

# TOWARDS A UNIVERSAL DEFINITION OF SERVICE INNOVATION<sup>1</sup>

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**Autor/Author:**

**SIPHO SELATOLE MAKGOPA**

ACTING DEPUTY DIRECTOR RESPONSIBLE FOR COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

University of South Africa

4-84 Winnie Madikizela-Mandela Building

PO Box 392, Muckleneuk Campus, Unisa, Pretoria, 0003

E-mail: makgoss@unisa.ac.za

ORCID: 0000-0001-7075-0219

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing literature on service innovation, the definition of the concept service innovation remains debated. Adopting the principles of a systematic review, this paper aims to review the previous literature for the period 2007-2022, synthesise towards the definition of service innovation focusing on published scholarly papers on service innovation, and further identify future research directions on the concept. This paper critically reviewed and discussed previous scholarly papers on service innovations using inclusion and exclusion criteria. This study demonstrates that the definition of service innovation is a multi-dimensional term that requires further scrutiny by providing an expanded definition. This paper concludes by providing future research directions.

**KEY WORDS:** services, service innovation, innovation management

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Service innovation is imperative for satisfying customers' needs through providing services that provide answers to customers' problems and increase business performance. Service innovation is a critical component that can be used to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage within service organisations (Chen et al., 2016). Service innovation in organisations has become a critical factor of focus used in adding value to stakeholders. According to Wang et al. (2013), service organisations is considered to be imperative to economic growth of countries, and viewed as a key driver of creating value and results in improved business performance. According to Zhang et al. (2018), service innovation entails that customers, employees and suppliers be included in creating service innovation activities in order to provide services that will satisfy needs of these customers. Hallikas et al. (2014) alluded that organisations operating in a multifaceted business environment should engage in service innovations to manage products and services, arrange human resources and technologies to add value to customers. Ordanini and Parasuraman (2011) added that service innovation is pertinent in service organisations as it improves financial performance and business growth. Christensen (2013) argued that organisation with inabilities to innovate are confronted with the risks of losing value creation opportunities for stakeholders in the future. Wang (2008) pointed out that service innovation activities are stronger in the organisations that support learning of employees which lead towards customer satisfaction.

## 2. PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

The purpose of this paper was to review literature to identify scholarly papers that discussed and conceptualised the concept of "service innovation" and develop a universal definition of the concept. To achieve the purpose of this paper, the following questions were formulated:

- (1) Which papers focus on the conceptualisation of term "service innovation"?
- (2) What is the relevant applicable expanded definition of service innovation?

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the dissertation: Makgopa. S. S. (2020) The influence of service innovation practices on business performance. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria).

This paper is arranged as follows: the literature linked to the purpose of this paper is shortly presented and discussed, the research methodology adopted in the paper, and findings leading to the definition of the service innovation concept. Lastly, the paper concludes by providing an expanded definition of service innovation, conclusions, and future research directions.

### 3. PERSPECTIVES ON SERVICE INNOVATION

Service innovation is an intricate and ambiguous concept (Miles, 2016; Witell et al., 2016). According to Miles (2016) and Witell et al. (2016), service innovation involves adoption of new technology and it emerges from manufacturing and new to-service organisations. Service innovation can be considered to be intangible (Grönroos, 2007). Toivonen and Tuominen (2009) argued that service innovation comprises of five processes, namely; processes without a specific project on prevailing service; innovation projects aiming to improve service production systems; process for testing new ideas with a customer; process aiming to solve customer problem; and externally funded innovation projects aiming to generate new service concepts and platforms. Andersson, Potočník and Zhou (2014) argued that service innovation involves several diverse initiatives that aim to test technical feasibility activities that contribute towards value co-creation.

According to Bettencourt, Brown and Sirianni (2013), service innovation is the main basis of competitive advantage in organisations by using the knowledge received from customers, competitors, and employees. Service innovation may, therefore, include innovation in service industries in different forms and to new services in the industry in which the innovation occurs. Cheng and Sheu (2017) postulated that service innovation benefits organisations and customers and added that customers tend to support organisations with service-driven approaches and innovation. According to Dotzel, Shankar and Berry (2013) service innovation differs in terms of changing customers' roles, usage of internet, and business models. According to Carlborg, Kindström and Kowalkowski (2014), service innovation is either planned, intentional, or unintentional activity, and is derived from an interactive learning process that takes place between the organisation and customers. Despite different perspectives on service innovation, systematic review focusing on conceptualising or defining this concept is limited in different economies, despite its contribution on employment and gross domestic product (GDP).

### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Systematic review principles proposed by Jesson, Matheson and Lacey (2011) are adopted in this paper to review the literature in addressing the research purpose. Jesson et al. (2011) indicated that systematic review includes plotting the field of interest by scoping review, followed by comprehensive search, quality assessment of sources, data extraction, synthesis, and writing-up. In this paper, the researcher drafted a research plan which include; the purpose of the research, research questions, identified relevant search keywords, and development of inclusion and exclusion criteria of sources. The purpose of the paper was to review literature to identify conceptual and empirical papers that discussed and conceptualised the concept "service innovation" and develop a revised definition of the concept. Firstly, articles that had a keywords "service innovation" and "review", "synthesis", and "conceptual" in the abstract were selected. Secondly, articles that had the keywords "service innovation" and "performance" were selected. Thirdly, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were outlined: publication period 2007-2022, academic articles published on Google Scholar in English. The search for relevant sources was carried-out on the 20 March 2022 and 21 March 2022, and the review process took six weeks were downloaded articles were read and summarised. The researcher read the abstracts of identified sources available from Google Scholar platform to ensure that the inclusion criteria is complied with. Following this procedure, seventeen articles were chosen and the researcher grouped the results of studies according to themes which helped the researcher to develop the definition of service innovation.

### 5. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DEFINING SERVICE INNOVATION

Table 1 below provides reviewed studies on service innovation with the authors of the academic sources, type of data, and the key findings of downloaded articles.

**Table 1.** Previous studies on service innovations

Authors	Type of data	Key findings
Kurtmollaiev & Pedersen (2022)	Secondary data	This the paper defined service innovation as “an introduction of new service or the creation and implementation of a new service”. This paper identified lexical cross-contamination, the parallelism of approaches as obstacles of service innovations.
Shin et al. (2022)	Secondary data	Service innovation is used in organisations to improve customer value, build brand preferences and develop integrated solutions. Organisations can develop new or improved offerings through service and product innovation.
Kustrak Korper, Holmlid & Patrício (2022)	Secondary data	Defined service innovation as a dynamic process that focuses on the process of resource integration in the co-creation of new value for the organisations and stakeholders.
Kurtmollaiev & Pedersen (2022)	Secondary data	Defined service innovation as process of conceptualising and development of new service in an organisation through integration of resources.
Edvardsson & Tronvoll (2013)	Secondary data	Service innovation involves actors must apply the structures and resources in new ways to co-create value.
Mele, Sebastiani & Corsaro (2019)	Secondary data	Described service innovation as value-enabling process that involve creative resources integration leading to opportunities.
Gustafsson, Snyder & Witell (2020)	Secondary data	The authors advanced the definition of service innovation as an initiative that involves the introduction of a new services or process offering that aims to add value to customers, consumers, and other stakeholders. This definition aligned that of Schumpeter (1934)
Witell et al. (2016)	Secondary data	The findings revealed that customer orientation has a stronger effect on innovation. The paper argued that many definitions of service innovation limit and prevent knowledge development of this concept.
Wang, Zhao & Voss (2016)	1646 manufacturing organisation and 686 service organisation	The findings revealed that the relationship between customer orientation and innovation is mediated by supplier collaboration within organisations.
Chen et al. (2016)	170 service-based organisations	The findings revealed that improved product development in service organisations is driven by high market-linking capabilities and market turbulence which in turn is influenced by high-service innovation.
Durst, Mention & Poutanenca (2015)	Service organization data	The findings uncovered that knowledge on the relationship between service innovation and performance is limited which requires further research.
Parris et al. (2016)	Case study on the athletic department	The paper identified challenges experienced by organisations in implementing service innovation. The identified challenges were costs and internal competencies.
Chong and Zhou (2014)	256 Health care care organisations	The findings revealed a positive influence of service innovations on an organisation’s decision to adopt web-based demand chain management.
Kindström et al. (2013)	Eight product-oriented, service firms	The findings uncovered that effective innovative service delivery in both product and service organisations is dependent on organisations’ stimulating internal capabilities.
Salunke et al. (2013)	192 Australian and 261 American firms	The findings uncovered that service innovation serve as a mediator of business activities and sustained competitive advantage. In addition, service innovation has a positive impact on sustainable competitive advantage.
Thankur & Hale (2013)	Managerial data from service organisations	The findings revealed that service innovation has a positive impact on both financial and non-financial performances. The findings also revealed existence of both positive and negative impact of managerial perceptions on service innovation success and failure.
Chuang, Kuo & Luo (2020)	Hotel service	The findings uncovered the role of infrastructure capabilities and staff innovation orientation, and the complementarity of sustained competitive advantage.

