In search of a theory of value (co-)creation in consumption contexts

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Abstract

Recognizing that the service-dominant logic (SDL) cannot satisfactorily explain value processes in consumption contexts, this paper builds a framework that shares with SDL two key ideas. The first is that consumer value is always related to services, either directly by interacting with a service provider or indirectly by using goods as mechanisms for service provision. The second key idea is the need to contextualize value processes to understand them. On this basis, different contexts are analyzed highlighting a set of foundational dualities: potential value versus actual value, value creation versus value determination, demand-side beneficiary versus supply-side beneficiary, service self-production/value self-creation versus service co-production/value co-creation, use value versus symbolic value. These constructs are invariant to consumer contexts, but at the same time can be used to frame their variety, that is, the different ways in which consumers self-produce or co-produce services, self-create or co-create value. A relevant implication emerges from a context-based view of value-in-consumption: the changes that consumption contexts undergo in relation to digital transition, particularly with reference to artificial intelligence and Internet of Things.

Keywords: Consumption context, service-dominant logic, value self-creation, value co-creation, potential value, actual value

Paper type: Conceptual paper

Analyzing the association between consumption and value, the founders of service-dominant logic (SDL) emphasize its inherent contextual characterization (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). However, this idea has not been further developed in SDL studies or in marketing studies more generally. Given such a gap, this paper – conceptual in nature – aims to outline a conceptual framework on value processes in consumption contexts. The second part of the paper shows that this original framework offers a privileged point of observation on the changing reality of consumption contexts.

1. Value processes in consumption contexts

Adopting the SDL's point of view (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008; Vargo *et al.*, 2010), consumption context is any situation – real or virtual, but spatially and temporally determined – in which one or more consumers benefit from the production of services. Value is associated with this benefit, as recalled by the working definition of value proposed by Grönroos (2008, p. 303): "Value for customers means that after they have been assisted by a self-service process (cooking a meal or withdrawing cash from an ATM) or a full-service process (eating out at a restaurant or withdrawing cash over the counter in a bank) they are or feel better off than before".

The analysis that follows focuses on different types of consumption contexts, starting from the simplest of them, where a consumer, alone, uses one or more goods. In describing these contexts, the term "value" is used in its meaning of use value, which is generally referred to all the benefits of the goods used for service provision (Priem, 2007). As emphasized by sociology of consumption (Corrigan, 1997), two distinct components contribute to forming use value: use value in the strict sense, related to the functional attributes of goods, and symbolic value due to the social and cultural meanings associated with them. To reduce the complexity of the analysis, this section refers to use value in the strict sense only.

1.1 Self-creation of actual value in the lone consumer context

In the lone consumer context, a consumer uses goods by him/herself. Consumers use goods to achieve a goal, and they can do so because goods incorporate knowledge. To this knowledge, they must add their own knowledge and skills, which differentiate them from other consumers who, having the same goods, pursue the same goal. Our consumer is an actor capable of "integrating" resources in the SDL language (Gummesson and Mele, 2010; Vargo and Lusch, 2008) or "combining" them in the language of Grönroos (2008) and scholars of the business network approach as well (Bocconcelli *et al.*, 2020).

As goods are mechanisms for service provision (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), this context is a service context where the service provider is the consumer who activates the context using specific goods. Precisely, by using the goods-in-context, the consumer self-produces the service (Grönroos, 2008). In this way, consumers create value for themself.[1] There is here self-creation of value, regardless of whether the consumers' commitment to the process is high or low (e.g., they merely press a button).

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[1] Since in the lone consumer context there is no co-creation but self-creation of value, then the SDL's idea that value is always co-created is flawed. For a more in-depth critique of this generalization of the concept of value co-creation, see: Grandinetti (2024); Grönroos (2012).

Goods have potential value in relation to the services that consumers can produce through their use. As Grönroos (2008, p. 299) highlighted the early days of service marketing, "a good represents potential value (or utility) for the consumer. He purchases the good and subsequently he must initiate and implement the activities required to transform this potential value into real value for him".

