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Halal Service Research: Definition, Domain and Dynamics

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Abstract

This inaugural article lays out the definition, domain, and dynamics of a growing field: halal service research. The following topics are mapped on to this new growing domain: the concept of service in Islam, contemporary service research and halal service research. The final section discusses future research opportunities and directions for the discipline of halal service research.

Keywords: *halal service, Islamic services, service, service science, service system*

Introduction

These days, the macro-environment of service is undergoing fast transformation. The impact of rapidly evolving technologies such as 5G, the Internet, the Internet of Things, social networking, mobile technology, artificial intelligence, service robots, augmented reality, and cloud computing has been enormous. Due to these penetrating impacts, service (e.g. public services, private services, commercial services, communal services) is gradually becoming better synchronised, more personalized and highly tailored. Service is defined as the focused application of capabilities, competencies, know-how, and knowledge to enable the creation of benefits for the service beneficiary (Vargo and Akaka, 2012). Service is the boundary spanning concept. Research shows that as many as twenty-four academic disciplines investigate service from their own perspectives (Spohrer, Kwan, and Fisk, 2014). Increasing interest in service is manifested in different research centres that span the globe. Some of them are Kalsruhe Service Research Institute (Germany), Center for Services Leadership at Arizona State University (USA), California Center for Service Science (USA), Centre for Service Management at Loughborough University (UK), Centre for Service Research at Manchester Business School (UK), Centre of Service Studies (Denmark), the Latin American Service Research Network, and the International Society of Service Innovation Professionals.

To measure service quality, several models have been proposed, adopted, and examined in different offline and online contexts (e.g., Brady and Cronin, 2001; Brogowicz et al., 1990; Dabholkar et al., 1996; Golder et al., 2012; Gronroos, 1990, 2000; Gummesson, 1993; Liljander and Strandvik, 1995; Rust and Oliver, 1994; Wolfinbarger and Gilly, 2003; Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Zeithaml et al., 2000, 2002). These models offer a wide variety of service quality dimensions. Parasuraman et al. (1988), for instance, proposed the SERVQUAL model that posits that service includes five evaluative dimensions: tangibles (physical facilities, equipment, materials); reliability (upholding promises); responsiveness (responding to inquiries promptly); assurance (instilling confidence, trust, and safety); and empathy (attending to individual problems). In an online retailing context, Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2003) identified four factors of eTailQ (electronic retailing quality): fulfilment/reliability (reliable display, description, and delivery of products); website design (navigation, personalization, product selection, order handling); customer service (effective responses to customer inquiries); and security/privacy (payment and information privacy).

In marketing, the service-dominant logic (SDL) is seen as one of the ground-breaking theories. This theory posits that the consumer benefits from services of tangible products, therefore all marketed products and offerings represent service (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). In other words, essentially service is “everybody’s business” (Henkoff, 1994). Service itself can be classified in different ways. The following types have been proposed (Palmer, 1994; Wirtz and Lovelock, 2016): tangible objects focused services (e.g. transporting goods, mail and courier services, repair and maintenance, tailoring), intangible assets focused services (e.g. banking, accounting, financial and investment services), mind focused services (e.g. education, telecommunications, consulting), and customer participation services (e.g. air travel, tourism, healthcare, theme parks, concerts). In most cases, service is intangible, variable, perishable, inseparable and co-created. Hence, its unique nature requires a renewed vantage point of analysis within the discipline of halal service research.

The Concept of Service in Islam

Types of Service

Islam emphasizes serving all creations of Allah (SWT) including humans, animals, plants, and the inanimate environment. From the Islamic perspective, the concept of *service* has different meanings in different contexts. Specifically, the orthodox Islamic thought distinguishes five concepts of service:

- Sincere service (khidmah)
- Service-as-worship (khidmah lil'ajr)
- Community service (fardul kifaya)
- Service-as-hire (ijaratul-amal)
- Service-as-lease (ijaratul-ayn)

Khidmah (from Arabic) refers to various actions of giving, helping, assisting people in need, working for someone, showing utmost hospitality and kindness. Sincere service has no commercial connotations. It involves actions or behaviour directed at benefiting others for the sake of pleasing Allah (SWT) only. Sincere service is indifferent to what people might offer in response for the service. There are no ulterior motives that would drive such services including the most common assumption of proselytization (i.e. religious conversion). However, it is not for nothing. The reward in the form of blessing, forgiveness, satisfaction, love leading to the eventual entry to the Paradise is expected from Allah (SWT) only, which may not even be guaranteed during the service provider's lifetime:

And they give food, in spite of their love for it (or for the love of Allah), to the poor, the orphan, and the captive. [Saying], "we feed you only for the countenance of Allah – we wish not from you reward or gratitude" (Qur'an 76:8-9).

