



Value co-destruction: Problems and solutions

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Abstract

The concept of value co-creation (VCC) is central to service-dominant logic (SDL) and forms its second axiom, namely that “Value is cocreated by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p.8). In parallel with the evolution of VCC in SDL, the term “value co-destruction” (VCD) has also emerged within the services and marketing literature (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Plé & Cáceres, 2010). Value co-destruction is pitched as a reverse concept to VCC—another side of the same coin (Plé, 2017)—capturing how interactions, practices, and resource integrations between actors might have negative impacts on value formation. Research on VCD has both expanded and fragmented (Echeverri & Skålén, 2021), but the concept has not been subject to the same scrutiny as VCC. In this article, we question the logic underpinning VCD conceptualization and problematize its use. We articulate three specific problems: first, the need to view VCC as a normative statement; second, a logical flaw in how VCD captures negative outcomes; and third, an issue with the “co” in co-destruction. We offer two solutions for researchers in this area: first, given that VCC is representative of a metatheory, we present mid-range theories as providing opportunities for exploring the role of valence in interactive service experiences; second, we identify literature that presents a continuum of contrasting negative and positive value outcomes.

Keywords Value · Value co-creation · Value co-destruction · Service-dominant logic · Customer engagement · Mid-range theory

Introduction

“Value” is a concept that plays a central role in multiple theories, ideologies, and research streams. It has at least two millennia of history behind it, having occupied the attention of key historical figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Smith, Mill, and Marx (Ng & Smith, 2012). In the marketing discipline, value has a rich taxonomy, including use value, exchange value, shareholder value, consumer value,

customer value, experiential value, brand value, aesthetic value, financial value, symbolic value, functional value, and sign value—to name but a few (see Karababa & Kjeldgaard, 2014). The study of value within marketing has also been codified in recent years, with observations being made in relation to research paradigms that motivate and underpin value research (Zeithaml et al., 2020).

One value concept that has precipitated extensive discussion and some controversy is the notion of value co-creation (VCC). Although this concept had its roots in various forms within management and practitioner literature (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2002, 2004; Ramirez, 1999), the term “value co-creation” gained prominence primarily due to its association with service-dominant logic (SDL). The latter is a theoretical framework that offers potential as a foundation for a general theory of marketing (Hunt et al., 2022; Vargo & Lusch, 2017). Value co-creation is found at the core of SDL and constitutes its second axiom: “Value is cocreated by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 8). Consequently, SDL brings about a fundamental shift in our perception of value. No longer

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confined to being embedded within a product or determined solely by a company, value is, instead, a phenomenon that is uniquely and phenomenologically determined by individuals and emerges “in use” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Furthermore, VCC acknowledges the involvement of multiple actors within value creation in service ecosystems, extending beyond a firm and shaping how value is determined (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Running parallel with the evolution of VCC in SDL, the term “value co-destruction” (VCD) has emerged in the fields of services marketing and marketing theory literature (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Plé & Cáceres, 2010). In this context, researchers introduce a term that can be seen as a reverse concept to VCC, another side of the same coin whose purpose is to capture how interactions, practices, and resource integrations between actors might have negative impacts on value formation (Plé, 2017). Research on VCD has expanded with conceptual reviews (Lumivalo et al., 2023) and studies exploring co-destruction typologies (Laud et al., 2019) centering on two distinct perspectives: one that focuses on resources, particularly the misuse of resources, and another that centers on VCD practices (Echeverri & Skålén, 2021). However, despite work offering an extensive critique of SDL and VCC (e.g., Brown, 2007; O’Shaughnessy & O’Shaughnessy, 2009), we are unaware of any that critique VCD.

In this article, we question the logic underpinning the conceptualization of VCD and problematize its use. Our inquiry begins with an investigation into the origins of VCD and the commensurate development of SDL and VCC. Here we observe that since its first appearance in 2004, SDL has often been misunderstood. Moreover, the evolution of VCD seems to have occurred, and endured, based on a distorted interpretation of SDL. This leads to three specific problems with how VCD is used: first, the need to view VCC as a normative statement; second, a logical inconsistency that emerges through the manner in which VCD has been employed to capture negative outcomes; and third, an issue with the “co” in co-destruction.

In addition to articulating problems with current conceptualizations, we address these VCD problems by proposing two solutions. Firstly, we observe that since SDL and VCC are meta-level concepts (Vargo & Lusch, 2017)—and given that VCC represents a positive statement of how value is created—mid-range theories provide opportunities for exploring the role of valence in interactive service experiences and offer several suggestions in this regard. Secondly, we direct attention to literature that offers a continuum of contrasting negative and positive value outcomes.

