

Editorial: Reimagine service research and practice: spotlight on Kennesaw State University research

Introduction

Marketing of services has faced significant challenges in recent years, including managing sustainability, consumer polarization, conscious data management and outdated organizational policies insufficient for the current environment. Not surprisingly, businesses are facing new challenges in engaging with diverse consumer groups. Customer interactions with brands and other actors are changing significantly (Schoenmueller *et al.*, 2023; Weber *et al.*, 2021), and businesses are often caught in the crosshairs. Thus, it becomes crucial for service researchers to reevaluate the existing literature and its application in today's environment (Heinonen, 2024).

The *Journal of Services Marketing* has recently called for papers addressing contemporary issues in services marketing, including research relevant from both societal and managerial perspectives. Along these lines, Russell-Bennett *et al.* (2024) call for research that focuses on well-being and sustainability, providing opportunities to all individuals. The case can be made for developing new theories applicable to services, especially evolving service settings such as social media, which have the potential to exacerbate biases and negatively affect consumers (Van Bavel *et al.*, 2024). For example, how could social media firms design their services to balance consumer polarization and welfare while still maximizing time spent on their platforms and revenue generation? What could be the policy implications? Or how can firms employing AI-related chatbots address data-related privacy concerns and build digital trust? Research could also focus on understanding intergenerational divides and organizational policies regarding customer deviant behaviors, such as shoplifting. There is significant scope to broaden the services literature and apply/modify existing service frameworks to examine human service providers, such as social media influencers.

Taken together, the foregoing discussion highlights the need to address questions about creating/managing service designs that cater to a diverse customer base, including vulnerable customers, in an ever-changing environment. Researchers also need to focus on societal and policy implications, as several service contexts may lack checks and balances that could negatively affect some customer groups. For example, the recent lawsuits against ChatGPT, Character

AI and AI platforms (Williard, 2025) display the lack of policy frameworks for both service users and providers. The following section provides a brief review of the papers in the special section and their associated future research questions, and the remainder of the editorial provides an overview of the value of nontraditional PhD programs such as the one provided by Kennesaw State University (KSU) in pursuing such questions, along with a brief profile of the program.

Selected papers

The special section includes four articles:

- 1 Social media service environments (SMSE) and polarization (Rynarzewska *et al.*, 2025).
- 2 Consumer feelings and privacy concerns (Sinha *et al.*, 2025).
- 3 Sustainable influencers and luxury (Darby *et al.*, 2025).
- 4 Frontline employees and guardianship policies (Brown *et al.*, 2025).

The first paper, by Rynarzewska *et al.* (2025), examines the influence of loneliness on vulnerable customers' engagement in polarizing and divisive behaviors on SMSE and the subsequent effect on social media dependency. As SMSE tend to use algorithms that can deepen biases and create echo chambers (Miller *et al.*, 2024), understanding how the inherent service design may exacerbate these issues becomes critical. The authors use two studies, the first of which analyzes user-generated comments on X for identifying polarizing and divisive behavior, and follow-up with a survey that validates the first study's findings. The findings across both studies highlight that loneliness is positively associated with polarizing social media behavior and subsequently social media dependency. In addition, polarizing social media behavior mediates the relationship between loneliness and social media dependency. These findings highlight the need for customer education and reassessment of algorithms to eschew further development of echo chambers to combat polarizing behaviors. Future research can be directed toward how loneliness can be addressed through design the SMSE and policy framework for alleviating creation of echo chambers in SMSE. The use of multiple studies, especially the empirics-first, mixed-method approach, allows for knowledge generation (Dekimpe and van Heerde, 2023; Golder *et al.*, 2023) in an evolving service environment. Considering that only 13% of the studies in the *Journal of Services Marketing* use a mixed approach (Valtakoski, 2020), the use of mixed-method approach is encouraged.

The second paper, by Sinha *et al.* (2025), creates a baseline study for understanding privacy-specific organizational justice theory dimensions. The approach of treating the privacy issue as a multifaceted fairness issue is novel and has potential application in evolving servicescapes such as SMSE and other technology-enabled exchanges. The study documents the changing patterns of customers' association with privacy, something that is increasingly important in the AI era, where data privacy is becoming a major issue (Martin and Zimmermann, 2024). These findings underscore the need for researchers and firms to better understand customers' association with information exchange, particularly as service providers embrace AI services that require significant disclosure of personal information. Future research can be directed toward understanding how customers perceive information disclosure

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with AI chatbots, association of information disclosure and digital trust and the role of information disclosure and creation of social bubbles and echo chambers. This study uses the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET), providing a nuanced understanding of a well-discussed construct (privacy concerns). Only 7.5% of articles published in the *Journal of Services Marketing* (Valtakoski, 2020) use qualitative research. Considering that the use of qualitative approaches allows researchers to uncover insights in servicescape and propose new theoretical frameworks, this approach is encouraged (Heinonen, 2024).

