

# Value Co-Creation in a Closed Business Service Triad: From a Dialogic to a Tri-logic Process

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## Abstract

It is crucial to understand value creation processes in business-to-business markets. However, the value creation/co-creation process among the triads in business networks remains unclear. Researchers are called to investigate the complexity of value co-creation among multiple stakeholders in business networks. This study investigates value co-creation amongst supplier, distributor and customer in business service networks. More specifically, how do multiple stakeholders participate in value co-creation, and how actors may benefit from value co-creation in a closed triad, and in what way? This study has employed a case study approach and obtained triadic data from supplier, distributor and customer from an Information Technology business service network. The findings illustrate the complexity of service interactions in value co-creation among triads. It extends the dialogic co-creation process into a wider network perspective, drawing attention to the direct and/or indirect engagement of a third party in the network which forms a tri-logic process in value creation/co-creation in a business network. The findings highlight distributor's contribution to facilitating and enabling the direct interactions and value co-creation between supplier and customer in business networks. This study alerts organisations of the danger of a myopic view of focusing on direct actors and direct value outcomes.

**Keywords:** value co-creation, business service networks, triadic

## Introduction

Value co-creation is derived from service encounters, yet “not limited to the activities of any one exchange or a dyad of service systems”, as multiple network partners participate in the complex service systems (Vargo, Maglio and Akaka, 2008, p.150). Indeed, researchers from the IMP group have emphasised that business organisations are connected in a network (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Actors from both supplier networks and customer networks are involved in value co-creation (Cova and Salle, 2008). Researchers advocate investigation on the complexity of value co-creation among triads in business networks (Nätti, Pekkarinen, Hartikka and Holappa, 2014; Wynstra, Spring and Schoenherr, 2015).

Despite the importance of understanding value creation/co-creation processes in business (Lindgreen and Wynstra, 2005), only a handful of empirical studies on value co-creation focused on dyadic interactions (e.g. Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012; Jaakkola and Hakanen, 2013; Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008), and sparse empirical studies on triads (e.g. Nätti, Pekkarinen, Hartikka and Holappa, 2014; Wynstra, Spring and Schoenherr, 2015; Chowdhury, Gruber and Zolkiewski, 2016). The value co-creation process among multiple stakeholders in business networks remains unclear (Jaakkola and Hakanen, 2013; Baron, Warnaby and Hunter-Jones, 2014; Hsieh and Hsieh, 2015). This may not be surprising, as it is challenging to obtain empirical data from multiple parties in a complex network in order to analyse the value creation/co-creation process. However, a holistic picture of value co-creation among the triads in business networks is needed.

This study responds to the research calls and focuses on the triadic interactions amongst supplier, distributor and customer in a case study to explore how value co-creation manifests in business service networks with evidence from the emerging economies. More specifically, how do triads

participate in value co-creation, and how multiple stakeholders may benefit from value co-creation in a service network, what do they benefit from and in what way?

The contribution of this study is threefold: firstly, it extends the dialogic co-creation process (Hsieh and Hsieh, 2015) into a wider network perspective, drawing attention to the direct and/or indirect engagement of a third party in the network which forms a tri-logic process in value creation/co-creation. The tri-logic process shows that co-created value outcomes may not only benefit dyads that directly interacting with each other, a third party in the triad may also be an indirect value recipient in the service network. Secondly, this study confirms the importance for service providers to access customers' resources (Ordanini and Pasini, 2008), yet draw attention to balance this view that distributor needs access to supplier's and customer's resources and vice versa. Thirdly, this study challenges the claim that actors in the network (upstream and downstream) having the same opportunity to co-create value (Lay, Copani, Jäger and Biege, 2010), by highlighting distributor's contribution to enabling the direct interactions and value co-creation between supplier and customer in business networks. Neglecting a third party's role in business networks and restricting the focus of value co-creation process within two counterparties may hinder the understanding of value creation/co-creation process in the wider network.

