweave with the definitions presented in the service marketing literature. The concepts used by the interviewees were not 'carbon copies' of scientific definitions, but were sometimes more straightforward and simplified and sometimes distorted or clearly misunderstood. This study indicated that theories 'trickled down' to practice through several layers of discussion, including the semi-scientific discourse of teachers, consultants, and senior management; therefore, many middle and junior managers and supervisors may use service-related words without understanding their essential meaning. This may lead to 'jargonisation', which in turn results in, at its best, needlessly obscure but, at its worst, meaningless and misleading language (Figure 3).

The findings of this study revealed that each employee interprets service according to their best understanding, reflecting their own starting points and experiences. The misunderstanding and obscurity of the definitions may cause problems in communication, which for example, may arise when customers and service providers have different perceptions of sale transactions or when, within an organisation, a reporter

and readers have different understandings of the service described in a report. An extra challenge may be that, in escalating demands, service-oriented organisations tend to grow rapidly in size by hiring new personnel (Aarnio, 2015). Diversified interpretations complicate communication, resulting in various practical problems for organisations, which could be avoided by providing more structured common definitions.

Figure 3   The 'trickle down' process of concepts and definitions (see online version for colours)
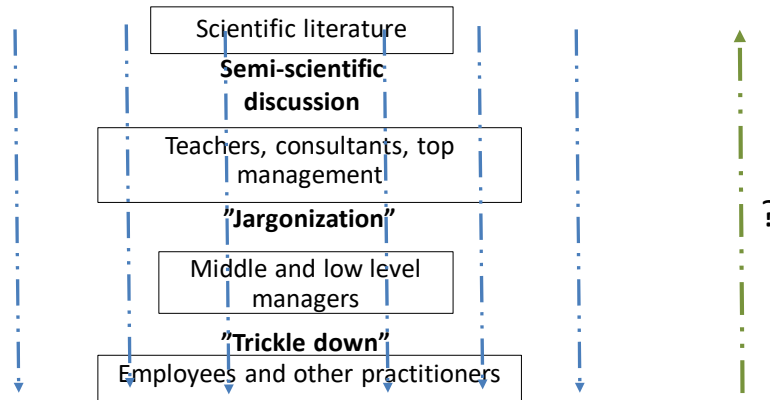
5.2   Limitations and future research

The empirical data in this study was limited to only one country and only one open question relating to the definition of a service. A thematic questionnaire using several open-ended questions would have produced a larger dataset and future research could use larger datasets covering multiple countries. The interviewees represented various sectors and types of organisations and their responses reflected general perceptions of the topic, and deeper data collected from one or two sectors or limited types of organisations could lead to different conclusions. Furthermore, the interviewees represented employees of service organisations, and data collected from people not working in the service sector could further broaden the perspectives.

In the study, a literature review formed the basis of a framework, which was then used to determine whether the theoretical approaches were reflected in the definitions of service given by the interviewees. This is a novel approach; thus, more research using comparable frameworks could provide a deeper understanding of the topic. For example, studying the concept of the customer would be interesting, as it was also expanding (Gummesson, 2011; Saarijärvi et al., 2017).

As mentioned previously, as the world around us becomes more complex, so do the theories. The complexity of theories then affects the language of practitioners; therefore, it is likely that this kind of research, analysing the relationships between theories and practice, will become more necessary in the future. Finally, more interdisciplinary research is needed, because studying definitions and their usage with, for example, combined linguistics and behavioural approaches would elicit new insights and deeper understanding of the definitions.

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