Consumers, at least in the consumption or service context we are dealing with, are not involved in the creation of potential value, which takes place in the contexts where goods are produced, spatially and temporally separated from the contexts in which their use take place. In service self-production contexts, consumers self-create value which is associate with the goods-in-service, or more precisely with the benefits they generate. We can qualify this value as actual or real value to distinguish it from potential value (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Value self-creation in the lone consumer context.
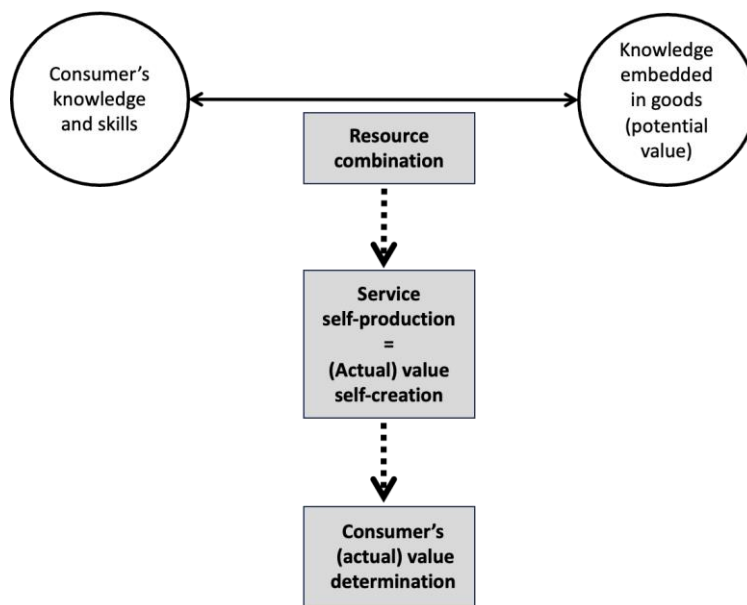
The creation of actual value ends with its recognition by the creator of this value, i.e., the consumer. This process is different from value creation: Vargo and Lusch (2008) call it value determination and others value perception (Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). The determination of actual value is a purely subjective or idiosyncratic (unique to an individual consumer) process as several authors point out (e.g., Priem, 2007; Vargo and Lusch, 2008), corresponding to that "being or feeling better" that Grönroos (2008) speaks of in defining (actual) value.

Related to the lone consumer context, there are two different types of beneficiaries of what happens in it – the producers of the goods and the consumer self-producing the service – and each determines a different type of actual value, although both values are linked to the potential value of goods. For the producer-beneficiary, this linkage is rather straightforward: the price set for the sale of the good (exchange value) is a measure of the potential value for the producer (p_1); this value is converted into actual value for the producer through the price (p_2) paid by the consumer; this conversion is an objective process as it is anchored to the two prices. In the case of the consumer-beneficiary, the potential value of goods derives from the service they contain

in nuce, and thus incorporates their prospective use by the consumer. The linkage is less straightforward here, since, between the potential value of goods and the actual value of the service as determined by the consumer, there is a process of (actual) value self-creation that results in its subjective determination.

For instance, consider a hypothetical situation in which two consumers assign different actual values to the same good-service, for which the same price was paid, in both cases is free of defects, and that has been used not only correctly by the two consumers but also in a substantially identical way (in terms of context of use). What happened? We understand this by remembering that the determination of actual value is purely subjective (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). In other words, consumers are not standard even when almost everything would suggest that they should be. Even the most incidental emotions can influence consumer judgments and choices (Han *et al.*, 2007), including the determination of actual value.

1.2 Co-creation of actual value in service encounters

Other consumption contexts involve professional service providers, that is, contexts that take shape with a service encounter (Surprenant and Solomon, 1987). Figure 2 shows the simple situation in which a consumer interacts with a service employee who uses – alone or together with the consumer – certain goods in the production of the service.