The remainder of the paper is structured as below: relevant literature of the study is reviewed, followed with the explanation of methodology. Then, findings are presented and the discussions are developed. It concludes with managerial implications, reflections upon research limitations and identification of future research opportunities.

## **Theoretical background**

### **Value and value co-creation**

Value has drawn much research from both business-to-business and business-to-consumer markets (Mencarelli and Rivière, 2015). Value is a multidimensional concept (Babin and James, 2010). It has surpassed the economic monetary dimension (Zeithaml, 1988; Grace and Iacono, 2015), and the non-monetary aspects of value have also been recognized, e.g. reliability, compatibility with future solutions (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012) and relationship value (Corsaro and Snehota, 2010). Researchers have investigated value from various angles (Mencarelli and Rivière, 2015), from utilitarian value to hedonic value (Babin and James, 2010), from episodic value to relationship value (Ravald and Grönroos, 1996; Ford and Mouzas, 2012), from macro to micro levels (Neghina, Caniels, Blemer and Birgelen, 2015), from transactional to relational approach (Lapierre, 1997, 2000), and from customer, supplier to mixed, dyad and network perspectives on value (Ulaga and Chacour, 2001; Walter, Ritter and Gemünden, 2001; Ballantyne and Varey, 2006). There are direct and indirect value outcomes, depending on whether or not the value outcomes have effects at present or in the future (Chowdhury, Gruber and Zolkiewski, 2016). However, it is difficult to reach a unified definition of value, except for the consensus made that value is a dynamic, multi-dimensional concept in both B2B and B2C contexts (Mencarelli and Rivière, 2015).

Despite the lack of consensus on the definition of value, value is created, experienced and determined by the user (Grönroos, 2011a; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Service interaction is a 'platform' where value is co-created as actors 'merge into one integrated process of coordinated actions, where both parties are active, learn together and from each other, and may directly influence each other' (Grönroos, 2011a, p. 290). Value is continuously unfolding as actors take part in the process (Cova and Salle, 2008). The participants become better off by perceived benefits as the result of service (Babin and James, 2010; Grönroos, 2011a).

Actors may take different forms and roles in value co-creation and participate in different types of value constellation (Kowalkowski et al., 2013). Customers' active role in value co-creation has been found through the control of process, information and decision in service recovery (Guo, Lotz, Tang and Gruen, 2016). Customers may co-create a recovery strategy for service failure (Roggeveen, Tsiros

and Grewal, 2012) which is found to be effective in restoring customer satisfaction (Heidenreich, Wittkowski, Handrich and Falk, 2015). Although customers seem to gain some control of the service interactions, no one holds the majority of control in the complexity of interconnected contexts (Fisher and Smith, 2011) where the commercial, operational and financial interactions amongst network actors involve risks (Cova and Salle, 2008). Instead, organisations in the supply chain (whether it is upstream or downstream) have been found as having the same opportunity to co-create value through interactions (Lay, Copani, Jäger and Biege, 2010). Suppliers and customers may co-create value by taking the opportunity to recover a service failure in business-to-business contexts (Zhu and Zolkiewski, 2015). The joint activities between suppliers and customers help to optimize resources allocation and contribute to the co-created value (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012), and new capabilities may be needed for value co-creation (Kazadi, Lievens, and Mahr, 2016). Constellation of actors (Kowalkowski et al., 2013) and actors' roles in value co-creation in relating to others needs to be reconfigured (Ramírez, 1999).

Value co-creation has drawn discussions from various aspects of studies, from the role of marketing and purchasing (Matthyssens, Bocconcelli, Pagano and Quintens, 2016), outsourcing (Baraldi, Proença, Proença and Castro, 2014), sales function (Haas, Snehota and Corsaro, 2012) to supply chain management (Jüttner, Christopher and Baker, 2007) and conflict management (Mele, 2011); from the perspective of internal alignment (Matthyssens, Vandenbempt and Weyns, 2009) to cross-functional, cross-firm involvement in value co-creation (Lambert and Enz, 2012); from organisational level to individual level (Hohenschwert and Geiger, 2015); and from customer and supplier network value proposition (Cova and Salle, 2008) to value constellations in business networks (Kowalkowski, Witell and Gustafsson, 2013). However, what remains unclear is how multiple actors and their related service interactions contribute to value creation/co-creation in a business network, what are the perceived value and who are the related value recipients. Further research of multiple stakeholders' interactions in the value co-creation process is needed (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012).

