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# Guest editorial: How value cocreation and innovation drive service ecosystem evolution

## Introduction

The continuous creation of value among individuals and collectives contributes to the evolution of the human condition, markets and societies. Joint efforts and processes that create value – *value cocreation* – emerge through the integration of resources and interaction among multiple actors through systems of social and economic exchange (Vargo *et al.*, 2008). The study of value cocreation is rooted in the management literature (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) but has been advanced through the development of a service-dominant (S-D) logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008) for markets and marketing, which is now centered on exploring how value cocreation and innovation occur in dynamic *service ecosystems* (Vargo and Lusch, 2011). Sheth *et al.* (2022) described S-D logic as a primary candidate for developing a general theory of marketing, which underscores the centrality of service in understanding and explaining phenomena associated with how value is created through markets and exchange.

This editorial explores how value cocreation and innovation serve as key drivers of service ecosystem evolution, emphasizing the dynamic interactions among actors, resources and institutions that shape service ecosystems. By focusing on service ecosystem evolution as the central theme, we examine how these processes unfold across different (micro-meso-macro) levels of analysis, highlighting increasing complexities of resource integration, institutional arrangements and relationship dynamics. Building on this foundation, we present the key themes of this special issue—Institutional Dissonance, Service Ecosystem Adaptation, Role of Technology in Ecosystem Evolution, Practice Innovation and Relationship Reconfiguration—each contributing to a deeper understanding of how service ecosystems evolve. To further advance this research stream, we introduce a research agenda that outlines potential research questions and discusses their contributions to the service ecosystem evolution literature, offering pathways for future exploration and theoretical development.

This special issue aims to further advance our understanding of *value cocreation and innovation in service ecosystems*. The contributions from the papers published in this special issue provide key insights into how value cocreation and innovation are fueled by the integration of human and non-human resources and the reconfiguration of relationships, which increase the complexities of service ecosystems and drive systems change. In this editorial, we provide a backdrop for conceptualizing *service ecosystem evolution* – the ongoing adaptation process that increases system complexity. We overview each of the papers in this special issue along a progressive pathway that provides evidence for how value cocreation and innovation contribute to the disruption, adaptation and evolution of a service ecosystem.

## Service ecosystem evolution

The S-D logic, service ecosystems approach to conceptualizing and studying how value is cocreated draws attention to multi-level interactions and varying value outcomes. Prior research exploring value cocreation in service ecosystems underscores the social nature of technology (Akaka and Vargo, 2014) and points toward innovation as a cocreative process that can lead to lasting social change (Vargo *et al.*, 2015). Service ecosystems are “relatively self-contained, self-adjusting systems of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange” (Vargo and



Lusch, 2016, p. 10). Rather than individual (e.g. the firm) or dyadic actors (e.g. firm–customer), a service ecosystem is the appropriate unit of analysis for understanding value creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2014). Considering the service ecosystem as the focal unit of analysis allows for investigators to oscillate across nested and relative – micro, meso and macro – levels of interaction among multiple actors.

The study of service ecosystems draws from an extensive field of literature that continues to refine S-D logic and the lexicon that has been developed through the work of numerous scholars across a variety of disciplines (Pohlmann and Kaartemo, 2017). Core to this service-centered perspective is that value is cocreated through the integration of operant (those that act on others) and operand (those that are acted upon) resources (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Among these resources are social roles that help to scaffold networks of relationships and contribute to both stability and change of a system (Akaka and Chandler, 2011). These networks of resources and relationships are made up of individuals and collectives (e.g. organizations or nations) and can include both human and non-human actors (Akaka and Vargo, 2014). The interactions among multiple actors are driven by institutions and institutional arrangements, or the assemblages of social norms, rules, values, and meanings that govern and guide relations in a service ecosystem (Vargo and Lusch, 2016).

Prior research explores how value cocreation practices (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2012) and processes (Payne *et al.*, 2008) lead to a variety of value outcomes, including shaping service ecosystems (Mele *et al.*, 2018). Although the study of innovation in service ecosystems has been a growing area of interest (Vargo *et al.*, 2015; Mele *et al.*, 2018), attention towards ecosystems evolution is lacking. Evolution is a form of change through which a simple system becomes more complex, often by diversification of the original elements of the system and, in some instances, formation of new elements (Oxford Languages). In the case of service ecosystems, dyadic exchange relationships become increasingly complex through networks of exchange and layers of organizations, money and extended socioeconomic systems (Vargo *et al.*, 2008). Service ecosystem evolution is evident as exchange systems intersect and grow through ongoing interactions that lead to continuous value cocreation as well as innovation, which spread across geographies and through technological advancements that increase the complexity of a system (Akaka *et al.*, 2013).

As the complexity of exchange increases, the need for new practices, processes and institutions emerge. Increasing institutional complexity – multiplicity of institutional arrangements – spurs novelty in value cocreation and drives innovation (Siltaloppi *et al.*, 2016). In addition, the diffusion of unique practices change service ecosystems as practices are adapted across time and space (Akaka *et al.*, 2022). Importantly, recent research exploring the evolution or shaping of service ecosystems suggests that not all value cocreation or innovation leads to positive outcomes (Mele *et al.*, 2018). This is especially true when actors engage in value-creation practices and processes with a self-interest while knowing and disregarding detrimental outcomes for others. Systemic conflict, ambiguity and opportunism enacted by actors can lead to undesirable outcomes for the system more broadly.

The papers in this special issue have been organized along a general pathway for considering an iterative and multifaceted process of ecosystem evolution, which can be triggered by institutional dissonance, or misalignment of institutions, both within and external to the service ecosystem (Chandler, 2025), and reconciled through ecosystem adaptations, such as regeneration (Sarno *et al.*, 2025) and self-adjustment (Di Pietro *et al.*, 2025). The research in this special issue also emphasizes how technology plays a critical role in ecosystem adaptation as it supports the integration of operant and operand resources (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) and reconfigures relationships of human and non-human actors. In particular, papers in this issue highlight the role of technology in *practice innovation* that is driven by smart-technology enabled value cocreation practices (Mele and Russo-Spena, 2025) and organizational resilience (Schau *et al.*, 2025). Other papers discuss the *reconfiguration of relationships* in service ecosystems through human engagement on digital platforms (Farmer *et al.*, 2025) and human–artificial intelligence (AI) relationships

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(Kaartemo and Helkkula, 2025). Together, these seven papers highlight the increasing complexity of service ecosystems and the necessity of systems change to continue cocreating value for individuals, organizations and society.

### **Institutional dissonance in a service ecosystem**

In her research note titled, *Institutional Dissonance and Innovation: Higher Education from a Service Ecosystems Perspective*, Chandler (2025) proposes that institutional dissonance is a manifestation of tensions and divergencies among actors' commitments to overall institutional norms and values. She argues that in many cases, this dissonance is considered a threat to a university because of differences in viewpoints and disagreements on appropriate solutions. However, she also argues that institutional dissonance can actually stimulate and launch early steps toward innovation. This can come in the form of new academic programs, but can also emerge as new or alternative ways of engaging with the internal community through inclusive programs that promote diversity. Importantly, she states that actors' readiness for ecosystem change requires willingness and ability to collaborate and leverage accessible resources or engage with others, or cocreate value, more broadly. Change, she suggests, is stimulated by the need for institutional alignment and the willingness of actors within the ecosystem to drive the reconciliation of institutional dissonance and lead to systems change.

Chandler (2025) states, "Traditional higher education research suggests that students, faculty and staff must devote physical and psychological energy to the university's existing programs ... however [to adapt they] must be willing to engage, and universities must strengthen a sense of belonging and connection for all stakeholders." In other words, for value to be cocreated in increasingly complex ecosystems such as higher education, institutional dissonance must be viewed as an opportunity to engage in collaboration and the readiness of actors (e.g. faculty, staff and administrators) for participating in realignment of the system can contribute to innovative outcomes that can sustain and grow the service ecosystem. In this way, institutional dissonance can trigger the need for innovation and drive adaptation of cultural norms and collective processes to evolve the service ecosystem.

### **Service ecosystem adaptation**

Service ecosystems are inherently adaptive because they are "self-contained, self-adjusting systems" (Vargo and Lusch, 2014). However, prior research indicates that adaptation of a service ecosystem can be guided or propelled by institutional innovation (Vargo et al., 2015) as well as practice diffusion (Akaka et al., 2022). The papers included in this special issue offer additional insight into ecosystem adaptation in the form of regeneration (Samo et al., 2025) and self-adjustment (Di Pietro et al., 2025), which can potentially lead to service ecosystem evolution.