Origins and manifestations of value co-destruction

Plé and Cáceres (2010) first introduced the concept of VCD and its relationship to SDL, based on the assertion that SDL’s conceptualization of value has an “over-optimistic” view of the value process (i.e., VCC). The authors note that “implicit here is the assumption that the interactions between the parties have an inherent tendency to result in value co-creation” (Plé and Cáceres, p. 431). However, the authors observe that “if it can be co-created, it seems logically possible that value might also be co-destroyed through such interactional processes” (Plé & Cáceres, 2010, p. 431). The authors define VCD as “an interactional process between service systems that results in a decline in at least one of the systems’ well-being (which, given the nature of a service system, can be individual or organizational)” (Plé & Cáceres, 2010, p. 431). For Plé and Cáceres (2010), VCD is manifested through the intentional or accidental misuse of resources by one of the service systems (Plé & Cáceres, 2010). An example of this (from the same paper) would be an individual who buys a car but does not maintain it, thus destroying potential value for themselves, but also for the firm, if the individual subsequently blames future problems on the firm. This, the authors claim, is a VCD process for both parties, caused by misuse of the firm’s value proposition.

In parallel with Plé and Cáceres, another perspective of VCD was developed by Echeverri and Skålén (2011), who refer to VCD as the “collaborative destruction, or diminishment, of value by providers and customers” (Plé & Cáceres, 2010, p. 355). In this paper, the authors present a view of interactive value formation that can be “associated with value co-creation but also with value co-destruction” (Plé & Cáceres, 2010, p. 351). Using the lens of practice theory and an empirical study in a public transport setting, the authors outline a range of interaction practices that can be viewed as “co-creation” or “co-destruction,” depending on the outcome. For example, for “informing” practices, they describe a scenario in which a bus driver who is running late pulls away from a stop and does not allow a customer, who is running to make the bus, get on in time. This seems like “bad service” to other customers, and value is therefore co-destroyed.

The literature has expanded since the emergence of VCD in 2010, and in a review of VCD papers, Echeverri and Skålén (2021) identify 34 papers between 1999 and 2018 in which VCD is a core concept. However, they also note that the field is fragmented—perhaps even so fragmented that it hinders the development of research in this field (Echeverri & Skålén, 2021). This fragmentation is evident when one examines how VCD is utilized in the literature. We identify

three broad ways in which VCD is conceptualized (see Table 1).

Our first theme sees VCD in experiential or interactional terms. Here, VCD relates to potential value not being (co-) created or unrealized value. For example, Čaić et al. (2018) describe co-destruction as a process that destroys the emergence of potential value. Further, others describe value as consumers' health that can potentially be co-destroyed by online diagnoses (Robertson et al., 2014), unrealized positive outcomes of a collaboration (Uppström & Lönn, 2017), and missing out on potential experiential utility (Crowther & Donlan, 2011). Value co-destruction is also articulated via experiences. For example, what is being co-destroyed is a (potentially) positive subjective or collective experience (Camilleri & Neuhofer, 2017; Carù & Cova, 2015), a tourist experience (Neuhofer, 2016; Kirova, 2020), or a service experience (Zhang et al., 2018). The focus of these studies is on understanding why and how experiences did not lead to VCC (hence unrealized value); in other words, where co-destruction relates to the notion of unrealized potential as favorable experiences did not emerge.

Our second theme sees VCD associated with individual cognitive and affective outcomes in relation to emotions, relations, and wellbeing. For example, several articles describe VCD as undesirable feelings such as disappointment, anxiety, irritation, feeling cheated, let down, frustration, anger, and dissatisfaction (Prior & Marcos-Cuevas, 2016; Quach & Thaichon, 2017; Kashif & Zarkada, 2015). Vartiainen and Tuunanen (2016) view value as analogous to pleasure, describing it as hedonic. The assumption made, therefore, is that there is a positive feeling (e.g., happiness) to be co-created, but something goes wrong (i.e., co-destruction) and a negative feeling (e.g., anger) therefore emerges.

Given its association with SDL, other VCD articles view value as similar to well-being with value understood primarily in terms of wellbeing outcomes (see Plé & Cáceres, 2010). This stream of the literature adopts a rather strict interpretation of SDL and therefore views and describes value as phenomenologically perceived wellbeing (see e.g., Plé & Cáceres, 2010; Plé, 2017; Smith, 2013; Castillo, Canhoto, & Said, 2021). Finally, there are papers that see social and relational value being co-destroyed. Corsaro (2020) focuses on the outcomes of co-creation/co-destruction rather than the process of understanding the relationships between actors and how this is linked to "value diminution". Similarly, Cabiddu et al. (2019) investigate how value co-creation/co-destruction affects the relationships between actors in a B2B setting. This stream of research assumes that whatever makes a relationship thrive is also what co-creates (or co-destroys) relational and social value.