### **Business networks and triads**

Business-to-business organisations are connected within a network (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989, 1995). It is recognised that firms cannot be seen to act in isolation; their actions are conditioned by the actions of their counterparts and their counterparts' counterparts (Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Håkansson, Harrison and Waluszewski, 2004). Investigations of business-to-business interactions cannot be separated from a company's position in the supply chain (Cunningham, 1980; Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson and Ford, 2002). Empirical evidence shows a domino effect that cascades from upstream service provider to service recipients and customers in the downstream business-to-business networks (Zhu and Zolkiewski, 2015) which not only illustrates the complexity of multiparty relationships (Andersson-Cederholm and Gyimothy, 2010), but also highlight the importance for understanding value co-creation in business service networks.

Business triad is the smallest unit for studying multiple stakeholders in a business network (Harrison, Holmen and Pedersen, 2012). Triads have been categorised into 'unitary triad', 'serial triad' and 'bridge triad' (Havila et al., 2004; Rossetti and Choi, 2005, 2008; Holma, 2009, 2012). 'Unitary triad' is also called 'closed' triad where three parties have direct interaction with one another (Pardo and Michel, 2015); in other words, a triad is formed by three dyads (Ritter, 2000; Nätti et al., 2014; Wynstra, Spring and Schoenherr, 2015). In 'serial triad', interactions mainly occur between two dyads, while much less intense interaction among the other actors in the triad. 'Bridge triad' is also called 'open' triad (Holma, 2009, 2012) where supplier and customer have no direct interactions but mediated by the distributor (Pardo and Michel, 2015). However, van der Valk and van Iwaarden (2011, p. 199) regarded 'open triads' as 'two-level bidirectional supply chain'. Instead, van der Valk and van Iwaarden (2011) distinguished service triads from manufacturing triads by emphasising on services being directly delivered by the subcontractor to the end customer. Researchers highlight the need of researching triads in business networks (Frow and Payne, 2011; Jaakkola and Hakanen, 2013; Havila, Johanson, and Thilenius, 2004).

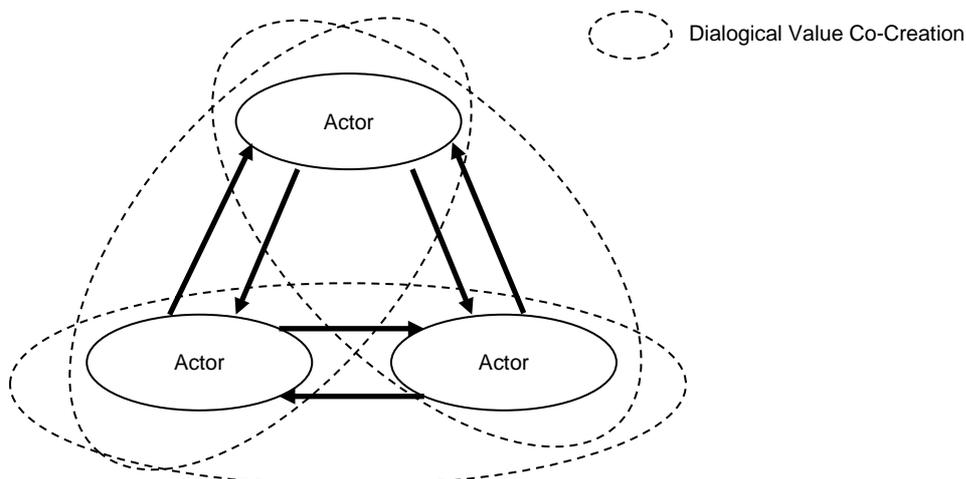
Triadic data and network approaches are appreciated and valued in business-to-business studies (Vedel, Geersbro and Ritter, 2012; Wynstra, Spring and Schoenherr, 2015), as dyad approach failed to capture the complex nature of business-to-business marketing (Morgan, Deeter-Schmelz and Moberg, 2007). Empirical studies of the interactions of triads and its related outcomes are needed (Wu, Choi and Rungtusanatham, 2010; van der Valk and van Iwaarden, 2011). Studying value co-creation among triads is a starting point in developing our understanding of value co-creation in business networks.