Santos-Vijande & Sánchez (2016)	Spain knowledge-intensive business services	The findings uncovered that improved internal communications, involvement of top management, and sufficient resource allocations, contributed towards improved new service advantage and enhanced market performance.
Barrett et al. (2015)	Secondary data	The findings of this study revealed that service innovations in organisations is driven by the market aiming towards differentiation of service products. In addition, the findings uncovered that service innovations are fueled by the quick ICT developments and deployment of ICTs.
Kindström, Kowalkowski & Sandberg (2012)	Primary data	The findings of this study uncovered organisations' internal factors and vibrant capabilities contribute towards service innovations.
Kowalkowski, Witell & Gustafsson (2013)	Primary data	The findings revealed that SMEs tend to follow different processes in developing service innovations in their respective organisations and differentiate themselves through new value creations in their networks.

## 6. FINDINGS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper reviewed literature from both conceptual relying on secondary data and empirical papers that reviewed the concept of “service innovation” and to develop a revised definition, and identify future research directions on the topic. Brown and Osbourne (2013) defined service innovation as “the intentional introduction and application within a role, group or organisation of ideas, processes, products or procedures, new to the relevant unit of adoption, designed to significantly benefit the individual, the group, the organisation or wider society. Fernandes, Ferreira and Raposo (2013) defined service innovation as “the mechanism by which organisations design and launch the new products, processes, and systems necessary to meeting changes both in marketplace technologies and in models of competition”. On the same token, Kuo, Kuo and Ho (2014) advanced the definition of the concept of service innovation as “a new way of business thinking to reform relatively conservative and inflexible operational procedures and processes, which can transform organizations to better meet the needs of their markets”.

Durst et al. (2015) viewed service innovation as “an introduction of new services or additional improvements or adaptations of the current services”. Skålén et al. (2015) conceptualized service innovation as “the development of new value propositions by means of developing existing or creating new practices and/or resources, or by means of integrating practices and resources in new ways.” Revisiting Schumpeter (1934), this scholar argued that innovation creates value for the organisation and further changes the market in such a way that other competitors imitate and follow. However, the keyword new is viewed to be a distinguishing factor in defining service innovation. According to Toivonen and Tuominen (2009) as cited in Makgopa and Antonites (2021), defining service innovation is based on two themes, namely; the extent to which the service is new or original and the categories of innovation. Dotzel, Shankar and Berry (2013) argued that service innovation be viewed through categories and be differentiated from traditional innovation perspectives considering factors such as the changing role of customers, use of internet, and new business models as postulated by Hsieh et al. (2013). Gallouj and Savona (2009) alluded that service innovation could be either planned, intentional, or unintentional (Carlborg, Kindström & Kowalkowski, 2014). Fruhling and Siau (2007) argued that innovation involves the action, a process, a modification of service delivery activity that is viewed as unusual in a business, organisation and market.

Toivonen and Tuominen (2009) conceptualised service innovation to be an introduction of a new service or a renewal of present service/s and which offers benefit to the organisation which has developed it. The benefit typically is derived from the added value that the revitalisation provides the customers. In addition, service innovation includes the renewal that is new not only to the developer, but to other stakeholders. This definition of service innovation points to the following; the definition distinguishes the results (benefits) of service innovation from the development process, and the new invention should be implemented. Another point is that the invention must be new to one of the stakeholders to the organisation. Lastly, the new invention should add value for some stakeholders of the organisation. In addition, Biemans, Griffin, and Moenaert (2015) argued that new service development (NSD) and service innovation must be considered to be synonymous in defining the concept. These authors defined the preceding two concepts as a process of developing a new or incremental service, from idea generation to market launch. On the same token, Skålén et al. (2015) added that the process of developing new services cannot be distinguished from the implementation and value creation of the new services, however, and the two activities should be perceived as different stages of service innovation. On

that basis, Skålén et al. (2015) extended the definition of service innovation to include development, implementation, and outcomes.