Finally, our third theme has VCD associated with net benefits (or losses), often described in financial terms. For example, Daunt and Harris (2017) associate VCD with negative effects on an organization's finances, Worthington and Durkin (2012) with debt management, while Vafeas et al. (2016) view VCD in terms of monetary costs. Other articles see VCD in terms of trade-offs. For example, a suggestion that value constitutes the net benefits of the trade-off between benefits and sacrifices (Järvi et al., 2018) or that value is the perceived net benefits of resource integration (Makkonen & Olkkonen, 2017). Consequently, if an exchange results in no net benefits it should be regarded as VCD.

Table 1 Themes in the VCD literature

Theme	Description of VCD	Illustrative examples	Context
Interactional experiences	VCD is articulated in experiential or interactional terms. Here VCD relates to potential value not being (co) created or value being unrealized.	Carù & Cova, 2015 Prior & Marcos-Cuevas, 2016 Čaić et al., 2018 Järvi et al., 2020 Keeling et al., 2021	The leisure industry Air space industry Service robots and care networks Hotel service Healthcare
Individual outcomes	VCD is associated with cognitive and affective negative outcomes in relation to emotions, relations, and wellbeing.	Smith, 2013 Robertson et al., 2014 Frow et al., 2016 Buhalis et al., 2020 Engen et al., 2021 Lumivalo et al., 2023	Shopping centers E-health, do-it-yourself diagnosis Healthcare Sharing Economy, AirBnB Public services (the Social Insurance Agency and the Tax Agency) Service encounters
Net benefits	VCD is associated with net benefits (or losses). Here VCD is articulated in terms of trade-offs and net benefits. If an exchange has no net benefits, it is considered to be co-destruction of value.	Daunt & Harris, 2017 Makkonen & Olkkonen, 2017 Quach & Thaichon, 2017 Järvi et al., 2018 Kim et al., 2020	Showrooming Relationships between companies/organizations (a sponsorship) Luxury, online platforms Relationships between companies/organizations Sports, professional golf tournaments

Development of value co-creation in service-dominant logic: Potential for misunderstanding

To better understand the core misrepresentation of SDL at the heart of VCD research it is necessary to summarize the development of VCC in SDL, examining how Vargo and Lusch's subsequent articles develop the concept and attempt to resolve issues of contention with the original 2004 paper.

When reviewing the 2004 *Journal of Marketing* paper it is perhaps not hard to see how misunderstandings occur. Early in the paper, Vargo and Lusch (2004) seek to reframe the customer's role from largely operand resource and "target" (in a goods-dominant logic; GDL) to operant resource and co-producer:

The customer is a coproducer of service. Marketing is a process of doing things in interaction with the customer. The customer is primarily an operant resource, only functioning occasionally as an operand resource (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 6 & 11).

Moreover, the 2004 paper also hints at a normative, goal-oriented purpose when discussing the change in perspective driven by this new dominant logic:

A service-centred view of exchange points in an opposing normative direction. It implies that the goal is to customize offerings, to recognize that the consumer is always a coproducer, and to strive to maximize consumer involvement in the customization to better fit his or her needs (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 12).

The period between 2004 and 2006 was witness to substantial debate and discussion around both the impact and content of the 2004 paper. In 2006, Lusch and Vargo summarized some of this debate and their view of the newly named SDL. Five issues emerged, with the third addressing the nested roles of VCC and co-production in SDL. Firstly, the authors note that "since co-production implies making something, a unit of output, they [scholars pointing out that co-production was something of a goods-dominant term] were, of course, correct. Almost immediately we changed FP6 to 'The customer is always a co-creator of value'" (Lusch & Vargo, 2006, p. 284). Thus, VCC became a nested concept with two components, the co-creation of value, and co-production. The relationship between the two is observed as follows:

The most encompassing of these is the co-creation of value. This concept represents a rather drastic departure from G-D logic, which views value as something

that is added to products in the production process and at point of exchange is captured in value-in-exchange (i.e. price) ... The second component of co-creation is what might more correctly be called co-production. It involves the participation in the creation of the core offering itself. It can occur through shared inventiveness, co-design, or shared production of related goods, and can occur with customers and any other partners in the value network (Lusch & Vargo, 2006, p. 284).