In their paper, *A Processual View on Sustainability Transitions in Service Ecosystems*, Samo et al. (2025) offer a framework for conceptualizing the process of systems adaptation as it relates to sustainability transition – large-scale changes addressing sustainability issues in complex systems. They draw on a regenerative thinking approach to offer a phase transition process that includes the emergence of new de/re-stabilizing properties and amplifying/balancing feedback loops for de/re-institutionalization of the service ecosystem. In their approach, systems adaptation is important for value cocreation at all levels – micro, meso and macro – because it "can support an understanding of systems' dynamics toward their renewed viability." In other words, the regeneration of a system occurs through de/re-stabilization and de/re-institutionalization or the reshaping of the institutional arrangements that constitute the service ecosystem. It is through this disruption and reconciliation of institutions as well as the diffusion of sustainable practices that service ecosystems evolve.

Di Pietro et al. (2025) investigate the role of an understudied group, volunteers, in cocreating value in service ecosystems. Their paper titled, *Exploring Volunteers' Roles in*

*Healthcare Service Ecosystems: Value Co-creation, Self-adjustment and Re-humanization*, investigates how these particular unpaid actors contribute to new value cocreation practices and well-being outcomes in the context of healthcare. They look specifically at volunteer engagement and how this contribution to value cocreation contributes to well-being at multiple levels of interaction and allows a service ecosystem to self-adjust. This self-adjustment occurs through what the authors call “a reconceptualization of the repurpose concept in the service ecosystem literature.” They describe it as the “utilization of previously untapped resources to develop new ecosystem activities and services that can generate additional value.” In other words, they uncover the benefit of integrating un/under-used resources provided by volunteers, such as emotional support or completion of simple tasks, that can alleviate time and effort of other, more specialized actors, such as doctors and nurses. The self-correction in the system occurs as the volunteers take on a variety of necessary tasks to support and sustain the system that do not require the expert knowledge of medical professionals. These volunteers increase complexity of the service ecosystem through changes in social roles (Akaka and Chandler, 2011), but the outcome of this self-regulated adaptation is an increased level of well-being across individual and collective levels of a service ecosystem.

### **Role of technology in ecosystem evolution**

The sociomaterial nature of technology (Orlikowski, 2007) has been discussed with reference to S-D logic and its ecosystems approach (Akaka and Vargo, 2014). In this view, technology is an operant resource or one that has the capability of acting on other resources, including the shaping of social structures or service ecosystems. Furthermore, the study of practice diffusion (Akaka et al., 2022) suggests that the movement or introduction of technological artifacts requires the connection to meanings and competences to become embedded within a social structure. In other words, technological adoption requires practice adaptation – the linkages between materials, meanings and competences within a system of practices (Shove et al., 2012). Because of this, technology that moves without clear adoption outcomes (e.g. steep sales trajectory) may lack connection to salient meanings or critical competencies or both.

### *Practice innovation*

Practice innovation is revealed in the alteration of practices or the introduction of novel practices within a particular service ecosystem (Akaka and Schau, 2019). The introduction of technological artifacts can introduce new practices or change the enactment of practices, which lead to practice innovation. Mele and Russo-Spena (2025) provide insight into the agency that emerges at the intersection of technology and practice in their paper, *Agencement of Onlife and Phygital: Smart Tech-Enabled Value Co-creation Practices*. Their paper proposes a framework for considering how devices embedded with smart technology enable performative (inter)actions among multiple actors, resources, and contexts that leverage and advance a tech-based ecology for service ecosystems. The authors argue that smart technology – that which can sense, learn, and be adaptive and responsive – “can inform innovative forms of agency and structure and enhance new value co-creation practices within service innovation.” Because of these alterations of structure, new connections between materials, meanings and competences within a service ecosystem are made. As materiality (e.g. devices) changes and new technology enters a service ecosystem, the practice elements and linkages within a system of practices and institutions must change to allow for practice adaptation. This underscores the value of exploring both internal dissonance and external jolts of disruption that require the introduction of new technology to solve problems and drive systemic change.