Den Hertog, Van der Aa and de Jong (2010) added that service innovation includes a new service experience or service solution that consists of one or a few of the following dimensions: new service concept, new customer interaction, new value system/business partners, new revenue model, new organizational or technological service delivery system. The argument is that service innovation includes the creation of new services such as a renewal of an existing service which is implemented which benefit the organisation and add value to customers. Den Hertog et al. (2010) in Witell et al. (2016) further added that service innovation has four proportions: new service concept; new client interfaces; new service delivery systems and new technological options. Moreover, other researchers described service innovation as value-enabling process that involve new integration of resources in co-creation of products and services which leads to opportunities for the organisations and stakeholders (Kustrak Korper, Holmlid & Patrício, 2022; Kurtmollaiev & Pedersen, 2022; Mele, Sebastiani & Corsaro, 2019; Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2013).

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

From the previous definitions, an ideal approach is to divide innovations into radical (innovations that are new to the world) and incremental (innovations that are new to the market) (Rubalcaba et al., 2012). Following this view, innovations that are only new to the organisation not to the consumers and market should not be considered as innovations. Moreover, the benefits of innovations are measured in economic value in the organisation that developed it, although this has recently changed in definitions. Consequently, other researchers who view service innovation as outcome or change instead define these benefits from the customer perspective (Lusch & Nambisan, 2015). In addressing the purpose of this study, the expanded definition of service innovation is postulated as follows:

*Service innovation is defined as the new idea generation and implementation of intentional incremental innovations that are new to the organisation, market and stakeholders which includes the addition of new processes, co-creation of new products or addition of new service on the existing services, and new procedures, new integration of resources, adoption of new technology created to add value to the customers, the organisation, and other stakeholders.*

## 8. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In reviewing the literature, this paper uncovered those papers published from 2007-2022 argued that the service innovation topic is multifaceted and disjointed. Considering the benefits and importance of service innovation, the results of this paper make calls for more research on the concept. Due to inclusion and exclusion criteria, specifically, language used in this paper, specifically, English, this study has limitations in coverage of all the conceptual and empirical academic articles on service innovation as some of papers may have been missed. Some of articles may have been left out due to different language of publication. However, a reasonable review process was conducted in this paper by including enough conceptual and empirical studies. Therefore, this paper calls for future empirical research studies to focus on getting the perceptions of non-academics, managers and industry practitioners on their understanding of the concept service innovation. Moreover, future research should explore if the expanded definition is applicable in the same way in different sectors of the economy and different countries.

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## PREMA UNIVERZALNOJ DEFINICIJI INOVACIJE USLUGA<sup>2</sup>

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### SAŽETAK

Unatoč sve većem broju radova o inovaciji usluga, definicija koncepta inovacije usluga i dalje se raspravlja. Usvajajući načela sustavnog pregleda, ovaj rad ima za cilj dati pregled prethodno objavljene literature za razdoblje od 2007. do 2022. godine, napraviti sintezu prema definiciji uslužnih inovacija s fokusom na objavljene znanstvene radove o uslužnim inovacijama i identificirati buduće smjerove istraživanja koncepta. U ovom su radu kritički pregledani i raspravljani prethodni znanstveni radovi o inovacijama usluga korištenjem kriterija uključivanja i isključivanja. Ova studija pokazuje da je definicija inovacije usluga višedimenzionalni pojam koji zahtijeva daljnje ispitivanje davanjem proširene definicije. Rad završava pružanjem budućih smjernica istraživanja.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** usluge, inovacije usluga, upravljanje inovacijama

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<sup>2</sup> Ovaj rad proizašao je iz doktorske disertacije: Makgopa. S. S. (2020) The influence of service innovation practices on business performance. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria).