Enabling Value Co-Creation in Partner Collaboration Ecosystems: An Institutional Work Perspective

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Abstract

This study integrates service-dominant logic and institutional theory to develop a conceptual framework that delineates how institutional work can be leveraged to enable value co-creation within partner collaboration ecosystems. We contribute to research and practice by highlighting the importance of institutions (i.e., rules, norms, meanings, symbols, and similar aides to collaboration) and institutional arrangements (i.e., interdependent assemblages of institutions) as coordination mechanisms for value co-creation in partner collaboration ecosystems and by proposing how actors can purposively shape these arrangements to achieve value co-creative collaborations.

Keywords: partner collaboration ecosystems, service-dominant logic, institutional arrangements, institutional work, conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Partner collaboration ecosystems have gained importance as structures for value co-creation by actors in today's interconnected and dynamic world (Burdon et al., 2015; Elo et al., 2023). Such ecosystems represent multilevel sociotechnical systems in which two or more interconnected actors (e.g., service organizations) collaborate by integrating resources and exchanging service for value co-creation, coordinated by shared institutional arrangements (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). In today's digital-first age (Baskerville et al., 2020), these ecosystems often rely on collaboration technologies and digitally enabled platforms (see, e.g., Fehrer et al., 2018; Singal, 2022) that facilitate the exchange of service and integration of resources among actors.

Partner collaboration ecosystems offer organizations increased potential for innovation, growth, and long-term viability compared to individual endeavors (Daugherty et al., 2006; Iheanachor & Umukoro, 2022). However, numerous interpersonal, social, political, and cognitive challenges have been related to collaboration (de Vreede et al., 2009), making the establishment and long-term viability of partner collaborations challenging (Elo et al., 2023; Lindsey Hall et al., 2022).

In partner collaboration ecosystems, actors from diverse backgrounds must navigate the complexities of establishing and maintaining a shared understanding and effectively coordinate their collective efforts. Therefore, it is crucial to establish and nurture a common institutional logic consisting of regulative, normative, and cognitive elements (Scott, 2014). This institutional logic coordinates actors' resource integration and service exchange efforts and supports aligning their value co-creation behavior within the ecosystem (Edvardsson et al., 2014).

To advance our understanding of the enabling conditions for value co-creation in partner collaboration ecosystems, this paper draws upon institutional theory (Scott, 2014) and, in particular, the concept of institutional work that refers to purposive actions undertaken by individuals and organizations to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). We raise the following research question: *How can institutional work be leveraged to enable value co-creation within partner collaboration ecosystems?* Moreover, we argue that the service-dominant (S-D) logic's (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008, 2016) service ecosystem perspective provides a robust framework for studying and explaining value co-creation in partner collaboration ecosystems. This perspective emphasizes the importance of institutions and institutional arrangements as coordination mechanisms for value co-creation (Edvardsson et al., 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Although the significance of the institutional perspective to value co-creation has been acknowledged (Edvardsson et al., 2014; Koskela-Huotari et al., 2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2016) and its relevance to building partnerships has been recognized (Elo et al., 2023), the concept has not been sufficiently theorized within the context of partner collaboration ecosystems. In particular, the concept of institutional work that studies

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how actors can intentionally shape their surrounding institutions calls for further understanding (Lawrence et al., 2011).

To this end, this paper proposes a conceptual framework that delineates the process and mechanisms through which actors can engage in institutional work to enable value co-creation within partner collaboration ecosystems. Following the established guidelines for conceptual contributions (see, e.g., Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011), the purpose of our framework is to explain previously unexplored connections between concepts, that is, to detail and depict an entity (institutional work) and its relation to other connected entities (institutional arrangements, partner collaboration ecosystems, value co-creation). We emphasize the role of actors purposively engaging in creating, disrupting, and maintaining institutional arrangements (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) to enable the continuous evolution of the ecosystem for value co-creation.

We contribute to the literature by advancing the process of discovery (MacInnis, 2011) and by identifying avenues for future research contributions on this topical phenomenon. For practitioners, we provide valuable insights that can assist organizations in developing institutional strategies to manage collaboration efforts in continuously evolving partner collaboration ecosystems.

In the following sections, we establish the conceptual foundation, present our conceptual framework, and conclude by discussing theoretical and practical implications and suggesting future research directions.

2. Conceptual foundation

2.1. Partner collaboration ecosystems

Collaboration has long been acknowledged as crucial for organizations seeking to co-create value within service ecosystems (Elo et al., 2023; Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018; Sarker et al., 2012). Through establishing partnerships, organizations gain access to novel resources, competencies, and capabilities that serve their individual and collective interests (Iheanachor & Umukoro, 2022). The fundamental principle of a partnership is collaboration toward a common goal and the pursuit of mutual benefits (Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018).

Partnerships can be formed in various contexts, such as IT vendor–customer relationships, to strengthen collaboration and increase value co-creation. This strategy goes beyond conventional IT outsourcing and emphasizes joint strategic engagement and seamless integration within the relationship (Burdon et al., 2015).

Another example is the formation of strategic partnerships between digital service organizations to propose customers with shared and enhanced value (Elo et al., 2023).

In addition, the rise of collaborative platform ecosystems in industries such as banking, healthcare, and energy has transformed the exchange and provision of service via digitally enabled platforms (Singal, 2022). These modern approaches to market organization and collaboration facilitation are often referred to as the "platform economy" (Costabile et al., 2022; Fehrer et al., 2018).

Depending on the specific context and dynamics of the ecosystem, partner collaboration ecosystems can be organized and guided by a focal actor, such as a platform provider, who leads the organizing and facilitating of collaboration within the ecosystem (Fehrer et al., 2018) or formed through partnerships between equal entities (Costabile et al., 2022). In such instances, the ecosystem is not dominated by a single actor but rather by multiple actors collaborating and coordinating value co-creation efforts as equals.

However, in both cases, a partner collaboration ecosystem, as we define it, refers to the actors' conscious and intentional efforts to co-create value for mutual benefit. In partner collaboration ecosystems, actors often remain closely connected, establish mutual governance mechanisms, and align strategies, resources, and objectives for value co-creation. These ecosystems connect individuals, teams, and organizations with distinct roles, responsibilities, specialized knowledge, and skills to achieve common goals (e.g., proposing enhanced customer value, fostering innovation, sharing resources and expertise, business efficiency, expansion, and growth).

Keast (2016) suggested several components of collaboration. First, effective collaboration requires an interpersonal orientation characterized by trust, reciprocity, respect, and reputation. Second, collaboration entails interdependence, in which actors rely on one another to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Third, mutuality is essential, requiring a shared vision, shared values, and effective communication. Furthermore, individual and group objectives are aligned in collaborative efforts through joint activities (Keast, 2016).

Similarly, de Vreede et al. (2009) defined collaboration as "a joint effort toward a group goal." Thus, actors' interdependent, purposive, and goal-driven actions distinguish partner collaboration ecosystems from a generalized view of ecosystems. Furthermore, these characteristics establish distinct (yet fuzzy) boundaries (Sajtos et al., 2018) for partner collaboration ecosystems nested within broader service ecosystems.

2.2. S-D logic and service ecosystem perspective for partner collaboration ecosystems

The S-D logic's service ecosystem perspective (Vargo & Lusch, 2016) provides a well-established foundation for understanding partner collaboration ecosystems. Within S-D logic, service ecosystems are defined as "relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system[s] of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange" (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 10-11). This narrative emphasizes the co-creation of value through the exchange of service—the process of using one's resources (e.g., specialized knowledge and skills) to benefit another (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Furthermore, it acknowledges the enabling and constraining influence of endogenously generated, shared institutions, including social norms, rules, symbols, and other normative and heuristic guidelines for action (Ng & Vargo, 2018).

A partner collaboration ecosystem, while encompassing its distinct characteristics outlined in the previous section, can be understood and interpreted within the framework of a service ecosystem. This is supported by the understanding that service ecosystems are inherently nested and multilevel in nature (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2016). Service ecosystems encompass micro-level entities (e.g., individuals and organizations), meso-level structures (e.g., markets and industries), and macro-level contexts (e.g., society) that frame resource integration and service exchange for value co-creation (Chandler & Vargo, 2011). A partner collaboration ecosystem can be characterized as a meso-level structure interconnected with other ecosystems and nested within a broader service ecosystem (e.g., industry, society) while also shaped by the micro-level actions and interactions of actors (e.g., individuals, organizations) within and outside the partner collaboration ecosystem.

2.3. Institutions and institutional arrangements

S-D logic defines institutions as "humanly devised rules, norms, and beliefs that enable and constrain action and make social life predictable and meaningful" (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 11). Institutions represent various forms, including formal codified laws, informal social norms, and symbolic meanings (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2020) that coordinate resource integration and service exchange (i.e., value co-creation) by actors in service ecosystems (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). They provide structures within which interactions occur and govern actors' behavior (Scott, 2014). Furthermore, by setting mutual expectations for social interactions, institutions reduce uncertainty and promote collaboration (Edvardsson et al., 2014).

Scott (2014, p. 56) suggested that institutions involve "regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life." The regulative elements include formal rules, laws, and sanctions constraining actors' behavior and maintaining order. Normative elements comprise norms and values that guide actors' actions and indicate appropriate behavior. Values consist of concepts of what is desired and standards by which behavior and structures can be evaluated, whereas norms specify how certain things should be done (Edvardsson et al., 2014). Normative elements direct actors' objectives and determine how to achieve them by leveraging social obligations and internal commitments to norms and values (Scott, 2014). Lastly, cognitive elements pertain to actors' perceptions of reality and internal representations of the surrounding environment (Edvardsson et al., 2014). They comprise beliefs and sense-making frameworks that support shared logic and meaning by actors (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2020).

According to Edvardsson et al. (2014), regulative elements influence actors' behavior through self-interest and avoidance of negative consequences, normative elements influence behavior through social constraints or benefits, and cognitive elements result in "taken-for-granted" behavior. The three elements of institutions (regulative, normative, and cognitive) are interconnected, and their combinations shape and influence the behavior of actors (Edvardsson et al., 2014).

Indeed, institutions in partner collaboration ecosystems exist not in isolation but as arrangements of interconnected rules, norms, and meanings (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Moreover, these arrangements consist of nested and overlapping institutions that influence one another, collectively shaping actors' behavior, affecting the process of value co-creation (Edvardsson et al., 2014), and forming the basis for actors' collective actions (Siltaloppi et al., 2016). Notably, while institutions impact how actors act and behave, the latter shape institutions through their behavior (Edvardsson et al., 2014). This paradoxical and reciprocal relationship will be discussed further in subsequent sections.

2.4. Institutional logic

Institutional arrangements shape the dominant institutional logic within a specific social and cultural context, such as a partner collaboration ecosystem (Akaka et al., 2023). These institutional logics have a crucial impact on the behaviors of actors within the ecosystem as they establish and enforce shared rules,

norms, and beliefs (Edvardsson et al., 2014). They guide actors' actions, interactions, and interpretations of reality within the ecosystem, fostering a sense of shared purpose and unity (Harsman, 2023).

While institutional logic is the fundamental organizing principle of a partner collaboration ecosystem, it can also contribute to imbalances (Jaakkola et al., 2019). For example, when actors from different organizations collaborate, they often encounter incompatible or contradictory institutional logics, thereby hindering collaboration opportunities (Sajtos et al., 2018). Actors operating according to different logics may experience conflicts and tensions that constrain collaboration by introducing competing interests, conflicting goals, and divergent prioritizations (Jaakkola et al., 2019).

Nested and overlapping institutional arrangements in partner collaboration ecosystems create potential conflicts and incompatible guidelines for action, resulting in ambiguity, uncertainty, tension, and contradictions within the ecosystem (Siltaloppi et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding how various institutional logics within the partner collaboration ecosystem affect and influence actors, including individuals, teams, and organizations, remains essential (Siltaloppi et al., 2016).

Furthermore, it is necessary to establish mechanisms that enable actors with different institutional arrangements to find common ground and bridge the gaps between them. Achieving a sufficient level of convergence in logic among actors within the partner collaboration ecosystem is vital for successful collaboration (Jaakkola et al., 2019). Mechanisms are needed to align institutional arrangements across actors within the partner collaboration ecosystem (Siltaloppi et al., 2016; Wieland et al., 2017). In the subsequent section, we propose the concept of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) as a means to achieve and implement such mechanisms.

2.5. Institutional work

Understanding partner collaboration ecosystem dynamics and how actors within these ecosystems can shape institutional arrangements for value co-creation requires understanding the concept of institutional work, which refers to the "purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). As mentioned, institutions can be understood in terms of three pillars: cognitive, normative, and regulative (Scott, 2014). These three pillars, representing the objects of institutional work in partner collaboration ecosystems, form a continuum from formal, legally enforced obligations to less formal,

normative social obligations and shared mutual understandings (Sajtos et al., 2018).