FIGURE 2. Value co-creation in a simple service encounter.
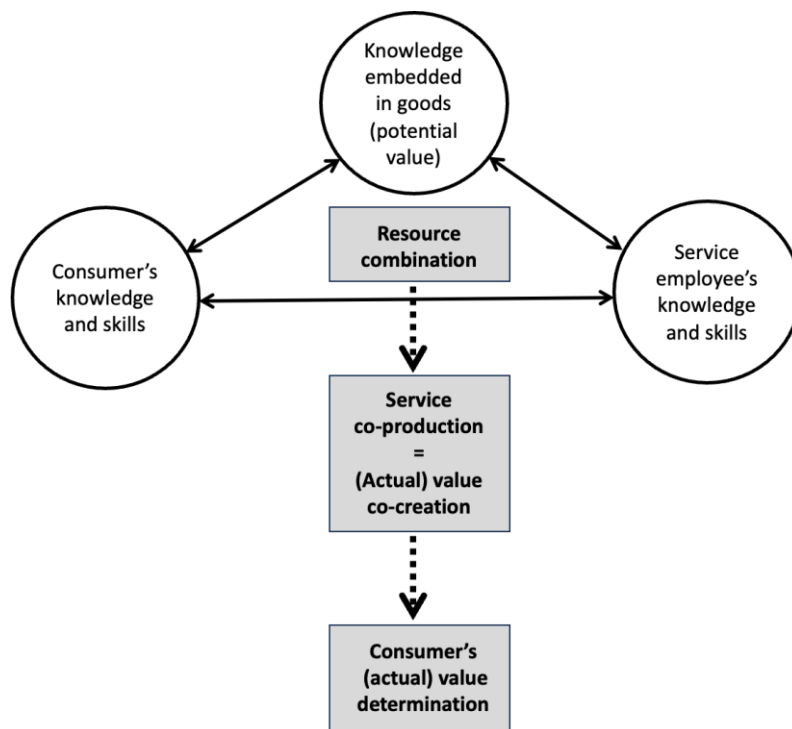
The association between service encounter and service co-production was proposed within conceptual frameworks of service marketing or service management developed in the 1970s and 1980s (Eiglier and Langeard, 1987; Grönroos, 1978; Normann, 1984) and then by Prahalad and Ramawamy (2000), who were the first to speak of value co-creation. Finally, Grönroos (2012)

proposed a synthesis model based on the notion that "the co-creation of value takes place in joint collaborative activities during direct interactions of the parties" (p. 1527).

Continuing in the wake of this literature and reading the encounter between a consumer and a service employee with the categories of the contextual perspective already used for the analysis of the lone consumer context, service encounters can be described as consumption contexts in which actors combine resources (their knowledge and skills, knowledge embedded in goods) to co-produce services and co-create actual value. So, in the elementary service encounter presented in Figure 2 there is, unlike the lone consumer context (Figure 1), co-creation of actual value, which unfolds in the vertical direction as in a supply chain. In both contexts, upstream of actual value there is potential value, as communicated and promised (also) by the price set by the service provider and the producers of goods-in-context. Again, in both contexts the creation of actual value ends with its determination by the consumer, while the supply side actors determine their own actual value. Notably, in the case of service encounters, the consumer interacts with the service employee in co-creating actual value, which makes the value determination by each actor-beneficiary under the influence of the other.

On the consumer side, the determination of actual value comes to depend on the quality of the interaction with the service employee, which in turn depends on the knowledge/skills of the two actors (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2018; Tommasetti *et al.*, 2017). Specifically, actual value for the consumer increases in relation to: (i) his/her ability to provide the information needed to obtain a service that fits to his/her need, either at the beginning or during the process; (ii) the ability of the service employee to obtain such information and interpret it correctly; and (iii) the ability of both to take actions leading up to satisfy the consumer.

If we change the structure of this elementary context by increasing the number of consumers and/or contact employees, the shift from a dyad to a network makes the processes of service co-production, co-creation of actual value, and its determination more complex (Polese *et al.*, 2017). For example, relationships between consumers may come into play, in the presence of which the individual consumer's determination of actual value may be different than it would be in their absence. However, the reading of value processes does not change from what has been said with reference to the dyadic context.

In contrast, the situation is simplified when the consumer encounters an automat device such as an ATM or software accessible through the service organization's website or even an app downloaded by the consumer. These and similar cases are referred to as self-service technologies and technology-based service encounters (Meuter *et al.*, 2000), the impressive growth of which has changed the consumption landscape in the digital age. On the other hand, the hybrid nature of self-service technologies should not be missed: on the one hand, they are artifacts (goods) used by consumers to create value for themselves (there is no co-creation of actual value), replacing the human-human interaction of traditional service encounters; on the other hand, they perform activities typical of service employees, within the limits imposed by the given technology.