Thus, the more normative co-production is recast as a subordinate component within VCC. A follow-up paper in 2008 further clarifies these relationships where value creation "always involves a unique combination of resources and an idiosyncratic determination of value". Co-production is, however, optional "and can vary from none at all to extensive co-production activities by the customer or user" (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p. 8). By 2008, therefore, FP6 had been clarified as "The customer is always a cocreator of value".

Between 2008 and 2016, Lusch and Vargo (2014) published a book in which four of the original foundational premises (FPs; including FP6) were reconceptualized as "axioms" of SDL. These axioms (with one further addition) were given additional prominence in what is the most up-to-date article on SDL (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). In this paper, a final update to FP 6/Axiom 2 was made, which became "Value is cocreated by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary." (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 9).

Despite the overt and public way in which the evolution of VCC has been articulated, Vargo and Lush note in various published papers how components of SDL have often been misunderstood (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). In relation to FP6, the authors note that perhaps "there is no other FP that has created as much misunderstanding and, in a few cases, controversy as FP6" (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 8). Misunderstanding VCC as a normative statement is, we believe, at the center of VCD research, and this is addressed in the next section alongside the other two flaws of VCD we indicated in the introduction which are a logical fallacy in relation to the word "destruction," and problems with its use of "co-".

Problematizing value co-destruction research

Value co-creation: Positive or normative statement?

The first problem with VCD is theoretical and related to the extent to which FP6 represents a positive or normative

statement¹. As indicated earlier, this may have been, in part, due to constraints placed on the original 2004 paper and statements such as “A service-centered view of exchange points in an opposing normative direction” or “strive to maximize consumer involvement in customization” (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 12). However, as indicated above, these were early days in the development of SDL, which was an embryonic idea not yet fully formed. By 2008, the authors recognized wider misunderstandings around VCC and observed how “some seem to have interpreted FP6 as a normative statement. It is intended as a positive statement” (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p. 8). By 2016, the distinction between positive and normative is expressed much more clearly:

On the normative side are scholars who understand FP6 as expressing a viewpoint that firms should always involve customers (and in some cases other actors) in the design, definition, creation, completion (e.g., self-service), etc. of firm output (i.e., coproduction) ... whereas cocreation of value is simply a positive statement that, at least in human systems, which are characterized by specialization and thus interdependency, value is always cocreated (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, pp. 8–9).

Despite these attempts between 2006 and 2016 to clarify the nature of VCC as a positive statement, it might be said that the damage to our understanding of VCC had already been done; moreover, in relation to VCD, it is not hard to see the misunderstanding emerging. Plé and Cáceres (2010, p. 431) write “Etgar (2006) studies the costs associated with co-production, hence value co-creation” and implicitly hint at a view that regards co-production as not too different from co-creation. They continue with an observation on a chapter of a 2006 book on SDL in which “Jaworski and Kohli (2006) mention that, under some conditions, firms should not engage in the co-creation of value with a customer because this exercise would be suboptimal for both parties” (Plé & Cáceres, 2010, p. 431). Indicating a choice over whether one can co-create is clearly normative. Echeverri and Skálén (2021) are more explicit, asserting that VCC is “normatively biased since it presupposes positive processes and outcomes as regards interactions between actors” (Echeverri & Skálén, 2021, p. 228). Importantly, this paper was

published in 2021, five years after Vargo and Lusch had clarified VCC as a positive statement.

VCD research, therefore, has a serious conceptual flaw at its heart. If VCC was indeed intended as normative within SDL, then articulating and conceptualizing situations where this was negative, exploitative, or even destructive would perhaps make some sense. This is not the case, however. Value co-creation in SDL is a positive statement, encompassing all market activity and human systems, in which specialization and thus interdependency mean that value is always co-created. The implications for VCD are serious. Both early works on VCD draw on SDL (Echeverri & Skálén, 2011; Plé & Cáceres, 2010) and these works (as Echeverri & Skálén, 2021 observe—see Table 1 pp. 230–235) have inspired and formed the conceptual basis of the bulk of VCD papers. Therefore, we argue that VCD, as a proposed reverse concept to VCC, is built on a misrepresentation of SDL.