Although the importance of understanding value co-creation from a network perspective has been acknowledged, empirical studies of value co-creation in service networks are rather limited (Baron, Warnaby and Hunter-Jones, 2014). Researchers have called for more investigation to obtain perceptions from various parties in the network to further understand the value co-creation process (Jaakkola and Hakanen, 2013). At the same time, fundamental issues in value co-creation require a better understanding, e.g. the actors, activities, processes and the related outcomes and dimensions (Neghina et al., 2015). In addition, despite the growing studies of marketing management in developing economies (e.g. ALHussan, Al-Hussan and Fletcher-Chen, 2014; Rod, Lindsay and Ellis, 2014), networks and value co-creation in emerging contexts need further investigation (Butler and Batt, 2014) to help organisations developing their understanding of how to co-create value with firms from diverse business contexts.

This project responds to the research calls, investigating how value co-creation manifest in a closed triad from an emerging economy. The conceptual framework is proposed (see Figure 1) and the following research questions are raised:

Research question 1: How actors (i.e. supplier, distributor, customer) participate in value co-creation in a closed triad?

Research question 2: How actors (i.e. supplier, distributor, customer) benefit from the value co-creation outcomes in a closed triad?



**Figure 1: Conceptual framework: value co-creation in a closed triad**

An in-depth investigation of triads in the value co-creation process would contribute to the understanding of who co-create value, the objects of interactions, the related value outcomes and value recipients. To address these questions, fieldwork was carried out in an emerging market. The following section explains the methodology of the study.

## Methodology

This research explores how business triads interact with one another to leverage resources and co-create value in a business service network. Case study offers a means to investigate complex real-life situations to understand a rich and contemporary phenomenon (Meredith, 1998; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005; Yin, 2009), thus case study research strategy has been employed in this project.

The case study companies are large organisations in a high-tech and electronic industry from Taiwan which is known as a service-oriented and technology-driven economy (World Economic Forum, 2014; Momoko and Sturgeon, 2010). The case study companies have high-level of skills and knowledge, and provide consulting and engineering services as well as tangible products to their customers. Supplier (S-DT) sells liquid-crystal display products, provide product design for customized gadgets, hardware maintenance, compatible software updates, branding and product consultation service. Distributor (D-JY) sells Information Communication Technology hardware, touch-screen communication platforms, customised interface and provides remote technical support, technical maintenance, interface consultation and on-site training. Customer (C-LM) sells computers with related services, such as software installation, digital archiving and training. Their business customers cover a wide range of industries, from retailers, banking, manufactures, to software design firms.