The notion of institutional work suggests that actors can actively shape institutions and their arrangements for value co-creation. Simultaneously, institutions provide templates and mechanisms for action (coordinate actors' actions) (Lawrence et al., 2009). This recursive relationship between institutions and actors' actions creates the "paradox of embedded agency" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006)—the tension between agency (i.e., actors' conscious choice) and structure (i.e., institutional mechanisms that coordinate actors' actions in social systems) (Wieland et al., 2017).

Through institutional work, actors can overcome this paradox and influence the institutional arrangements in which they are embedded (Siltaloppi et al., 2016). This implies that actors not only respond to their institutional environments but also actively influence and transform them (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2011; Sajtos et al., 2018; Wieland et al., 2017). To understand value co-creation in partner collaboration ecosystems, it is essential to understand the reciprocal nature of this relationship.

Lastly, institutional work encompasses not only the actors' efforts to transform a partner collaboration ecosystem to adopt a new form but also their efforts to enhance the ecosystem's capacity to adapt to changing conditions and maintain its current form (Baker & Nenonen, 2020). Institutional work is not only about transformative action but also about maintaining existing structures and resolving tensions and conflicts within and across overlapping and nested institutions (Wieland et al., 2017).

Next, we further elaborate on the mechanisms of creating, disrupting, and maintaining institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). First, creating institutions refers to actors' purposive actions in forming new institutions. Connected to the three institutional pillars, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) suggested that institutional creation can arise from various activities within three core areas: regulatory-based actions, changes to actors' belief systems, and changes to boundaries and meanings.

Second, disrupting institutions entails challenging or undermining existing institutions. Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) found that actors engage in this work primarily by redefining, reconfiguring, abstracting, problematizing, and manipulating the social and symbolic boundaries that constitute existing institutions.

Lastly, maintaining institutions involves actors' engagement in activities to repair or recreate controls that underpin an institution by ensuring compliance with existing rule systems and concentrating on reproducing existing norms and belief systems. While some

institutions possess self-reproducing social control mechanisms, most rely on these actions to ensure stability and compliance (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), necessitating continuous maintenance of institutional arrangements in partner collaboration ecosystems.

It is noteworthy that maintaining institutions goes beyond mere stability or the absence of change; it requires significant effort, particularly in response to organizational or environmental changes within the ecosystem. Actors must continually adapt to factors such as the evolving direction of the ecosystem and technological advancements (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Furthermore, the three forms of institutional work should not be seen as sequential but as co-occurring. For example, whenever an existing institutional structure changes by creating and disrupting institutions, a significant portion of existing institutions is maintained (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2016). While some of these activities may be highly visible and dramatic, most are almost invisible and often routine "day-to-day adjustments, adaptations, and compromises" (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 1).

Enabling value co-creation in partner collaboration ecosystems as a process of continuously sustaining and (re)forming institutional arrangements is not straightforward or without conflicts and tensions. As institutional work includes multiple actors guided by various institutional arrangements, the institutionalization of mutual value co-creation logics occurs through multiple adjustments and changes until a standard template is accepted and shared (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2016).

Moreover, partner collaboration ecosystems evolve rather than become static structures (Baker et al., 2019). This requires continuous and simultaneous creation, disruption, and maintenance of institutional arrangements for value co-creation (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2016). Institutional alignment within partner collaboration ecosystems is enabled by continuous negotiations, experimentation, competition, and learning (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2016). These alignments are imperfect and temporary due to the nested nature of institutional arrangements and the continuous evolution of the ecosystem, leading to incompatibilities and tensions among institutions and actors (Hartmann et al., 2018; Sajtos et al., 2018).

Institutional change arises from the collective activities of interconnected actors as they engage in institutional work (e.g., resolving tensions, reinforcing similarities), and bring about imperfect alignments in their institutional arrangements (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). For this purpose, actors require an understanding

of the underlying institutions and their interrelationships (Sajtos et al., 2018).

Recent research suggests that reflexivity, which is defined as "an individual's general awareness of the constraints and opportunities created by the norms, values, beliefs, and expectations of the social structures that surround them" (Suddaby et al., 2016, p. 5), is a key enabler for actors to engage in institutional work (Vink et al., 2021). In addition, successful institutional work has been suggested to depend on the capabilities, agency (e.g., power, social capital, and connectedness to other actors), and motivations of the actors, in addition to the conditions enabled by the institutional arrangements in which they are embedded (Thompson & Harris, 2021).

The following section presents the proposed conceptual framework. First, Table 1 summarizes the main concepts of the study.

| Concept	Definition	Sources
Service ecosystem	Relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange.	Vargo and Lusch (2016)
Institutions	Humanly devised rules, norms, and beliefs that enable and constrain action and make social life predictable and meaningful. Regulative, normative, and cognitive elements.	Vargo and Lusch (2016) Scott (2014)
Institutional arrangements	Interdependent assemblages of institutions.	Vargo and Lusch (2016)
Institutional logic	Assemblages of institutions (i.e., institutional arrangements) influence the dominant institutional logic(s) in a particular social and cultural context (e.g., partner collaboration ecosystem).	Akaka et al. (2023)
Value co-creation	A collaborative process of resource integration and service exchange, coordinated by shared institutional arrangements, that results in emergent, positively or negatively valenced changes in the well-being or viability of a particular system/actor.	Vargo and Lusch (2016) Vargo et al. (2020)
Collaboration	Actors' joint effort toward a group goal that is characterized by interdependency (shared reliance on each other for results), mutuality (shared vision, values, and communication), and collaborative activities that meet individual and collective goals.	de Vreede et al. (2009) Keast (2016)
Partner collaboration ecosystem	A multilevel sociotechnical system in which two or more interconnected actors intentionally collaborate (forming partnerships) to integrate resources and exchange service for value co-creation, coordinated by shared institutional arrangements, to achieve common goals and mutual benefits.	Current paper
Institutional work	Purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions.	Lawrence and Suddaby (2006)

Table 1. Summary of key concepts
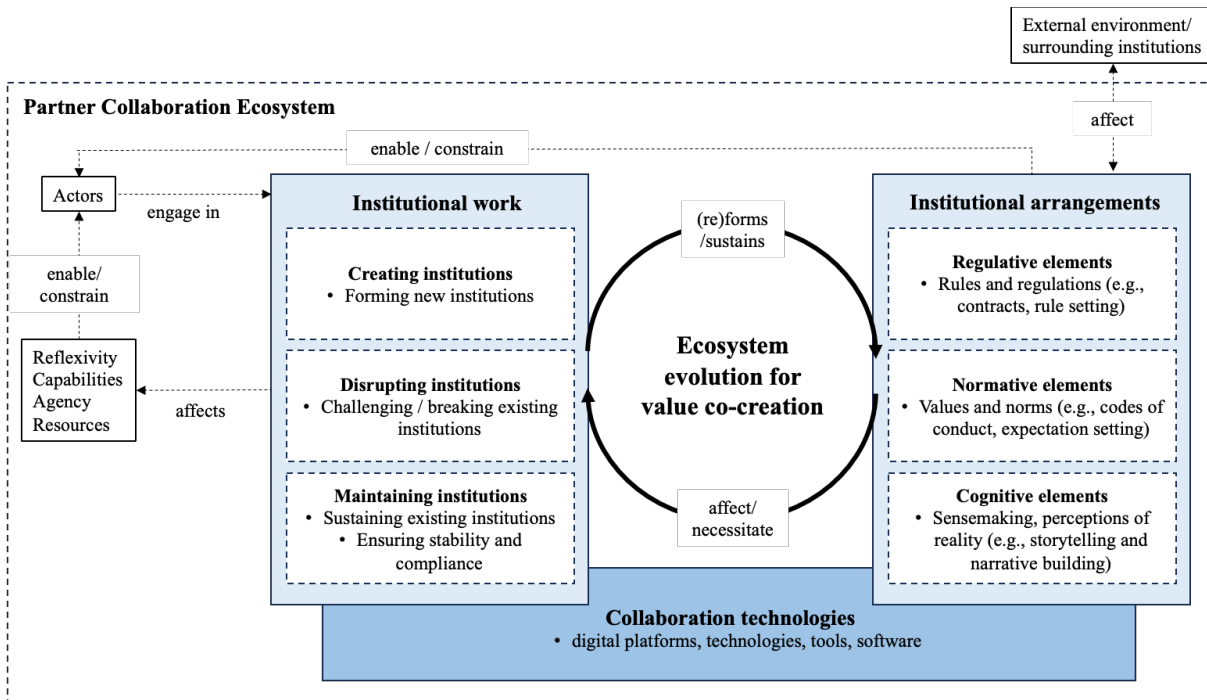
Figure 1. Institutional work enabling value co-creation in partner collaboration ecosystems

3. Conceptual framework

Building upon the conceptual foundations presented in the previous section, the proposed conceptual framework (Figure 1) aims to delineate (MacInnis, 2011) the institutional dynamics within partner collaboration ecosystems. The framework comprises two main components: (1) institutional work and (2) institutional arrangements. These interconnected components are proposed to contribute to establishing and sustaining the enabling conditions for value co-creation in partner collaboration ecosystems by driving the continuous evolution of the ecosystem.

The process of ecosystem evolution for value co-creation involves continuously sustaining and (re)forming existing institutional arrangements. Thus, ecosystem evolution for value co-creation refers to the dynamic process by which the partner collaboration ecosystem adapts and transforms itself to facilitate actors' collective value creation. It emphasizes that the ecosystem and its institutional arrangements are not static structures but undergo changes over time to enable collaboration among actors (Baker et al., 2019).

Based on existing literature, we identify three key areas of institutional work on the left side of the framework: (1) creating, (2) disrupting, and (3) maintaining institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). These activities are performed by actors (e.g., individuals, teams, and organizations) in the partner

collaboration ecosystem, enabling the sustaining and (re)forming of the ecosystem for value co-creation.

Sustaining institutional arrangements implies ongoing support, continuation, and endurance of institutional arrangements to maintain the ecosystem to support its long-term viability. (Re)forming refers to reshaping or reconfiguring institutional arrangements by modifying or enhancing their current form, introducing new elements into the institutional structure, and breaking existing ones. Sustaining is supported by the institutional work of maintaining institutions, whereas (re)forming focuses on changing and disrupting institutions. As suggested in the literature (e.g., Koskela-Huotari et al., 2016), all of these are required (to varying degrees and at different times) to enable the evolution of the ecosystem for value co-creation.

The right side of the framework presents institutional arrangements and their constituent elements (Scott, 2014): (1) regulative, (2) normative, and (3) cognitive. Notably, these do not represent independent institutions but interdependent elements of institutions. We suggest that institutional arrangements can be holistically shaped and aligned by focusing on these distinct but interconnected elements of institutions.

The framework also emphasizes elements that enable or constrain ecosystem actors in institutional work, such as reflexivity (Suddaby et al., 2016; Vink et al., 2021) and agency (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

This list is not exhaustive and requires further exploration; however, it reveals significant initial considerations. In particular, the role of collaboration technologies in facilitating institutional work is an area that calls for additional understanding.

Furthermore, the framework acknowledges the reciprocal effects between the partner collaboration ecosystem and its external environment, including other actors, ecosystems, and surrounding institutions. The (meso-level) partner collaboration ecosystem operates within a broader service ecosystem, where macro-level institutions, such as laws, industry standards, and culture, shape its establishment and maintenance. At the micro-level, partner organizations consist of individuals and teams with their own institutional arrangements, which adds complexity to partner-level collaboration. In addition, we recognize the interplay between institutional arrangements and the institutional work performed by actors. While engaging in institutional work, actors are simultaneously coordinated by the institutional arrangements around them, influencing their actions and behaviors (Edvardsson et al., 2014).

Next, to enhance our conceptualization and explanation of the role of institutional work in partner collaboration ecosystems, we elaborate on its role from two essential perspectives: (1) establishing partner collaboration ecosystems and (2) ensuring their long-term viability.

3.1. Institutional work in establishing partner collaboration ecosystems

When establishing a partner collaboration ecosystem, institutional work plays a crucial role in shaping and aligning the actors' (e.g., individuals, teams, and organizations) existing institutional arrangements within the ecosystem. By engaging in the works of institutional creation, disruption, and maintenance (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), actors can define, develop, and align new and existing structures to establish a foundation for value co-creative collaboration.

Creating institutions defines the basis for collaboration by establishing rules and agreements (regulative), shared norms and values (normative), and fostering a shared understanding of collaboration (cognitive). Establishing shared institutional arrangements (Vargo & Lusch, 2016) provides a foundation for collaboration and facilitates effective ecosystem coordination and value co-creation.

Establishing partner collaboration ecosystems may also necessitate disrupting existing structures within partner organizations to align institutions with others and adapt to the shared institutional framework. However, in establishing partner collaboration

ecosystems, disruption rarely implies radical change; instead, it often calls for minor adjustments to the existing logic. Institutional maintenance during the ecosystem establishment phase exists through existing arrangements of the partner organizations, forming the foundation upon which shared arrangements are established and aligned.