Pre-destruction and unrealized value

In the VCD literature, there is often an assumption that if value was not co-destroyed, it would have been co-created. Čaić et al.’s (2018) research on the VCC and VCD potential of care robots concludes that one of their contributions is that (future) technologies must “mitigate future value co-destruction, by designing around hindrances to value realization” (p. 195). A similar vein runs through other VCD studies, especially those with an experiential focus. For example, what is being co-destroyed is a (potentially) positive subjective or collective experience (e.g., Camilleri & Neuhofer, 2017; Carù & Cova, 2015), a favorable touristic (e.g., Neuhofer, 2016; Kirova, 2020) or service experience (e.g., Zhang et al., 2018). The focus of these studies tends to be on understanding why and how this experience did not lead to VCC and why a more favorable experience did not emerge—for example, a lack of competencies on the part of the customer or service failure on the part of the provider. When favorable experiences are not realized, negative experiences emerge instead—a phenomenon regarded as VCD. Put differently, it is the possible existence of a favorable outcome that is being co-destroyed (cf. Čaić et al., 2018; Robertson et al., 2014). Indeed, one study even states that “value does not need to have been co-created before it can be destroyed. Individuals expect a certain value dimension to be met. If the expected state does not occur, we define this phenomenon as value co-destruction” (Stieler et al., 2014, p. 76).

It seems that subscribing to the logic of VCD implies an inherent premise, namely that value that does not exist can be (co-)destroyed or that co-destruction occurs when there is an obstruction of future value creation—a failure to

¹ Positive statements refer to assumptions about how something ‘is’ whereas normative statements relate to how something ‘ought to be’. As Vargo (2007, p.53, emphasis added by authors) indicates in relation to Adam Smith: “Smith was a moral philosopher, and his focus was more of a **normative** concern for what was right and good for society and what nations **should do** for their own wellbeing than it was a **positive** concern for how economic activity functioned”.

realize value. Irrespective of the positive/normative issues outlined above, there is a problem here of logical semantics, namely, how could something that has never existed be (co-)destroyed? A quick review of online definitions of “destruction” reveals the problem (all emphasis added by authors). Oxford Languages (used by Google) defines destruction as “the action or process of causing so much damage to *something* that it no longer exists or cannot be repaired;” Merriam Webster’s definition is “to ruin the *structure, organic existence, or condition* of, or, to ruin as if by tearing to shreds, or, to put out of *existence*” (Merriam Webster); the Cambridge Dictionary definition is “the act of destroying *something*, or the fact of being destroyed.” The problem with using VCD in this way is brought into stark relief here—to destroy something it must first exist. An additional assumption is that if the incident that caused the VCD process to occur did not happen, value would be co-created. Once again, we are in positive/normative territory, in that the experiences in these papers actually occurred; value was therefore co-created, but it just so happens that the outcome was negative.

Moreover, VCD papers frequently list associated feelings and emotions such as disappointment, anxiety, irritation, feeling cheated, let down, frustration, and/or anger (e.g., Prior & Marcos-Cuevas, 2016; Quach & Thaichon, 2017; Kashif & Zarkada, 2015; Vartiainen & Tuunanen, 2016). In these studies, the emergence of “unpleasant feelings” is seen as the outcome of co-destruction. Alongside our earlier argument in this section that it is illogical to suggest that value can be “pre-destroyed,” we also regard the emergence of negative feelings resulting from “destruction” as illogical. Negative feelings such as anger or dissatisfaction emerge from resource integration, interactions, or practices between actors. In other words, these feelings—much like the negative experiences they emerge from—are “co-created,” and it is hard to see how the creation of a specific emotion can be regarded as destruction.

Customer experiences, we should also note, are complex phenomena, in which the removal of one negative encounter/interaction does not preclude other potentially negative (or positive) aspects later in the customer journey. Furthermore, experiences frequently involve multiple actors. Becker et al. (2023), for example, identify differences within an individual’s *value determination* having two constituent parts: *value experience*, value derived from the individual’s own experience, and *value attribution*, value projected onto the experiences of others. In relation to the latter, the authors note how attribution can often be “incorrect, inaccurate, or biased,” citing challenges individuals face when evaluating others’ experiences (Becker et al. 2023, p.7). Therefore, ascribing experiences as destructive may be unwise,

as negative outcomes for one actor might be positive for another and vice versa.

In relation, therefore, to VCD somehow capturing a failure to realize value, we observed that a distinction should be made between the creation of value (which could be positive or negative) and evaluation (the assessment of value by an individual, which could be assessed differently by the various actors concerned). The papers discussed in this section are concerned with assessing the extent to which value could have been created/realized, thus representing evaluation, rather than creation. Here again, the term destruction seems like an illogical fit with the phenomenon in question.