The third paper (Darby *et al.*, 2025) explores an emerging topic of sustainable influencers and luxury consumption. The view of influencers as human service providers is a novel viewpoint and allows for application of service frameworks toward exploring influencer marketing from a different perspective. The authors examine how sustainable influencers' (influencers who advocate green, sustainable practices and ethical consumption) consumption and collaboration with luxury brands can lead to undesirable consequences. Across two studies the authors find evidence that the use of luxury brands by sustainable influencers increases relationship avoidance and reduces WOM intentions. Even collaborations with sustainable luxury brands increase relationship avoidance. Furthermore, the authors identify perceived narcissism as an underlying mechanism that mediates the above relationships. The findings suggest that future researchers should study the negative side of social media marketing in the context of sustainability. Sustainable influencers have the potential to shape conscious consumption and act as servicescape shapers (Mai *et al.*, 2025) and from a research standpoint, needs significant exploration.

The final paper, by Brown *et al.* (2025), uses two experiments to examine frontline employees' (FLE) perceptions of fairness regarding guardianship policies in the context of a specific customer deviant behavior (shoplifting) using both firm and customer-level impact factors. Across two studies, the authors examine the interplay between increased compensation, authorized (vs required) guardianship policies and customer relationships. The serial mediation effects of empowerment and anger are also examined. The findings suggest that future researchers should seek to explore the psychological processes and factors that enable FLEs to constrain deviant customer behaviors (shoplifting, mistreatment, etc.) which are prevalent in service settings (Widmier *et al.*, 2025). Possible avenues for research also include examining the effect of policies toward organizational and marketplace deviance for FLEs, which also includes societal and well-being aspects. Researchers may consider using relationship marketing theories such as agency theory and transaction cost economics to further explore these contexts.

Taken together, the papers selected in the special section contribute toward the new vision of *Journal of Services Marketing*, which is to examine issues that are relevant to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, and seek to address larger societal issues. The following section highlights the contributions of KSU's researchers and doctoral students in pursuing this vision. The next section provides a brief overview of the KSU PhD program and its overall contribution to the higher education field and society.

Kennesaw State University PhD program

The PhD in Business Administration program at KSU, offered through the Michael J. Coles College of Business, is a nationally recognized, nontraditional doctoral program designed for working professionals. Originally launched in 2009 as a Doctor of Business Administration, it transitioned to a PhD program in 2018, becoming among the first research-focused, executive-format PhD programs in the USA. In 2024, it became the only STEM-designated PhD in Business Administration program in Georgia. The program is AACSB-accredited, ensuring high academic standards and credibility in the academic job market.

At its core, the program addresses a critical shortage of business faculty by preparing experienced professionals for academic and leadership roles through a flexible, rigorous curriculum. KSU's program is tailored to mid- and late-career professionals – executives, educators and entrepreneurs – who typically have approximately 17 years of experience and hold a master's degree. The average student age is around 47, and more than half of the students come from outside Georgia, reflecting the program's national reach. Its once-a-month weekend residency format allows students to maintain full-time employment while completing the degree in 3 to 4 years. The cohort-based structure fosters peer support and ensures timely progression through coursework and dissertation phases.

The program's competitive advantages include its hybrid model, which blends the academic rigor of a traditional PhD with the flexibility of executive doctoral programs. Students are trained to conduct theoretically-grounded, scientifically-based research, with many dissertations leading to peer-reviewed publications. Alumni have conducted research in the areas of consumer-focused financial services, college services and captive services. This research, along with that of other alumni, has been published in high-quality journals.

KSU's more than 140 PhD graduates have achieved notable success in academia, securing tenure-track, instructional and administrative positions at institutions such as Florida International University, Middle Tennessee State University, Sam Houston State University and the University of Georgia. Others have advanced in industry and public service, including roles as CEOs, executives at IBM, department heads at federal agencies and elected officials. The program aligns with broader trends in doctoral education, which has been gravitating toward more flexible, inclusive and practice-relevant training. Researchers have noted how this can effectively address faculty shortages and attract a more diverse range of candidates. Its model offers a blueprint for other institutions seeking to modernize doctoral training and expand the pipeline of qualified business scholars.

Pramod Iyer

Department of Marketing and Professional Sales, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia, USA, and

Saurabh Gupta

Department of Information Systems and Security, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia, USA

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Further reading

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