1.3 Co-creation of actual value in consumer communities

Moving from the lone consumer context of Figure 1 to two or more consumers involved in service production, consumption contexts take on a community dimension, from the micro-community represented by a household dyad (Figure 3) to a community of practice among

consumers. The use of goods in the community context can be one-to-one (e.g., a group of mountain bikers who ride together) or one-to-many (the group bought some equipment for collective use). Moreover, the context can be real (as in the previous case) or virtual (some group members participate in an online community sharing information about any kind of artifact used in mountain biking practices). It is pertinent to speak in all these cases of co-production of service, although the prefix co- has been used in studies that have dealt with co-production of services or co-creation of value to indicate situations involving actors on both the demand and supply sides (Galvagno and Dalli, 2014).

FIGURE 3. Value co-creation in the household dyad context.
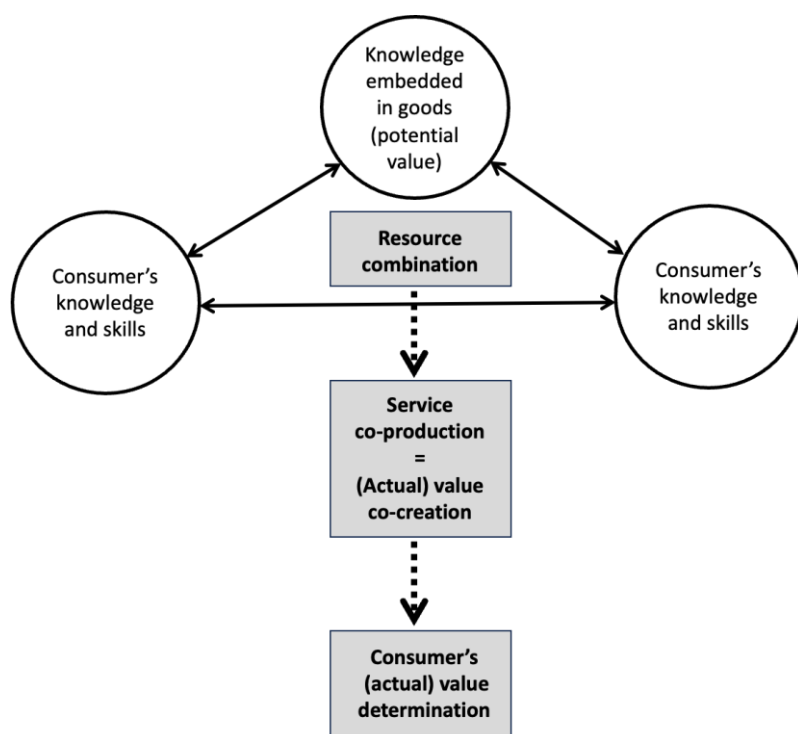
It is possible to speak of service co-production in contexts activated and animated by consumers alone because in them service is produced with the contribution of two or more actors. At the same time, it is to emphasize the relative autonomy of this type of actor, which already exists when a consumer is alone but is reinforced in domestic and non-domestic contexts of community use of goods. This perspective has remained fairly overshadowed in marketing studies except for the specific phenomenon of consumer communities of practice, which have begun to attract interest since their strong online development (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010). On the other hand, the least studied are those most interesting from the perspective of consumer autonomy, i.e., non-brand communities for participants "to have fun with the product/activity (a social aspect) or to make the activity safer" (Yoshida *et al.*, 2014, p. 2).

If there is service co-production, there is also value co-creation. Compared to the lone consumer context, the scheme of consumers co-producing services is thus characterized by the fact that there is co-creation of actual value. As in a service encounter, the co-creation process implies direct interaction between actors (Grönroos, 2012), only in our community context the

actors are all on the demand side. Looking at the level of value determination, there are as many distinct processes as there are consumers involved, and – given the subjective nature of these processes – results can also be very divergent. On the other hand, in consumer communities (large or small) information and knowledge circulate among interacting members, and this sharing results in a gradual convergence of individual processes of actual value determination. In addition, a member with leadership can exert his/her influence on others even at the level of determining actual value, leading to an alignment of individual values around his/her own.