The “Co” in “co-destruction”

Our final observation on VCD is the implication of using the prefix “co” for its meaning. To do this we must first consider “co” within SDL. The current version of FP6 reads as follows: “Value is cocreated by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 9). Here Vargo and Lusch clarify that in previous iterations they had “drastically understated the extent of value cocreation,” which did not simply encompass a single actor or dyadic exchange between customer and firm, but rather “a whole host of actors” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 9). The change recognized that value is never created solely by an individual, but through complex resource integration and from multiple sources, both private and public. Here FP6 recognizes how—

... the beneficiary is always a party to its own value creation but in doing so, it inadvertently might have conveyed that value cocreation is dyadic ... on the contrary, as stated, zooming out reveals that it is neither singular nor dyadic but rather a multi-actor phenomenon, often on a massive scale, albeit with the referent beneficiary at the center, as indicated in FP10, and playing a key, integrative (and evaluative) role in all instances (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 9).

This zooming out process presents a further challenge for VCD research, since when proffered as a reverse concept to VCC it is hard to see where multiple actors fit into a process of destruction, either dyadically or systemically. We observe from our reading of the VCD literature that VCD usually occurs because of one actor’s role in the value creation process. This is expressed in three ways: first, when an actor does not “value” the experience they are having; second, when an actor deviates from their expected role; and third, when one actor’s actions affect value creation in a service system.

In relation to an actor's experience, Carú and Cova (2015, p. 288), writing about VCD in the leisure industry, observe, for example, that when queuing for an activity this could be viewed as either VCC or VCD, as "some consumers consider it an unavoidable ritual, others an annoying loss of time." The implication here is that people who do not like queuing are destroying, or having their value destroyed. This seems a curious way to articulate destruction as one would assume that even when an individual does not enjoy queuing, they generally receive the outcome of whatever they are queuing for. Moreover, this VCD constitutes the feeling or experience of one single actor—other actors might be happy to queue. On that basis, value is regarded as co-destroyed even when an actor performs the role they were expected, or designed, to perform.

In another example relating to an actor's experience Prior and Marcos-Cuevas (2016) relate VCD to an imbalance of power between actors in a B2B setting. One quote indicates that "they (the supplier) know what they're doing, and I respect the fact that they are trying to secure their long-term profitability. I have no issue with that; however, my personal perception is that the transparency isn't great" (p. 546). Here the individual in question does not doubt the other actor's competency—just expresses disquiet over how the work is carried out. In research on service robots in social care networks, Čaić et al. (2018, p. 189–190) observe how a robot could have the "potential to co-destroy value relative to other network actors," in that some individuals would not like to have a robot in their house. The robot, we might assume, performs its role as designed. In a healthcare scenario, Keeling et al. (2021) articulate VCD when clinicians fail to involve patients in discussion on their healthcare. We assume the care is still offered—only not in the way the patient expected. In all these examples destruction is framed in experiential settings where organizational actors are successfully performing the core aspects of their role, just in ways that another actor finds less desirable.

In other papers, value is viewed as co-destroyed when one actor deviates from their expected role with impacts on a purchase or experience for another focal actor. Studies present this in the context of the hospitality industry (Järvi et al., 2020), retail (Smith, 2013), sports (Kim et al., 2020), and the public sector (Engen et al., 2021). In these cases, we note similarities to disconfirmation and/or service failure, but observe that only one actor (usually the provider) is negatively affecting the others. This is often referred to as resource misuse in VCD papers (Plé & Cáceres, 2010). There are also instances where it is the focal actor who is responsible, such as in the case of E-health and self-diagnosis, with the potential for customers to make ill-judged decisions (Robertson et al., 2014).

Finally, we note some instances where VCD is claimed in more systemic contexts, such as in a paper set in the health-care sector by Frow et al. (2016, p.33), here one co-destructive practice is observed where "Industrial action [strikes] by ambulance drivers (a co-destructive practice) causes delays in assisting emergency patients and disrupts the admission process into the hospital emergency unit." Another example is the "hoarding of supplies ... by nurses [which] restricts the availability of critical drugs and other medical supplies" (Frow et al., 2016, p. 33), with negative outcomes for other actors. Here we might note that the striking ambulance drivers are presumably co-creating value for each other (e.g., collective strike action for improved conditions). We also note that the healthcare of others was not canceled, but rather delayed; and treatment is therefore still received. Similarly, in a sharing economy context, Buhalis et al. (2020) note that the growth of the rental sector in Barcelona (e.g., Airbnb) creates issues for either host, guest, or the local community, but accommodation is still offered and rented. Finally, for Daunt and Harris (2017, p.166) showrooming "represents a form of value co-destruction [...] because the showroomer knowingly takes value from channel members but does not reciprocate with the firm/s from which they intentionally took value." Here the customer receives a product and the supplier receives some revenue, with VCD occurring only for the retailer, who is—we assume—unaware of the showrooming in the first place.