Here, providing food to the poor or other vulnerable groups is given as one of the examples of sincere service. One must note that sincere service is done for the love of Allah (SWT). It is manifested through: (a) giving away something one really desires for oneself (which is different to simply sharing unwanted things); and (b) not wanting anything in return from the receiver (be it gratitude, thankfulness, favour, admiration, or conversion, etc.). Hence, sincere service is fundamentally different to many variations of modern philanthropy which is mostly driven by the goal of eliciting desired response from a target population.

Service-as-worship is very close to sincere service. The only difference is that the expectation of calculated spiritual reward (i.e. ajr, sawab). The person providing the service would consciously keep a kind of spiritual reward account, while providing a service for the sake of "topping-up" such an account. The following hadith relates to this notion:

We were with the Prophet (on a journey) and the only shade one could have was the shade made by one's own garment [it means it was too hot]. Those who fasted did not do any work and those who did not fast served the camels and brought the water on them and treated the sick and (wounded). So, the Prophet (SAV) said, "Today, those who were not fasting took all the reward" (Sahih al-Bukhari 2890).

Similarly, the importance of serving others is communicated through many hadiths:

Whoever relieves a Muslim of a burden from the burdens of the world, Allah will relieve him of a burden from the burdens on the Day of Judgement. And whoever helps ease a difficulty in the world, Allah will grant him ease from a difficulty in the world and in the Hereafter. And whoever covers (the faults of) a Muslim, Allah will cover (his faults) for him in the world and the Hereafter. And Allah is engaged in helping the worshipper as long as the worshipper is engaged in helping his brother” (Jami` at-Tirmidhi 1930).

Community service (fardul kifaya) is seen as a responsibility for the community as a whole, while making sure that some key services (e.g. education, healthcare, legal advice) are accessible to community members. It is assumed that community as a whole would become sinful (in front of Allah (SWT)) if it fails to provide its members with desired services. However, these services do not have to be provided for free. Professionals (e.g. doctors, mechanics, plumbers) can still pursue their self-interest. However, the fact of existence of such services (compared to the lack of such services) is seen as something that benefits the whole community, in addition to benefiting involved professionals and customers. This is related to the notion of marketing systems representing a public good (Kadirov, 2018).

In Islamic societies, the conceptual understanding of commercial service is predominantly developed from the Islamic law perspective. In general, Islamic jurisprudence employs the following distinction of transactions: contracts of sale and ijarah. If sale involves mostly tangible goods, ijarah is seen as involving the sale of benefits. Accordingly, ijarah has two forms: service-as-hire (ijaratul-amal) and service-as-lease (ijaratul-ayn) (Usmani, 2002). Service-as-hire involves employing people and paying them a wage, whereas service-as-lease involves leasing tangible products in exchange for a rent payment. In both cases, the payment is called “ujrah” (Usman, 2002). In service-as-hire cases, paying workers for their services in a timely manner is strongly emphasized:

Abdullah ibn Umar reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “Pay the worker his wages before his sweat has dried.” (Sunan Ibn Mājah 2443, graded sahih (authentic) by Al-Albani).

In general, Islam emphasises “mutual consent” as the foundation of service provision in commercial contexts. The conduct of the service provider and the service beneficiary should be governed by principles and rules agreed upon by the parties, the only condition being that these principles and rules should not contradict the main precepts of Islamic conduct.

Service Logic in Islam

The well-known Islamic commerce principle states that it is impermissible to sell non-existent products. This principle does not apply in the service context. Considering that service is defined as the sale of benefits, one might argue that “benefits” do not exist before the act of service delivery. However, Islamic jurisprudence permits service delivery. This is based on the evidence from Qur’an and Sunnah. From Qur’an, we know that Yusuf (AS) offered his services to the pharaoh of Egypt, whereas Musa (AS) was hired by the sheikh of Madyan. However, some scholars confuse the context of tangible goods sales with the context of service delivery. Especially, more or less complex cases such as subscription services, insurance, consulting, IT services require renewed investigation by scholars specializing in Islamic marketing and halal service research. For example, Kadirov (2020) argues that the conceptualization of commercial insurance in Islam was tainted by extreme overemphasis on the “goods” principle.

Muslim scholars defined “*ijarah*” as the sale of benefits (*manafi*). For pure services, there is no transfer of ownership, because the subject of a deal is not a tangible good. Hence, most service transactions involve offer and use of intangible benefits. Therefore, some of the *qiyas* (the comparison method in fiqh) techniques involving the transfer of goods may not directly yield satisfactory answers. Due to their intangibility and variability, services are not always exactly defined in terms of their expected benefits. However, the parties to a transaction must make sure that most details are agreed in priori to avoid future dispute. Especially, key service provider and customer conduct conditions should be clearly defined. For example, the sale of gym membership should involve clear responsibilities and accountabilities of all involved parties. It is important that potential harm to the property and liabilities for improper use are thoroughly agreed upon. In services, benefits are not transferred in bulk. There is a time dimension: the benefit of the service is actualized depending on the consumer’s use, involvement and participation. For example, business consulting may involve knowledge sharing. However, its benefits would not be truly actualized unless managers start correctly applying this knowledge to improve their business.

Value-added Service versus Availability-based Service

In Islamic marketing, scholars distinguish between two types of service delivery: value-added service (VAS) and availability-based service (ABS) (Kadirov, 2019). VAS contracts involve enhancing the value of raw materials, semi-finished goods, used products, or other materials and resources. For example, outsourcing contracts based on accomplishing specific manufacturing functions such as assembly, painting, polishing, repairing are included in VAS. In such circumstances, VAS is paid for based on the nature and quality of work involved. Tangible objects focused services such as transporting goods, mail and courier services, repair and maintenance, tailoring are part of VAS. In this context, the service provider is responsible for the materials and goods received from the customer. They would treat these goods as “*amanah*”. The concept of VAS relates to the Hill’s (1977) view of services that emphasizes service as a change in the condition of resources under the possession of the customer.

In contrast, ABS involves hiring a person for a specific period to deliver a specified service. For example, consulting, training or education can be included in ABS. Moreover, some mind focused services (e.g. education, consulting), and customer participation services (e.g. air travel, tourism, healthcare, theme parks, concerts) may be considered as ABS. Because such services block out the provider’s time, the provider must be compensated for their booked time, irrespective of the service occurring or not, as long as the provider made themselves available. Especially, the failure of the customer to show in a planned service encounter might still involve a payment. This is due ABS involving an opportunity cost – the same booked time could have been used to serve another customer. If in the VAS context the payment should be made only after the agreed task is fully accomplished and the expected benefit is materialized, in the ABS context the payment would still be due even in the case of the expected benefit not materializing.

Contemporary Service Research

Scholars define service as something that is qualitatively different from tangible goods. Service consists of processes, doings, activities, and interactions (Solomon et al., 1985; Wirtz and Lovelock, 2016; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). Service is seen as performance involving specific functions and procedures to help the customer (Lovelock, 1991). Some scholars distinguished services by their IHIP characteristics, namely inseparability, heterogeneity, intangibility, and

perishability (Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004), while others criticised the approach (Edvardsson et al., 2005). For example, there are services that are neither heterogeneous nor inseparable (Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004).

Grönroos (2000) defines service:

as an activity or series of activities of a more or less intangible nature that normally, but not necessarily, take place in the interaction between the customer and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems (p.46).

The definition given above focuses on customer problems. It indicates that service comes into existence as a solution to problems faced by customers. In the same vein, some scholars focused on the concept of customer value (Gummesson, 1995). They argued that service represents interlinked activities and interactions which support value generation for the customer. Taking a broader perspective, Vargo and Lusch (2004) define services as “the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself” (p. 2). Marketing experts see services as activities, while goods are seen as things (Edvardsson et al., 2005). Also, service is seen as “support” – which means that it represents the marketer providing support to facilitate the customer’s processes so that value comes into existence.

The concept of servicescape was introduced by Bitner (1992) to highlight the physical elements of the service environment. For example, buildings, technology, IT systems, tangible products, and other materials are considered to be integral part of servicescape. A specific tangible product is not something that stands in contrast to service, rather it is part of a greater field of interactions, i.e. servicescape. In other words, products can be seen as platforms of service provision. Edvardsson et al. (2005) argue that service is a mode of value creation. In other words, there are many alternative ways of creating value for customers, while service represents one of these ways.

Most services require close contact between the provider and the customer. Before the rise of internet technologies and other telecommunication solutions, most service encounters required some degree of closeness. However, these days close contact is not the required condition (Maglio and Spohrer, 2008). There are a range of services, specifically, knowledge and know-how intensive services, for which geographic proximity is not a significant issue. Moreover, the importance of the customer’s participation in service is becoming increasingly acknowledged. In fact, customers are active participants in services – they contribute resources, labor, property, information, expertise and networks.

Service comes into existence within a service system (Maglio and Spohrer, 2008). Service system refers to “value-co-creation configurations of people, technology, value propositions connecting internal and external service systems, and shared information (e.g., language, laws, measures, and methods)” (Maglio and Spohrer, 2008, p.18). The examples of service systems are: individuals, cities, regions, regional departments, businesses, business departments, nations, government agencies, global organizations. Hence, service does come into being within a vacuum, rather it emerges within relevant configurations of people, relationships, and cultural contexts. The idea that it is something that is exchanged one-off may not be correct. Service represents a field within which a specific service becomes relevant and meaningful. Service systems both provide and consume services. They are part of value propositions in

value chains and value networks (Maglio and Spohrer, 2008). Maglio and Spohrer further indicate that, in service systems based on outsourcing, the following are critical: 1) interaction to establish a distinct service system based on sharing information and risk; (2) integration of individual, organizational, and technological competences; and (3) innovation.

Halal Service Research

The growing halal market (Muslim and non-Muslim consumers) and halal industry (e.g., banking, food, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, personal cares, and tourism) have attracted attention among researchers. The current literature of halal research has been expanded from halal concept for a product to include supply chain activities, ranging from product sourcing, handling, and storing to manufacturing and transporting (Jaafar, et al., 2016). The focus of previous halal studies includes halal product, halal standards and certification, halal product traceability, halal market, halal consumerism, and halal as an innovation (Zulfakar, et al., 2012).

Halal service has been perceived as an innovation (Jaafar, et al., 2016; Karia and Asaari, 2016). Despite its important role in stimulating economic growth and societal well-being, conceptual and empirical studies focusing on holistic halal service frameworks and structures are still limited (Karia and Asaari, 2014, 2016). In their study, Karia and Asaari (2016, p. 589) highlighted that halal service is created by “halal aspects of behaviours, activities, and operations which are not violated or conflicted with the Islamic thoughts, operated and performed with trust, dedication, and honest, and follow terms of agreement or Shariah compliant, minimize hardship, and generate welfare or benefits to people (society), planet (environment), profit (economy), and ultimately the desire for Allah blessing”. Furthermore, halal services are viewed from three main perspectives: *aqidah* (faith or beliefs), **akhlaq** (behaviour, acts, morality, manners), and Shariah principles (Islamic law) (Karia and Asaari, 2016).

To fill these important knowledge and research gaps, this new journal, *Journal of Halal Service Research* (JHSR), is launched to focus on halal services provision to Muslims and other relevant customers and stakeholders in both business-to-business and consumption contexts. It investigates market ecosystems, processes, and structure of conceptualising, developing, and offering halal services.

The journal fuses a rich domain of Islamic service research theories in a range of disciplines such as management, marketing, economics, organisational theory, consumer research, logistics and supply chain management, hospitality and tourism, public policy, cultural studies and finance with the applied context of halal business and marketing activities. The research topics covered are diverse and include the concepts and philosophy of halal service, halal service ecosystems, service-based Islamic marketing systems, halal supply chain and logistics, Muslim consumers and their consumption practices, service related marketing issues and consumption practices pertaining to Muslim minorities, theories of Service-Dominant Logic and Chopsticks Marketing applied to halal services, institutional foundations of halal services, Islamic principles of service ethics, halal services research methods, and other relevant issues.

Future Research Opportunities and Directions

Halal service is a paradigm shift, which is not only about practices and processes in accordance with Shariah principles (Karia and Asaari, 2016). It requires innovation and system to design, offer, deliver, and control the activities, operations, processes, and outcomes of services based on explicit and implicit *aqidah* (faith), *akhlaq* (morality), and Shariah principles (Islamic law). It opens up future research avenues, including the twelve areas of service research priorities outlined by Ostrom et al. (2015):

- service innovation (development of complex service systems and value networks, antecedents of service innovation, collaboration through service innovation processes, use of crowdsourcing and open innovation, innovating service-product, service-process, and business models).
- facilitating servitization, service infusion, and solutions,
- understanding organization and employee issues relevant to successful service,
- developing service networks and systems,
- leveraging service design,
- using big data to advance service
- understanding value creation,
- enhancing the service experience,
- improving well-being through transformative service,
- measuring and optimizing service performance and impact,
- understanding service in a global context, and
- leveraging technology to advance service.

Similarly, a recent paper reviewing 3,177 service research papers published in the last 27 years proposed five key research agendas: technology/electronic service (service robots, blockchain technology, Internet of Things, smart services, and access-based services), service-dominant logic (co-creation process, outcomes of value co-creation, transformative value, and dynamic capabilities), emotions (role of emotions in service encounters, facial recognition of emotions and customer experience, and employees' emotional responses to customer emotional needs), innovation (innovation and customer resistance, open innovation process, online service design, and co-design), and environmental context (service ecosystems, global environmental context, and value propositions) (Furrer et al., 2020). All these topics are the potential dynamic research domains for scholars interested in halal service studies.

We welcome you to Journal of Halal Service Research. Your contribution to the development of the field is most welcome.

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