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Bibliometric analysis over research on “client satisfaction”

Abstract

The objective of this study is to analyze publication's evolution on the topic of client satisfaction using the Scopus database in the English language for the period 1954-2016. The methodology used in this paper is a literature review conducted on 2753 scientific articles and 156 journals. After establishing 100 top publications topics on client satisfaction, the contributors find that authors used almost the same methods of research and data collection. The main results demonstrate the increase of interest over the theme in different social and economic sciences, as well as in different countries. Important scientific journals also increase the number of publications on client satisfaction. Besides the high interest over this theme in the academia, the international literature reviews are still scarce. The approach, based on the construction of a database using a systematic selection process that was applied to the English language publications on social and economic science areas, is a valid tool that can be applied for literature reviews in all areas within social and economic sciences. To the contributors knowledge, the bibliometric analysis is applied for the first time on client satisfaction, so this is also a novel aspect of the paper to highlight.

Keywords: client satisfaction, literature review, analytical approach.

JEL Classification: C80, E21, Y10.

Introduction

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, “client satisfaction” became a widely studied topic in a variety of management fields. In social and economic sciences, it was initially described as the situation when client's needs and expectations were fairly met (Pitic, 2015). It is usually analyzed with other important business topics that include drivers, mediators or endogenous variables.

Oliver (1980) concludes that a variety of authors' definitions of satisfaction are “consistent with the expectancy disconfirmation model”. Churchill and Surprenant (1982) say that “the vast majority of studies on customer satisfaction have used some variant of the disconfirmation paradigm”. So, there is not a unique conception about “what the client satisfaction is”.

Client satisfaction is a result of a client's perception of the value received in a transaction or relationship, where value depends on the perceived quality relative to price and client acquisition costs, and relative to the value expected from transactions or relationships with competing vendors. So, high levels of client satisfaction (with pleasurable experiences) are strong predictors of client retention, client loyalty, and products repurchase (Rojas, 2010; Vazifehdoost et al. 2014).

Furthermore, there is a large body of research confirming that satisfaction is linked with a person's feeling of

pleasure or disappointment, which resulted from comparing a product's perceived performance against expectations (Czepiel & Rosenberg, 1977; Martin et al., 2008). These definitions demonstrate that it can be seen as a core of human experience that ties their minds to some company's products or services.

Some authors show that the connection between client satisfaction and other economic categories is different from profits and revenues. Duverger (2012) demonstrates how dissatisfied customers can trigger innovative service ideas. Anderson (2011) explains loyalty in e-markets through satisfaction. Nonetheless, researchers and managers have not treated satisfaction as a relative construct. Managers widely believe that customer satisfaction is a fundamental determinant of a long-term consumer behavior (Oliver, 1980).

Moreover, Iacobucci et al. (1995) find that service quality and customer satisfaction are important concepts to researchers studying consumer evaluations and to practitioners as a mean of creating competitive advantages and customer loyalty. This idea is developed by Tse and Wilton (1988): “it is generally agreed that satisfaction can be defined as... the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations... and the actual performance of the product”. Taylor (1993) describes the nature of the relationship between service quality and consumer satisfaction regarding the formation of consumers' purchase intentions across four unique service industries.

In a competitive marketplace, where businesses compete for clients, client satisfaction is seen as a key differentiator (Hosany & Witham, 2010) that allows companies to attract new clients. Oliver (1993) argues that consumer satisfaction is a process that involves states that are not limited to mere satisfaction. Taylor (1993) describes the nature of the relationship between service quality and consumer satisfaction regarding the formation of consumers' purchase intentions across four unique service industries. Iacobucci et al. (1995) analyze how the consumers perceive the differences between service quality and satisfaction.

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From our bibliometric analysis, we conclude that there is not a single article that deals exclusively with a sort of exhaustive literature review on client satisfaction. Thus, our research aims to fill this gap by investigating this interesting topic.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: in the first section, a description of the used methodology and data source of publications on client satisfaction is presented; in the second section, the main findings are shown; finally, some conclusions and limitations of the paper are included.

1. Methodology

The following methodology is used to find and analyze the articles about client's satisfaction that were subsequently reviewed. Scopus database is selected to search all articles that deal with "clients satisfaction"; a period of investigation and the main keywords are selected; the journals' trends and results are obtained; the evaluation of the articles is presented; finally, all the results are summarized, analyzed, and interpreted.

1.1. Selecting the database. Although different databases can be considered, we chose Scopus, because: (1) it is the world's largest single bibliographic database that indexes more than 21,000 titles of scientific international publishers; (2) it offers the possibility to search for keywords included in the article title, abstract and keywords; (3) it provides links to the publishers' websites and full text of articles; (4) it classifies all included papers according to the special section on Social Sciences and Humanities into subcategories; (5) it permits us to compare the searching results according to keywords; and (6) it presents some specific features on journals that identify those that deal exclusively with the subject of research.

1.2. Establishment of the investigation period. Publications during 1954-2016 are analyzed in Scopus. We started in 1954, because the first paper on client satisfaction was published in 1954.

1.3. Identification of keyword "client satisfaction". We choose for the search "client satisfaction" as a keyword to limit our investigation. Initially, the selection made the search very inconsistent and unsatisfactory, so we split both words into "client" and/or "satisfaction". The word "client" is used in countless research works in fields such as economy, medicine, psychology, and business management. The word "satisfaction" is very general, but it is strongly linked to healthcare settings in medicine areas. In this paper, "satisfaction" is chosen having in mind the definition given in the first section "what people need and want to make their life better participating in some economy activity".

1.4. Search criteria to include the papers. During the compilation, other characteristics of publications were taken into account like the type of source, document type and language. The publications on client

satisfaction are presented in different languages other than English, but we focus on the English language, because it represents 96.3% of all publications. We narrow the research including only papers published in academic journals, so other sources like books or chapters of books are finally excluded.

2. Results

The following logic was followed in the study. First, an analysis on journals trends regarding the downfalls and peak years is conducted. The journal's ratings on "client satisfaction" and its citation level are presented by years. Then, the analysis of the articles on "client satisfaction" is conducted within the 63 years period. The article's classification by areas, its dynamics, sources of publication, countries of publication and language are presented. Further, article's study areas on client satisfaction in accordance with the directions provided by Scopus are analyzed. Finally, an analysis of the methodology and data sources of publications on client satisfaction is presented.

2.1. Analysis of journals on client satisfaction. We analyze all the journals under the research on "client satisfaction" in Scopus in 63 years (1954-2016). Number of journals significantly increased from 1 in 1954 up to 156 in 2016. It should be noted that each year, new journals entered in all science classifications and the total number increased almost in 300%.

According to the number of publications, 4 out of the 5 leading journals are related to health disciplines, and only 1 transcends the boundaries of this discipline. These 5 journals accumulate 20% of the total publications. The heterogeneity of the analyzed theme is shown by the fact that 65% of the journals present only 1 paper, 15% between 2 and 5, and only 20% more than 5.

The Journal of Counseling Psychology published 107 articles in 63 years, Community Mental Health Journal 68, Psychiatric Services 49, Journal of Clinical Psychology 45 and Evaluation and Program Planning 42. Another important issue is that from 1955 to 1975, publications on client satisfaction were only in the Journal of Counseling Psychology, and this is still in the leading position. In 1975, Clinical Psychology started publications on the topic, but its relative ranking decreased in favor of other two journals: Community Mental Health and Psychiatric Services. Also, Journal of Clinical Psychology not only occupied the leading position for the analyzed period, but it also published 9 papers in 2011, the maximum figure for any journal analyzed. It is interesting to highlight that Indian Journal of Science and Technology, included in Scopus since 2007, has 1 article in 2015 and 6 in 2016.

Three clear peaks on the highest publication activity are identified: journal of Evaluation and Program Planning (7 articles in 1983); Psychiatric Services (7 in 1996); Journal of Counseling Psychology (9 in 2011). Later in 2012, there is a sharp decline in publications that can be partly explained by the fact that in 2000, many new journals published papers on this topic. It is also important to note that none of the above mentioned journals has a constant growth up to 2015.

However, citation level of publications in journals experienced an increasing trend during the period between 1996 and 2013. Readers will have noted that the reference period for citations has been changed, and there are objective reasons for this: Scopus does not have complete citation information for articles published before 1996 and the three year gap is done to have an adequate maturity period for the paper to be cited. Journal of Psychiatric Services is the leader by citations (8864 citations in 2013 against 196 in 1996); Journal of Clinical Psychology (6828 in 2013 against 1966 in 1996); Journal of Counseling Psychology (6182 in 2013 against 1654 in 1996); Community Mental Health (1742 in 2013 against 476 in 1996); the Journal Evaluation and Program Planning (1490 in 2013 against 450 in 1996). Additionally, the journal Psychiatric Services, which is the leader by citations (8864 in 2013), initially had the lowest citation level (196) in 1996, among this privileged set of journals. Secondly, in 1996 the leader of citations was the Journal of Clinical Psychology (6828) that occupied the second position in 2013.

2.2. Analysis of article's number on client satisfaction. Articles on "client satisfaction" appeared in Scopus since 1954 for a total of 2753. The growing interest in the topic is proved. We can see a gradual growth in the articles' number from 1954. Since 1973 to 1981, there was a constant interest over it and a positive growth trend. A negative trend is observed in the period 1981-1988, and during 1988, the activity failed almost to the level of 1975, partly because Scopus continued a further specialization in different areas: for example, Journal of Clinical Psychology, Family Process and Social Indicators Research, among others. In 1989, there was an increasing leap mainly because Psychology Journal presented a series of publications over client satisfaction. In the subsequent ten years period (1982-1992), the observed dynamics was quite unstable, in spite of the appearance of new journals like Evaluation and Program Planning, Evaluation and the Health Professions, Social Work in Health Care, Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, and Journal of Applied Psychology. Since then up to nowadays, the interest on the topic is increasing and this seems that this will be alive in the future. In this regard, we highlight the last two years 2015-2016 with 115 ar-

ticles: 68% articles in the health discipline (Fraser & Wu, 2016; Norlander et al., 2016), while only 12% articles from business, management and accounting area (García-Fernández et al., 2016; Tarhaničová & Glova, 2016).

2.3. Countries of publications on client satisfaction. Dynamics of papers and changes in areas of publications illustrate that countries vary very much with respect to the number of publications. Looking at the top 5 authors' nationalities, it accounts for 67% of the total number of published articles. The US was the most prolific country with 1123 published articles, followed by the UK, Canada, Australia and the Netherlands with 283, 173, 167, and 56 published articles, respectively. Analyzing the cross-section data, the rankings for the nationalities are not stable, with the exception of US, which outperformed all the rest of the countries dynamically. Thus, it is important to highlight that the first publication belonged to American authors Forgy and Black (1954).

2.4. Study areas. Analyzing the different areas of study like Social Sciences, Psychology, Business, Management and Accounting, Medicine, Decision Sciences, and so forth up to a total of 20 different areas, the 4 more important areas are: Social Sciences, Psychology, Business, Management and Accounting, and Medicine. It is always difficult to categorize the published paper in only one area, as in many cases, the lines for the categorization can be very red. However, it can be seen that the 4 more important areas accounted for a total representativeness of more than 70%. Besides these big four, it can also be highlighted how other areas like Health Professions, Nursing and Engineering were also important with more than 10% of representativeness.

2.5. Methodology and data source of publications on client satisfaction. The analysis of the research methods and data collection is based on a strict selection of the most representative 100 publications. Firstly, we select the authors with the highest number of publications (more than 5 papers); secondly, the most cited authors; thirdly, authors with the highest h-index (Table 1).

The subject area is mainly represented (73%) by medicine and psychology areas. It can be seen that the publications in this particular set are quite unevenly, being the period 2010-2016 clearly overrepresented. The most popular author is Drake, R.E., considering the number of publications (13), his h-index is 76, and has 9694 citations. For some other authors, the pattern between the number of publications and citations is not so clear. It is also important to highlight that almost all authors are from USA, with the exception of one who is from Singapore.