In all these cases we find it challenging to identify sufficient involvement of multiple actors to warrant value being "co"-destroyed. Even when cases are more systemic, actors seen as "destroying" value are often likely creating value for themselves. In addition, a common feature in VCD papers is that value is regarded as "destroyed" despite an experience being completed, a service being given, despite the actions of others negatively affecting an experience. It is therefore hard to ascertain exactly what is being destroyed.

Addressing the problems with value co-destruction

Addressing the misrepresentation of SDL using midrange theory

Earlier in the paper, we outlined how, in relation to VCC in SDL, a "process of zooming out to a broader perspective on value cocreation began almost immediately, as evidenced in the distinction between "co-production" and the "cocreation of value" and the move from a dyadic orientation toward a network orientation" (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 6). In more general terms, this broadening was "seen in our suggestions that S-D logic might serve as a foundation for a

“theory of the market” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 6). However, Vargo and Lush (2017, p. 51) also observe that “S-D logic is of course primarily focused on meta-level theory development, but not solely at a macro-level of aggregation. In fact, we would characterize it as equally, macro-, meso-, and micro-focused in relation to aggregation.” Indeed, they continue by observing that “one can also construct metatheory without directly addressing lower-level theory, at least initially, but perhaps somewhat ironically, if not arguably, it should, however, address all levels of aggregation” (Vargo & Lusch, 2017, p. 51). However, the broadening of SDL to a metatheoretical level does offer scope to consider alternative midrange and microlevel theories that can be directly tested, verified, and applied (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). Here, a process of zooming in and out across these levels of abstraction (meta-, midrange-, and micro-level theories) provides opportunities to better inform and understand the metatheoretical perspective.

In relation to VCD, we believe that consideration of midrange and micro-theoretical concepts in marketing and service literature already more than adequately covers many of the scenarios focused on by VCD researchers. For example, Plé and Cáceres (2010) focus on accidental and deliberate misuse of resources as being representative of VCD scenarios. Scenarios relating to accidental misuse of resources by employees are usually captured in research on service failure (e.g., Roschk & Gelbrich, 2014). Although less well known, scenarios that relate to deliberate misuse of resources by employees can be understood via research on service sabotage (e.g., Harris & Ogbonna, 2002). In relation to deliberate misuse of resources by customers, concepts such as customer misbehavior (e.g., Fisk et al., 2010) or jaycustomers (e.g., Harris & Reynolds, 2004) are often used. For accidental misuse of resources by customers, role theory (e.g., Solomon et al., 1985) would be appropriate, with a lack of competencies perhaps offering an explanation for resource misuse. When researchers seek to explore the outcomes of negative experiences, well-understood concepts such as complaining behavior (e.g., Tax et al., 1998), customer rage (e.g., McColl-Kennedy et al., 2009), and service recovery (e.g., van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019) are frequently used.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address each of these theories in detail; however, we should simply observe that, in each case, the concepts are established, well understood, and comprehensively address outcomes of marketing experiences that are somehow “negative.” However, we also note that certain aspects of these concepts are more nuanced. For example, studies on service sabotage (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002, 2006) find that although the outcomes for customers were typically negative, outcomes for the sabotaging employees were often more positive. In addition,

while complaining behavior is often associated with negative experiences, the motivation to complain may be positively valenced and focused on suggestions to improve a service.

While the theories above specifically address negative experiences (or the outcomes thereof) it is also possible to draw on other midrange theories that directly inform SDL, but also reflect both positively and negatively valenced value creation. For example, research on engagement draws directly on SDL in the creation of its own fundamental principles (Brodie et al., 2011a, b, 2019); however, as a mid-range theoretical concept (see Brodie, Saren Brodie et al., 2011a, b) it can also be empirically tested and verified.

In relation to this paper, it is crucial to note that engagement research already presents extensive evidence of both positively and negatively valenced manifestations. In fact, the valence of engagement has been considered a key dimension since its earliest inception (van Doorn et al., 2010). Valence has been explored in a range of settings, including social media (e.g., Azer et al., 2023; Dolan et al., 2016), online reviews (Azer & Alexander, 2018), and brand communities (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). Some articles address positive and negative valence in the same study to better understand the effects of engagement valence on organizations and societal phenomena (Azer et al., 2023; Dolan et al., 2016; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014), or focus exclusively on the effects of negatively valenced engagement on individuals and organizations (e.g., Azer & Alexander, 2020).

Therefore, with a focus on customer actions taken towards a focal firm beyond transactions, research on engagement provides a strong example of how mid-range theory that captures both positive and negative valence can illuminate how value is co-created in a service system (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). Thus, consideration of valence within mid-range or micro-level theory avoids the conceptual flaws outlined in Sect. 4.1.