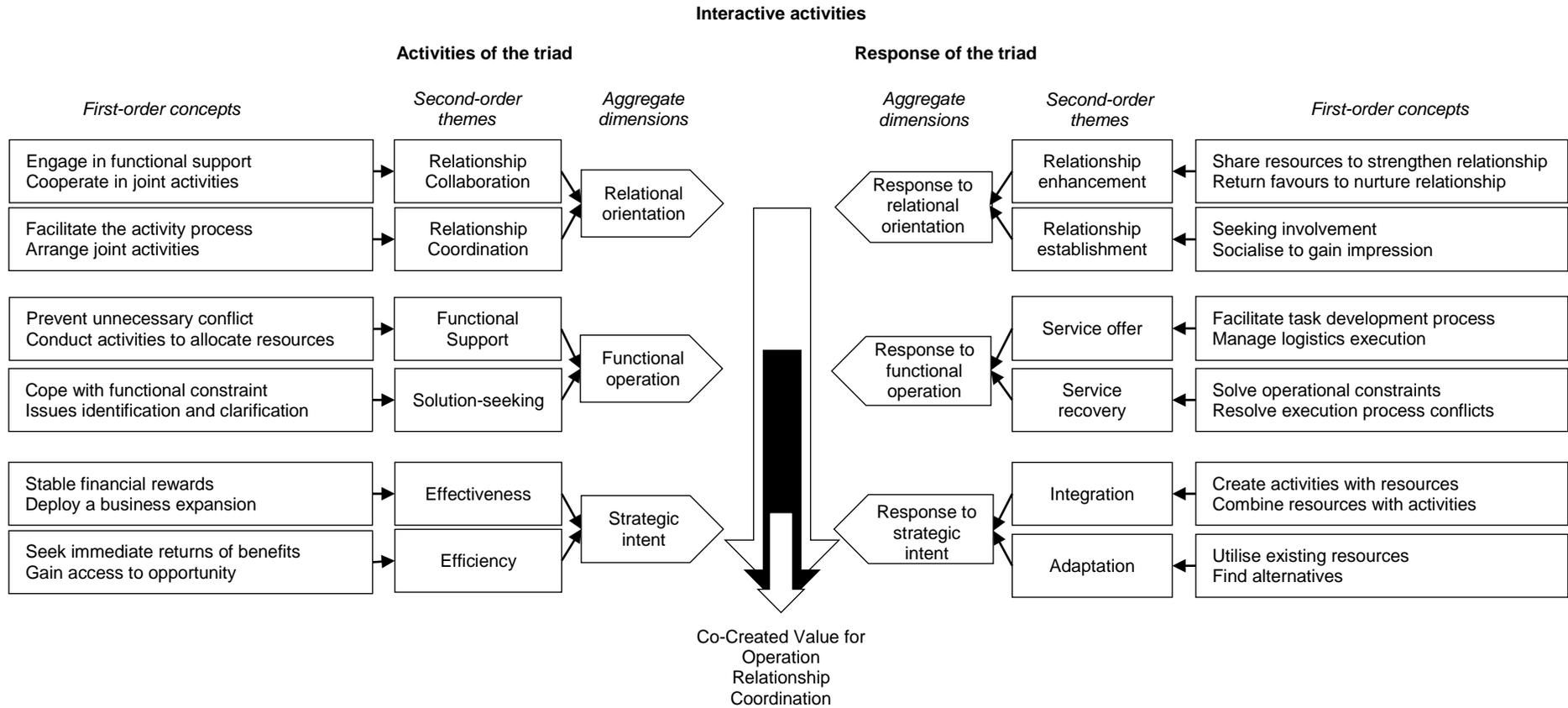
Data are collected from the in-depth interviews, on-site observation (from formal business meetings, product demonstration to social gatherings), firm documents and reports. Evidence from different perspectives allows a triangulation analysis and establishes a robust foundation for the findings (Farquhar, 2012; Forster, 1994; Siggelkow, 2007; Spekman, Salmond, and Lambe, 1997). The interviews started from a customer company. The key informant from the customer company recommended and introduced the key informants from the distributor and supplier. 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with directors, senior managers and relevant team members in sales, sales service, marketing and purchasing departments among the triad. The interviewees are accessible via text and telephone discussions when additional clarification and follow up is necessary. Table 1 provides an overview of the triad in the case study and summarises the data sources.

The data were analysed through stages of coding (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014): firstly, identifying initial, broad categories at an individual level (i.e. each actor's perception of service interactions and its related value co-creation in the triad); secondly, linking related concepts within each dyad (common attributes are categorised based upon actor's interactions and responses in the value co-creation process); thirdly, conducting cross-dyad comparisons and building a holistic understanding of value co-creation in triads (i.e. similar categories developed in stage two are condensed into aggregated dimensions). The analysis focused on who contributes to value co-creation, the service interactions among the triad, what are co-created value outcomes and the related recipient. Figure 2 shows the orders of analysis in the network. The detailed findings are reported below.