Nowhere has an exogenous jolt been more shocking and widespread in recent years than the COVID-19 global pandemic. Schau et al. (2025) investigate practice innovation during

this external disruption that impacted all service ecosystems at all levels – from individuals to collectives to global communities. Their paper titled *Organizational Resiliency through Practice Innovation: Forced Brand Evolution in a Prolonged Exogenous Service Ecosystem Disruption* recognizes the many ways in which service providers, in this case Starbucks, attempted to alter customer behaviors by considering multiple elements of practice. To this end, the company leveraged its digital platform to support online purchases and contactless pick-up, as well as their drive-thru options to provide safe alternatives to their service and retail experience. This shift from in-person to digital engagement required a reconsideration of the brand that was rooted in a “third-place” in-person, shared experience. The practice innovations eventually transformed the service experience from a physical encounter to digital engagement and led the brand to revise its definition of a third-place from a communal space to a digital third-place where people can interact with the brand anytime and anyplace via their mobile application. In this case, technology not only changed how customers engaged with the service or retail environment, but also evolved the service ecosystem and the brand. Organizational resilience was directly tied to service ecosystem evolution via practice innovation and changes in the ways customers leveraged the mobile app (material), engaged with the service (competence) and perceived the value of the brand (meaning).

#### *Relationship reconfiguration*

Networks of relationships are central to the structure of a service ecosystem and how people cocreate value for themselves and for others. In this issue, Farmer and colleagues (2025) and colleagues provide insights into how value is cocreated through the use of digital platforms in their paper titled, *Value Cocreation and Innovation Involving Consumers and Providers Interacting with Technology: A Digital Ethnographic Study of Online Mental Health Forums*. The authors draw attention to the importance of digital platforms for enabling the interactions among individuals struggling with common problems, such as mental health. The interactions among individuals cocreate value and shape the service ecosystem by (1) establishing a community that supports engagement and conversation around a specific topic and (2) providing a platform with user-generated data that can aid the platform and partner service providers in articulating more compelling value propositions. In this way, the digital platform allows for the configuration of relationships in new ways that increase value created for both customers and service providers.

Extending the network of relationships beyond human-to-human engagement, Kaartemo and Helkkula (2025) provide deep insights into human–AI how resources relations support value cocreation in a service ecosystem through their paper, *Human-AI Resource Relations in Value Cocreation in Service Ecosystems*. The authors offer a framework that relies on postphenomenology or, more specifically, cyborg intentionality to assess the types of human–AI relations that enable the integration of resources and cocreation of value. They aim to “dissolve the distinction between operant and operand resources” based on the notions that humans and AI are entangled and that these entanglements can be supported through a recognition of seven resource relations – background, embodiment, hermeneutic, alterity, cyborg, immersion and composite. This variation in relations indicates that humans can decide how they want to engage with machines, and then based on those decisions, the machines can take on varying roles to contribute to value cocreation. It is important to understand that although the role of technology can vary and its embeddedness in decision-making depends on a variety of factors, the agentic capacity of AI is dependent on the relationship it has with a human. In other words, the intelligence of a machine is ultimately dependent not on its speed of calculation and scale of aggregation of information, but on when, how, and why a human can and wants to engage. Increased reliance on AI can potentially be a weakness in a

system that is striving to be forward-thinking because all of the data and projection tools are based on the past. Even the most sophisticated forms of composite intentionality, human–AI collaboration, around generative AI can hinder the progression, growth and viability of an ecosystem if not leveraged to ultimately drive change. However, the complexity inherent to the introduction and adoption, and diffusion of AI continues to evolve the service ecosystem.

### Future research directions

It has been said that the only constant in life is change. The ongoing alteration of a human's lived experience is intertwined with varying levels of uncertainty across markets and societies. These experiences are nested within multiple levels of individual and collective interactions, as well as a variety of intersecting institutional arrangements that govern our daily lives. However, the systems that shape our interactions are also malleable to change, from the inside and out.

The aim of this special issue is to advance our understanding of value cocreation and innovation in service ecosystems. The contributions to this goal provide important insights to the process and outcomes of value cocreation and innovation and draw attention to specific drivers of innovation at different stages of ecosystem evolution. The papers in this special issue indicate that resource integration – of both operand and operand resources – are required for technology adoption and integration within a service ecosystem. However, this adoption of technology is limited by practice adaptation and, more specifically, practice innovation and diffusion throughout a service ecosystem (Akaka *et al.*, 2022).