Regulative elements play a role in establishing partner collaboration ecosystems by providing a formal framework for how ecosystem partners "must" act. Macro-level elements, including laws, regulations, and industry standards, coordinate the development of meso-level elements, including joint agreements, contracts, and rules between and within partner organizations.

Normative elements, such as shared values and norms, also influence collaborative behavior and actors' expectations within the partner collaboration ecosystem. It is essential to outline how partners "should" act and what they expect from one another beyond contractual ties. This can be accomplished by establishing codes of conduct and openly communicating values, norms, and expectations for collaboration.

Cognitive elements of institutions, which involve achieving a shared understanding to guide actors' actions and behavior, are another important consideration. Institutions, especially from a cognitive standpoint, are often "taken-for-granted" structures (Edvardsson et al., 2014) and may become sources of conflict if not addressed during the ecosystem establishment phase. Actors can promote shared understanding, for example, through narratives or storytelling that support individual and collective sense-making of the collaboration (Wieland et al., 2017).

3.2. Institutional work to support the long-term viability of partner collaboration ecosystems

Partner collaboration ecosystems are dynamic and evolve over time (Baker et al., 2019). Enabling the long-term viability of a partner collaboration ecosystem involves continuously observing and understanding changes in the ecosystem and its surrounding environment. This proactive approach allows revising rules, norms, and governance mechanisms to align with ever-evolving realities and sustain the collaboration's success.

It is suggested that the continuous maintenance of institutional arrangements is particularly essential for enabling the long-term viability of a partner collaboration ecosystem. Actors must purposively sustain, reinforce, and continuously align the ecosystem's rules, norms, and cognitive elements for value co-creation. However, institutions may also need

to be disrupted when external or internal changes require alterations to current institutional arrangements.

Furthermore, the evolution of the ecosystem and its objectives may call for the creation of new forms of collaboration. Collectively, these mechanisms allow the ecosystem to evolve, adapt, and thrive in the face of internal and external dynamics, enabling conditions for continuous value co-creation by ecosystem actors.

Regarding regulative elements, institutional work should address changes in the external regulatory environment or the need for internal adjustments to formal rules of collaboration that may impact institutional arrangements. From a normative perspective, institutional work should continuously align and reinforce elements, such as values and norms, to foster trust, shared objectives, and collaborative culture within the ecosystem. This may involve promoting open dialogue, enforcing codes of conduct, and reassessing values, norms, and expectations.

Institutional work for long-term viability also requires addressing cognitive elements to maintain reflexivity (Suddaby et al., 2016; Vink et al., 2021) and a shared understanding between actors. It is important to facilitate continuous sensemaking and ensure that actors collectively understand and share the collaboration ecosystem's objectives.

4. Discussion

This section discusses the implications and contributions of our paper to research and practice and suggests avenues for future research. First, by integrating S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008, 2016) and institutional theory (Scott, 2014), we contribute to the literature by shedding light on how institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) can be leveraged to enable value co-creation within partner collaboration ecosystems. Our study goes beyond the understanding offered in previous research of the important role of institutions and their arrangements in coordinating actors' value co-creation activities and behavior in service ecosystems (e.g., Edvardsson et al., 2014; Elo et al., 2023; Vargo & Lusch, 2016) and contributes essential knowledge into how actors may purposively engage in sustaining and (re)forming existing institutional arrangements to enable the ecosystem evolution for value co-creation.

We respond to calls to understand the reciprocal relationship between structure and agency (Lawrence et al., 2011) and offer a novel understanding of institutions and institutional work from two perspectives: establishing partner collaboration ecosystems and ensuring their long-term viability. As the establishment of partnerships for value co-creation and innovation becomes increasingly prevalent in today's

interconnected and dynamic service ecosystems, this understanding should be of great interest and value to research and practice.

Second, by combining S-D logic's meta-theoretical understanding of service ecosystems and institutional arrangements (Vargo & Lusch, 2016) with a more practice-level perspective of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), we advance the understanding of institutions and their arrangements within the S-D logic framework. While this paper builds upon the S-D logic's view of service ecosystems as "relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system[s] (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 10–11)," it also highlights the necessity of conscious and coordinated actions by actors to shape these systems, especially in the context of intentionally established ecosystems for collaboration. The interplay of the ecosystems' self-adjusting nature versus actors' purposive actions to shape institutions presents an exciting avenue for further exploration.