## Findings

The findings show that interactions among the triad (see Table 2) and how the triad benefit from the outcome of co-created value of coordination, relationship and operation in the service network (see Table 3).

Firstly, the triad interacted with one another, contributed to co-created value of operation (CCVO) and all three parties are the value recipient of the improved business process in the network. Among the triad, Distributor (D-JY) provides Customer (C-LM) with both hardware and software repair, installation and on-site training and technical maintenance. When Customer (C-LM) reported a hardware problem, Distributor (D-JY) required Supplier (S-DT)'s support and a solution to pass it on to Customer (C-LM). Initially, there are only direct interaction between Supplier (S-DT) - Distributor (D-JY), and Distributor (D-JY) - Customer (C-LM), but no direct interaction between Supplier (S-DT) and Customer (C-LM).



**Figure 2: Interaction and value co-creation among the triad**

**Table 1: An overview of the triad: data sources**

Network Firms <sup>a</sup>	Annual turnover <sup>c</sup>	Employee number	Services <sup>b</sup>	Product specialisation <sup>d</sup>	Interviewees <sup>e</sup>	Archival materials <sup>f</sup>	Observation
Supplier (S-DT)	\$21	125	B., C., Eng., P.D.	Liquid-crystal display (LCD) products and equipment (e.g. displays, screens, monitors.)	CEO (1) Senior director (1) Sales team (4) Sales service (2)	Company handbook Marketing materials IM exchanges e-mail exchanges	Business field trips (with supplier's company to visit distributor and customer sites) Office observation (4 days at the site)
Distributor (D-JY)	\$32.5	155	C., Eng., S.D., T.	Information Communication Technology and services (e.g. tablets, software design)	CEO (1) Senior manager (1) Sales team (4) Purchasing team (2)	Company handbook Marketing materials	Business meetings (twice with supplier and customer) Office observation (3 days at the site)
Customer (C-LM)	\$30	150	C., Eng., T.	Computer sets and services (e.g. laptops, desktops, tablets)	CEO (1) Senior director (1) Purchasing team (3) Marketing team (3)	Company handbook	Office observation (1 week at the site)

<sup>a</sup>Pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity of the firms.

<sup>b</sup>B. (Branding), C. (Consulting), Eng. (Engineering), P.D., (Product Design), S.D. (Software Design), T. (Training)

<sup>c</sup>Millions. (Information supplied by each firm during fieldwork.)

<sup>d</sup>These firms focus on B2B customers.

<sup>e</sup>This column summarises the number of interviewees and their positions within each firm.

<sup>f</sup>This column summarises the forms of archival and material collected from each firm.

As Distributor (D-JY) has its own limitation in providing hardware support service, Distributor (D-JY) requested Supplier (S-DT) to provide direct hardware repairing service to Customer (C-LM). Supplier (S-DT) responded positively to Distributor (D-JY)'s request. The direct interaction between Customer (C-LM) and Supplier (S-DT) has reduced logistic complexity of hardware repair among the triad in the network. Interacting with Customer (C-LM) directly not only saves the Supplier (S-DT)'s time, increase their business revenue from hardware replacement, but also enables Supplier (S-DT) to gain customer feedback towards their hardware products, and evaluate and monitor product quality. At the same time, both distributor and customer also benefit directly and/or indirectly from the improved process.

Supplier (S-DT): *“Based on D-JY’s (Distributor’s) explanation of their customer’s product problem, we are often required to identify the key problems. Direct communication wastes us no time. We can complete the project on time or in advance for other new orders. ...Those faulty products help us to evaluate about our product quality control.”*