Several papers provide interesting examples of the emergence and spread of new practices or existing practices enacted by non-traditional stakeholders. This mode of practice innovation can potentially support the integration and adoption of new technology in contexts such as higher education, but, in this case, curricular changes are required for this advocacy, and education is at a loss. In reviewing the papers for this special issue and looking back on the development of S-D logic itself, the evolution of an ecosystem is ultimately reflected in the increased complexity of the service ecosystem – as complexity of the system increases, can the service ecosystem (at any level) survive and thrive?

The need for further research is clear, and the contributors to this special issue highlight specific challenges that must be addressed in the near and distant future to continue the cocreation of value for individuals, organizations and society. We have developed a research agenda that explores five interrelated themes—Institutional Dissonance, Service Ecosystem Adaptation, Role of Technology in Ecosystem Evolution, Practice Innovation and Relationship Reconfiguration—each examined across micro, meso and macro levels to deepen understanding of service ecosystem evolution through an S-D logic perspective (Table 1). We hope these research questions, together with the papers in this special issue, attract further interest in value cocreation and innovation in service ecosystems, as well as research on service ecosystem evolution, which are crucial for the continued development of S-D logic and understanding increasing complexities related to markets and exchange.

We argue that understanding the triggers for disruption and mechanisms for adaptation establish a great first step in this transformation process; however, the complexities of the systems in which value cocreation and innovation are embedded require additional consideration for understanding what drives ecosystem stability and change. To continue the trajectory of value creation in markets, economies and societies, there is a need to increase complexity of interactions and diversity of perspectives, as well as expand the focus of individual value creation to the system as more than the sum of its parts. This is evident in the papers regarding higher education (Chandler, 2025), sustainability (Sarno *et al.*, 2025) and healthcare (Di Pietro *et al.*, 2025). Future research should focus on conceptualizing the complexity of a service ecosystem as a contributor to both value cocreation and the value of ecosystem evolution. The internal or external disruption across

**Table 1.** Research questions regarding service ecosystems evolution

Theme	Micro-level	Meso-level	Macro-level	Contribution
Institutional dissonance	How do individual actors interpret, navigate, and respond to institutional dissonance in their value cocreation activities?	How do communities of practice mediate conflicting institutional logics to support or resist systemic change?	How do broader institutional shifts and global regulatory changes create systemic dissonance that alters service ecosystem configurations?	Explores how institutional dissonance disrupts stability across levels, triggering adaptive processes that drive service ecosystem evolution
Service ecosystem adaptation	How do market actors adjust their roles and resource integration practices in response to ecosystem changes?	How do intermediaries orchestrate resource integration and foster adaptive capabilities in service ecosystems?	How do external shocks catalyze large-scale adaptation and transformation across interconnected ecosystems?	Reveals how adaptation unfolds recursively across levels, shaping service ecosystem evolution
Role of technology in ecosystem evolution	How do individuals' perceptions of technology influence their participation in value cocreation?	How do professional associations facilitate the diffusion, legitimation, and stabilization of new technology-related practices?	How do technological megatrends restructure service ecosystems and influence global value creation systems?	Uncovers how technology and service ecosystems co-evolve, reshaping structures, roles, and interactions across levels
Practice innovation	How do individuals experiment with and adapt service practices to address emerging challenges and co-create value?	How do organizational networks enable or constrain the diffusion and institutionalization of practice innovations?	How do institutional arrangements shape the convergence or divergence of innovative service practices across ecosystems?	Examines how practice innovations emerge, diffuse, and stabilize within and across service ecosystems, influencing systemic evolution
Relationship reconfiguration	How do human–technology relationships influence individual experiences and engagement within service ecosystems?	How do organizations and networks reconfigure inter-actor relationships to enhance value cocreation within evolving service ecosystems?	How do wider human-technology relationship shifts, reconfigure service ecosystems at the macro-level?	Explores how shifting relationship dynamics across human and non-human actors reshape structures and processes at multiple levels in service ecosystems

our many and varied opportunities for value creation can potentially guide participants to outline more complex and positive outcomes.

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### Further reading

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