For practitioners, we emphasize the importance of institutional arrangements as coordination mechanisms for value co-creation in partner collaboration ecosystems. We show how actors (e.g., individuals, teams, and organizations) can purposively shape their surrounding institutional arrangements to enable value co-creative collaborations. Our proposed framework and explanations of institutional work in establishing and sustaining partner collaboration ecosystems provide practitioners with actionable insights for assessing, aligning, and shaping their collaborations from an institutional standpoint.

Importantly, we highlight the collective and multi-level nature of partner collaboration ecosystems, considering the micro, meso, and macro levels (Chandler & Vargo, 2011) and their interrelationships in coordinating actors' actions within them. Furthermore, we provide an understanding of the multifaceted nature of institutions, encompassing not only rule-based formal structures but also less formal, normative, and cognitive elements (Scott, 2014). This understanding is essential, as it allows organizations for the holistic consideration and shaping of institutions and their arrangements for value co-creation.

Moreover, we highlight how establishing, sustaining, and (re)forming a partner collaboration ecosystem necessitates collective efforts from all involved actors. A single actor cannot establish and enforce a structure for a partner collaboration ecosystem (Wieland et al., 2017). While a focal actor (e.g., platform provider) or collaboration technologies may facilitate and provide the necessary infrastructure for collaboration, all actors within the ecosystem must collectively establish, align, sustain, and (re)form the institutional arrangements to enable the ecosystem's evolution for value co-creation.

Our conceptual study also has limitations that open fruitful areas for further theoretical and empirical contributions. First, to continue from this study, empirical investigation of real-world cases of partner collaboration ecosystems should be implemented to validate, expand, and gain a deeper understanding of the proposed conceptual framework. We suggest that a longitudinal case study would be especially suitable for this purpose. Observing the evolution of a partner collaboration ecosystem from its establishment to ensuring its long-term viability would enable an improved understanding of the different mechanisms of institutional work (creating, disrupting, and maintaining) and their interplay with various elements of institutions (regulative, normative, and cognitive) at different stages of collaboration. The conceptual framework can also serve as a starting point (problem identification and motivation) for additional research, such as a design science research (Peffers et al., 2007) study that would develop, demonstrate, evaluate, and communicate a method for organizations to engage in institutional work in partner collaboration ecosystems.

Further understanding is also needed on how the proposed enabling/constraining factors in this study, such as reflexivity and agency, manifest themselves in practice and to identify additional micro (e.g., individual, organizational), meso (e.g., collaboration ecosystem), and macro (e.g., industry, society) level factors that affect institutional work in partner collaboration ecosystems. Moreover, investigating how different collaboration technologies (de Vreede et al., 2009) may facilitate institutional work and affect institutional arrangements by driving ecosystem evolution calls for further understanding.

In addition, studying how the proposed mechanisms of institutional work function in different partner collaboration ecosystem contexts is essential for advancing our understanding of the phenomenon. Such research should range from more limited ecosystems with a few equitable partners to expansive, platform-based, distributed ecosystems, such as Amazon and Apple iOS (Fehrer et al., 2018). In addition, conceptualizing institutional work in other types of collaboration ecosystems, such as multisided (sharing economy) platforms (e.g., Uber and Airbnb), would advance our overall understanding of the role and forms of institutional work in enabling collaboration ecosystem evolution and governance for value co-creation.

Lastly, further studies on how different roles and responsibilities within partner collaboration ecosystems affect actors' ability and willingness to engage in institutional work are essential. In addition, examining whether institutional work is always a purposeful effort or whether (and to what extent) institutional arrangements are shaped by actors without conscious awareness would provide valuable insights into the dynamics of institutional work. It is also essential to consider the negative actions and consequences of institutional work on partner collaboration ecosystems to understand the overall nature and implications of this phenomenon.

5. Conclusion

This conceptual paper contributes to the understanding of institutions, institutional work, and value co-creation within partner collaboration ecosystems. By integrating S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008, 2016) and institutional theory (Scott, 2014), we shed light on the role of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) as a potential mechanism for establishing and sustaining value co-creative collaborations. Future research can build on our study by addressing the identified limitations and future research directions. We hope to inspire multidisciplinary research endeavors to support knowledge building on this emerging phenomenon.

6. References

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