Within a community context of (actual) value co-creation, one or more consumers may take on the role of the service employee as frequently happens in household contexts and in those associated with other communities, such as brand or non-brand communities of practice (Ardley *et al.*, 2020; Guercini and Cova, 2021). Members of a community may specialize in providing different services and be engaged in different contexts in relation to their specialization. Even with these specialized roles, the distinction between value co-creation and individual determination still applies, but now the co-creation of actual value between consumers does not unfold horizontally but vertically. In this respect, these contexts bear some similarity to the service encounters analyzed in the previous subsection.

2. Framing value and value creation in consumption contexts

Summing up what emerged from the analysis of the different consumption contexts considered, it is possible to identify some invariant constructs – each in form of duality – that together frame value-in-contexts (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Value-in-contexts and its dualities.

Construct	◄——— Duality ———►	
Type of value	Potential value	Actual value
Value process	Value creation	Value determination
Beneficiary position	Demand side	Supply side
Service production	Self-production	Co-production
Value creation	Self-creation	Co-creation
Type of value co-creation	Horizontal co-creation	Vertical co-creation

The first duality is between potential value and actual value. Potential value refers to goods as resources for creating actual value or services when they are still at the stage of promises of actual value, while actual value or value-in-use is always and only associated with services. Potential and actual value are different entities that are linked in consumption contexts enacted by consumers and possibly other actors. The distinction between potential value and actual value allows us to dispel the fog shrouding the discussion on value creation and co-creation by recalling that, first, it is necessary to specify what kind of value we are talking about.

Second, processes concerning value are of two general types: value creation and value determination. Regarding the latter, it is important to distinguish between beneficiaries who, given a specific consumption context, are on the supply and demand sides, respectively. Contextualizing value leads to acknowledge the latent tension that exists between these two types

of actors who pursue different goals and evaluate their achievement when determining "their" actual value. This value-for-whom perspective is ignored or neglected by studies on value co-creation (Galvagno and Dalli, 2014).

The last dualities included in Table 1 relate to the processes of service production and value creation. If consumer determination of actual value is a process of subjective perception (although affected by other actors in the context), the creation of this value is either an individual process (in contexts where a consumer alone self-produces the service and self-creates value) or involves two or more actors co-producing the service and co-creating actual value. In the second case, co-creation may involve only consumers in more or less extended communities (horizontal co-creation) or it occurs in service encounters (vertical co-creation).

2.1 The variety of consumption contexts

Recalling the definition of consumption contexts used as a premise for their analysis, their variety with regard to the value processes can be framed as a function of three main variables (Figure 4): (i) the number of actors activating the context – one (necessarily a consumer) or more; (ii) the type of actors involved – only consumer(s) or also service employee(s); and (iii) the type of value created – only actual or also potential value.

FIGURE 4. Determining the variety of consumption contexts.
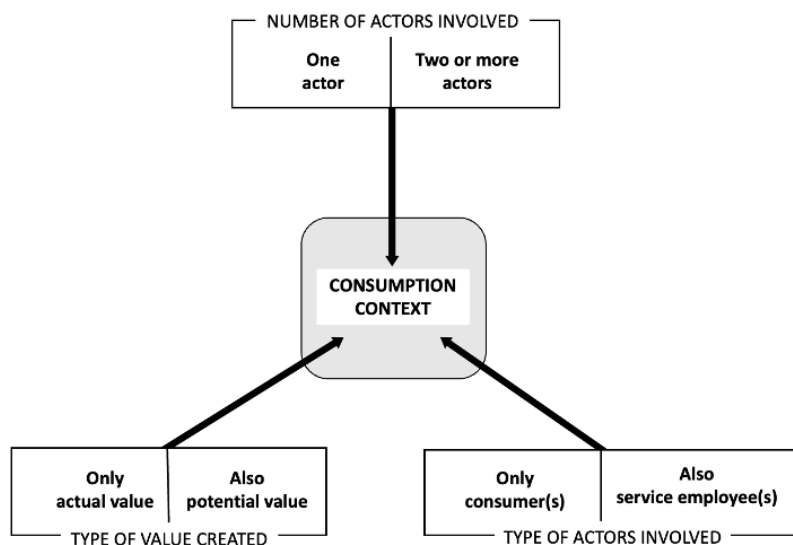
With these three variables, it is possible to compose a value-based typology of consumption contexts that includes other types besides those described in the previous section. For instance, a variation on the lone consumer context concerns good self-production or do-it-yourself, i.e., the consumer who uses goods to produce a new good or modifies them before benefiting from them, such as when preparing a plate of spaghetti or working on the photo gallery on a smartphone. From a value perspective, in this good self-production context there is creation of new potential value, a process in which consumers bring their knowledge and skills into play. On the new potential value, the same reasoning outlined in Figure 1 applies: the new or modified good is a mechanism for service provision; the service it provides through the consumer's use of it – in the same or in a different context from the one in which it was produced – has an actual