Table 1. 100 publications on client satisfaction

Author	H index/Citations	Research methods	Years	Subject area
Attkisson	16/2483	◆ QIA ◆ QnA	1993, 1984, 1985, 1983(2), 1981, 1982, 1979	SS/BMA
Becker	37/4517	◆ FA ◆ QnA	2005, 1998(2), 1997, 1996, 1994	M/Hthp
Bond	45/4276	◆ QnA ◆ Cases	2009, 2001, 2002, 1996-1998	M/Hthp
Calsyn	22/1501	◆ Cases ◆ QIA	2006, 2003, 1997, 1995, 1994, 1992	M/SS
Drake	76/9694	◆ PS ◆ QnA	2007, 2006(3), 2005, 2001, 1999, 1998(2), 1994-97	M/Hthp
Gelso	29/2114	◆ QnA ◆ QIA	2014, 2011(2), 2010, 1987, 1973	Psy/M
Hsieh	9/241	◆ Cases ◆ QnA	2014, 2012(2), 2009(2), 2006(2)	SS/Psy
Lambert	47/6446	◆ QIA ◆ QnA	2012(2), 2011, 2006, 2004, 1984, 1978	Psy /M
Ling	19/1240	◆ FA ◆ QnA	2015, 2014(4), 2013, 2005(2)	E/BMA
Morse	17/685	◆ Cases ◆ QnA	2006, 2003, 1997, 1995, 1994, 1992	M/SS
Owen	14/593	◆ QnA	2014, 2013(4), 2012(2), 2011(3), 2010	E/BMA
Rodolfa	14/454	◆ FA ◆ QnA	2013(2), 2012, 2011(2), 2010	Psy/M
Rosenheck	76/8954	◆ QnA ◆ QIA ◆ Cases	2014, 2012(2), 2006, 2006, 2004(2), 1999, 2000, 1995	M/SS

Subject area from Scopus: **M**-medicine; **Hthp**-health professions; **SS**-social sciences; **Psy**-psychology; **BMA**-Business, Management and Accounting; **E**-Engineering.

Research methods in articles: **PS**-pilot study, **QnA**-quantitative analysis, **QIA**-qualitative analysis, **FA**-factor analysis.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Within the 100 publications, the most popular methods of research are factor analysis and quantitative analysis. Although, most of these publications are not focused in economic and social areas, this method is also applied profusely in business and economic areas (Adogwa et al., 2012; Moreno-Peral et al., 2014). We find a similar situation with the popularity of quantitative analysis in research on client satisfaction (D'Elia et al., 2014; Miyajima et al., 2014).

Regarding data collection methods, the interviews and surveys are the basic tool, independently of the subject area of study. For example, Prisecaru & Constantinescu (2011) present a standard questionnaire to collect information regarding service quality. Chen & Yu (2009) on the base of a survey questionnaire analyze clients' satisfaction in both Taiwan and Singapore.

Conclusion

The bibliometric analysis on client satisfaction examines the evolution of the topics of interest over a 63 years period on the base of academic publishing observations. From our analysis, we conclude that the systematic literature reviews on client satisfaction are very scarce, and almost all papers consulted had a very simple literature review just to give some context to the paper. The increase of publications number clearly showed the interest and opportunity

to carry out this approach in order to fill this existing gap in the literature, because most of the previous literature was partial and incomplete.

Some insights and patterns were obtained. For example, a positive growth trend was observed since 2007 and the number of publications reached 115 in 2016. A tentative explanation for this trend can be underpinned in the recession and economic downturn period that firms confronted. Regarding the areas of study, medicine and other areas related to the health sector were in the group of the most representative.

According to the distribution of publications by journals, only the 41% published more than 3 articles per year, and less than 2% of them published only 2. Significant differences were also observed looking at the authors' nationalities, where the US showed a very dominant position. Most of the top 5 nationalities were from the Anglo-Saxon world, so it was not strange to find that a very ample part of the publications (96.3%) were written in English.

One of the main contributions of this paper was based on a comprehensive literature review of previous publications, and this can be used for further investigation on any other topics of research interest.

Other important findings are related to the most common methods applied and data sources used. Analyzing 100 publications according to some criteria, the most popular methods of research were factor and quantitative analysis, while data collection methods were based on interviews and surveys using questionnaires.

We end this section highlighting that our findings will provide a meaningful source of information about client satisfaction for a numerous set of characteristics that can support future research. However, it can be said that our study is only based on “client satisfaction” keyword and on Scopus for the period 1954-2016.

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