Addressing the logic issue

In their 2021 review of VCD literature, Echiverri and Skålen (2021) observe a fragmentation in VCD research; a fragmentation that, to a certain extent, may have been caused by authors feeling somewhat uncomfortable with “destruction.” For example, Vafeas et al. (2016) introduced alternative terminologies such as “value diminution.” Their article “examines the accuracy of the term ‘value co-destruction’ as a blanket description” (Vafeas et al., 2016, p. 469). Although Echiverri and Skålen (2021) regard this simply as a semantic issue, the problem observed in relation to VCD is the implication of irreparable loss.

Another indirect criticism of VCD comes from Kjeldgaard et al. (2021) who, in a paper about failure in marketing (a

concept often linked to VCD), suggest that “the ontological assumption of failure as an exclusively destructive phenomenon may neglect and de-emphasize important aspects of how failure matters to marketing as a productive moment that may create a meaningful difference also in a positive way” (p. 279). Applying this to our VCD examples mentioned earlier (Sect. 2), we might see the above at play. In the case of the customer who fails to maintain their car, causing VCD for the customer and firm, we might see outcomes of this type of scenario in the transition of the car industry from full ownership towards personal contract purchases, leasing, or rental plans—with contractual requirements relating to car servicing and maintenance, thus service plans are often included with new cars. Consequently, individual negative experiences can lead to positive outcomes for customers and firms in the longer term.

In line with our mid-range theory view, therefore, another solution is simply to acknowledge that individual experiences can result in either positive or negative value (Duncan & Moriarty, 2006; Sweeney et al., 2018; Zeithaml et al., 2020). Indeed, recent works on and associated with S-D logic acknowledge this more explicitly. In the glossary of the S-D logic handbook, an actor is defined as an “entity capable of acting on potential resources to cocreate value, either positively or negatively valenced” (Vargo & Lusch, 2019, p. 740). Thus, value becomes “an emergent change in the well-being or viability of a particular system/actor, which could be positively or negatively valenced” (Vargo et al., 2023, p. 19).

Therefore, the emergence of “anger”—or any unpleasant feeling or bad experience for that matter—is simply a negatively valenced outcome. Even early VCD papers acknowledge how “interactions between service systems cannot only co-create value, but also have adverse consequences leading to actual value co-destruction” (Plé & Cáceres, 2010, p. 430). The crucial words here are “adverse consequences”—in other words, a negative outcome. Therefore, if VCD was introduced to somehow highlight the bipolarity of value, the concept is redundant, as research on value (and wellbeing) already accounts for both positive and negative outcomes (Becker et al., 2023; Duncan & Moriarty, 2006; Mele et al., 2023; Sweeney et al., 2018; Vargo et al., 2023; Zeithaml et al., 2020). In fact, given that value represents a *change* in state for a system or actor, using destruction in the first place seems to lack coherence.

Conclusion

In this article, we have endeavored to present what we believe to be one of the few critiques of VCD literature. As we have stated throughout the paper, the concept appears

to face three challenges. First, whereas literature on VCC evolved from its genesis as co-production in 2004 to become an axiom, a positive statement that captures the multi-actor phenomenon at the heart of value creation, VCD literature remains determined to label VCC as normative. This leads to conceptual divergence and fragmentation, as researchers attempt to sidestep its flaws. Second, we observe an issue relating to logic in VCD with regard to how it attempts to account for destruction taking place in that which does not yet exist. Third, papers on VCD frequently refer to scenarios in which the involvement of multiple actors in destruction is hard to justify, or where destruction is claimed despite an experience being delivered or consumed.

As a theoretical concept VCD might have served its time. The purpose of these studies (undoubtedly honorable) was to force the service research community to turn their attention to the potential negative outcomes of value creation. However—and somewhat ironically—while the evolution of SDL literature highlights and reinforces key problems in VCD papers, it also offers solutions by articulating a process of oscillating foci between meta-, mid-, and micro-theoretical perspectives (Chandler & Vargo, 2011) that inform and increase our understanding of meta-theoretical concepts such as VCC. This recasts many of the well-used concepts in the marketing and service lexicon that capture negative experiences or negative outcomes as micro or midrange theories that explain how value is co-created, even when outcomes are negatively valenced. The consequence is that the concept of VCD becomes rather otiose. We advocate those researchers should instead continue to draw upon the wide array of theories that relate to value creation—theories that can always be positioned on a continuum with both positive and negative anchors.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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