value determined by the consumer; and in the creation of actual value, the consumer's knowledge/skills (as distinct from those that led to the creation of potential value) again come into play. This type of context is thus characterized by the fact that the consumer, in addition to creating actual value, also creates the underlying potential value. Moreover, the creation of potential value can take place not in the form of do-it-yourself but in the community form of do-it-with-others (co-creation of potential value).[2] This phenomenon concerns a wide variety of goods, from the relatively simple as in the case of preparing a dinner to the very complex as in the case of self-building a house (Vannini and Taggart, 2014).

2.2 Contextualizing symbolic value

Let us now consider a last duality relating to value, that between the symbolic value that goods or even services (provided in service encounters) may have and their use value in the narrow sense. In consumer studies, it is well established the idea that consumers buy goods also and often primarily for their symbolic meanings, the symbolic value of a good being determined "by the social and cultural meanings associated with it that enable consumers to express individual and social identity through the product's purchase and use" (Ravasi and Rindova, 2008, p. 270).

The distinction between potential and actual value also applies to the symbolic component of value. Regarding the potential symbolic value, its creation is a process of co-creation that always involves consumers (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), but in a far more complex way than in the contexts where the co-creation of potential value concerns only use value in the narrow sense. More precisely, the potential symbolic value that can be associated at a certain time with a good as a pair of Nike Air Jordans or a service as a visit to Disneyland Paris is the result of contributions with positive or negative impact that have occurred over time coming from: (i) producers of the branded goods or branded services with their communication strategies (Nandan, 2005); (ii) individual consumers as bloggers or other social media influencers (Vrontis et al, 2021); (iii) groups of consumers as brand communities (Schau *et al.*, 2018) and tribes (Cova and Cova, 2001); as well as (iv) a range of events that have a generative or disruptive effect on potential symbolic value (Ravasi and Rindova, 2008).

Actual value consisting of two components is congruent with what has been called experiential or consumer value (Holbrook, 1999; Mathwick *et al.*, 2001), while the symbolic component alone corresponds to experience-related hedonic value (Babin *et al.*, 1994). If we look at the variety of consumption contexts, the inclusion of symbolic value as a component of actual value does not change our framework: one can create this value (in real or virtual contexts), individually, or co-create it with the concurrence of other actors, and, in this case, co-creation can take place in a horizontal or vertical direction; the determination of symbolic actual value is a process distinct from its creation, takes on entirely different forms depending on the type of beneficiary, and is purely subjective in the case of consumers; the alignment or misalignment between potential symbolic value and actual symbolic value depends on what happens in the context (where, for example, the consumer who bought an expensive garment with the aim of differentiating him/herself from others may or may not find evidence that the aim has been achieved); and finally, in consumer communities, there can be an alignment

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[2] Consumption contexts of do-it-yourself or do-it-with-others are among those that inspired the theory of prosumption, i.e., the phenomenon of simultaneous consumption and production (Shah *et al.*, 2020).

between the actual values determined by individual members, a phenomenon that – in the case of the symbolic component of value – stems from the epistemic commonality among them (Thompson, 2005).

3. Digitally-driven changes in consumption contexts

This paper aimed to conceptualize the processes regarding value involving consumers. The attempt shares with the SDL two key ideas: first, value is always related to the services that consumers benefit from, since goods incorporate knowledge that makes them mechanisms for service provision; second, value processes must be contextualized in order to understand them. This paper goes a step further than SDL: after defining consumption contexts as any situation – real or virtual, but spatially and temporally determined – in which one or more consumers benefit from the production of services, contexts were analyzed with attention not only to the value processes occurring within them but also to their interdependencies with processes occurring outside them. In doing so, a number of dualities come to light that together define an original approach to value creation in consumption contexts: potential value versus actual value, value creation versus value determination, demand-side beneficiary versus supply-side beneficiary (value for whom), self-service production/value self-creation versus service co-production/value co-creation, and use value (in a narrow sense) versus symbolic value.

This approach to value consists of a set of invariant constructs necessary to analyze consumption contexts, while at the same time conceptualizes the variety of such contexts, that is, the different ways in which consumers self-produce or co-produce services, self-create or co-create value. Consumption contexts in their variety matter, but of this there is not yet full awareness in studies as in marketing practices, particularly about the design and marketing of goods.

Furthermore, consumption is changing within the landscape of the fourth industrial revolution and digital transition, particularly with reference to artificial intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things (IoT) (Grandinetti *et al.*, 2022; Huang and Rust, 2021). A context-based view of consumption gives us a high-definition lens to understand this evolution.

Think to those consumption contexts that are activated by consumers in their homes in the presence of service robots or other smart artifacts based on AI (Argandoña *et al.*, 2021). For instance, robots may be engaged in healthcare at home for a variety of diseases or patients' conditions, where the robot transfers information from the patient (for example, a diabetes patient) and his/her sensors to an external carer who transfers to the robot the indications that the latter in turn provides to the patient (Al-Taee *et al.*, 2016). The same kind of technologies are working and helping consumers in other contexts examined in 1.1 and 1.3, for example the car (Sestino *et al.*, 2022), or in service encounters (examined in 1.2) where they flank or replace frontline personnel (Grandinetti, 2020; Wirtz *et al.*, 2018): stores (Guha *et al.*, 2021), restaurants (Berezina *et al.*, 2019), hotels (Lukanova and Ilieva, 2019), museums (Recuero Virto and López, 2019) or hospitals (Kyrarini *et al.*, 2021).

The cognitive architecture and connections that this latest AI-based generation of frontline robots or similar artifacts are fitted with, makes them able to (Grandinetti *et al.*, 2022; Wirtz *et al.*, 2018): acquire the information that qualifies the specific characteristics of the context in which they operate (context awareness); analyze numerical and non-numerical data; make

autonomous decisions; adapt and customize the services they provide by interacting with the customers in front of them; behave proactively trying to help customers not only by answering their requests; learn within the contexts of use and evolve their behavior (machine learning). The information these robots use to accomplish their tasks are elaborated thanks to incorporated devices (cameras, microphones and sensors), and comes from sources within the organization where they operate (for example, the customer database), and from other "external" sources (IoT), including other robots and complex devices. Ultimately, it becomes difficult to interpret them as simple artifacts (goods): rather, they behave as if they were new interacting and knowing actors that inhabit the consumption contexts.

Considering the spread of new digital technologies in relation to the distinction between contexts without and with service employees, a further relevant aspect emerges. When the former host artificial actors capable of co-producing services – and thus co-creating value (Zhang et al., 2020) – by interacting with human actors (consumers), a hybrid category of contexts between the first type and the second takes shape. These intermediate contexts are activated by consumers in the typical places of "without" contexts, but in the way they function they are quite like service encounters, due to the presence of "robotic things" working as service employees and because behind these quasi-actors are the organizations that manage them, thereby entering consumers' places of life (Grandinetti *et al.*, 2022). The hybrid category is being filled with new contexts, which have drawn the attention of scholars especially with reference to the abovementioned home health care services (Al-Taee *et al.*, 2016; Simoens *et al.*, 2018; Bishop *et al.*, 2023), but which have also emerged in many other fields from teaching assistance to fitness assistance (Alabed *et al.*, 2022). In these hybrid contexts, resource combination and value co-creation are processes more complex, often inter-contextual, and still largely to be explored.

Clearly, the growing presence of hybrid consumption contexts raises a big issue, that of knowledge asymmetry between the consumers of robotic things and the organizations that manage these service-providing goods in consumption contexts and exploit their intelligence. Organizations involved on the supply side enter all contexts in which consumers are involved, collect information and increase their knowledge about consumers in general and at individual level, and gain increasing control over them. With all evidence, this is a sort of dark side of the digital landscape, and a new challenge for consumers embedded in it.

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