**Table 2: Service interactions among the triad**

Service Provider	Service Recipient	#	Service	Interaction Status	Service Request Initiator	Actor Involvement
Supplier	Distributor	1	Product hardware repair	Routine direct		Dyadic
		2	Product maintenance	Routine direct		Dyadic
		3	Technical inspection	Routine direct		Dyadic
		4	Service consultation	Routine direct	Distributor	Triadic
Distributor	Customer	5	Product repair	Routine direct		Dyadic
		6	Product monitoring	Routine direct		Dyadic
		7	Technical maintenance	Routine direct		Dyadic
		8	On-site training	Routine direct		Dyadic
Supplier	Customer	9	Product hardware repair	From indirect to direct	Distributor	Triadic
		10	Product design consultation	From indirect to direct	Distributor	Triadic
		11	Product branding consultation	New direct	Customer	Dyadic
		12	Product customisation consultation	New direct	Customer	Dyadic

Distributor (D-JY): *“We don’t have hardware repair skills. S-DT’s (Supplier) help has eased complicated liaison. We eventually solved this missing puzzle of technical maintenance with a relief. Now, we refer S-DT to fix the hardware. The hardware problems less consume our service quality and maintenance time.”*

Customer (C-LM): *“This direct connection (with Supplier (S-DT)) reduces logistic complexity. There is no need to go back and forth to clarify what went wrong amongst three of us. The direct interaction efficiently shortens the length of the repaired hardware, at least 5 days.”*

The findings suggest that Distributor (D-JY)’s initiation in requesting Supplier (S-DT)’s direct hardware service to Customer (C-LM) not only reduces the complexity but also improves the efficiency in functional operation among the triad in the network. In other words, the involvement of Distributor (D-JY) triggered the interaction between Supplier (S-DT) and Customer (C-LM) which enables a smoother business operation among the triad. All three parties are the value beneficiaries of the related outcome for business operation in the network.

Secondly, the findings show that distributor’s effort in encouraging a dialogue between supplier-customer led to all three parties benefiting from related outcome of co-created value of relationship (CCVR).

**Table 3: Service interactions and co-created value among the triad**

Actors	Service <sup>a</sup>	Service Request Initiator	Co-Created Value	CC' CCVR CCVC	Direct Recipient	Value &	Indirect Value Recipient
<b>Distributor-Customer</b>	9	Distributor	Reduce logistic complexity	✓		Distributor & Customer	Supplier
	5/6/7/8/9	Distributor	Complete technical maintenance execution	✓		Distributor	
	1/5/9	Distributor	Technical maintenance Improvement	✓		Distributor & Customer	
	4/9/10	Distributor	Face-giving to access resources	✓		Customer	
	10	Distributor	Posit business to a potential customer	✓		Distributor	
	9	Distributor	Immediate profit growth		✓		Supplier
	4/5/6/7/8/10	Distributor	Gain a strategic account customer		✓	Distributor	
	4/5/6/7/8/10	Distributor	Stable company turnover		✓	Distributor	
	4/5/6/7/8/10	Distributor	Market leader		✓	Distributor	
	4/5/6/7/8/9/10	Distributor	Network expansion to new network		✓	Distributor	
<b>Supplier-Distributor</b>	9	Distributor	Reduce logistic complexity	✓		Supplier & Distributor	Customer
	9	Distributor	Cover technical incapability	✓		Distributor	
	2/3	Distributor	Support technical maintenance	✓		Distributor	
	9	Distributor	Complete technical maintenance execution	✓		Distributor	
	4/10	Distributor	Face-giving to access resources	✓		Distributor	Customer
	2/3	Distributor	Favour return	✓		Supplier	
	9/10	Distributor	Reputation endorsement	✓		Distributor	
	4/9/10	Distributor	Network expansion	✓		Supplier	Customer
	5/9	Distributor	Immediate profit growth		✓	Supplier	
	4/9/10	Distributor	Potential company revenue increase		✓	Supplier	

<b>Supplier-Customer</b>	9	Distributor	Reduce logistic complexity	✓	Supplier & Distributor
	9	Distributor	Project time management	✓	Customer
	9	Distributor	Product quality control	✓	Supplier
	9	Distributor	Network expansion	✓	Supplier & Customer
	4/10/11/12	Distributor	New customer	✓	Supplier
	9/10	Distributor	Reputation endorsement	✓	Distributor
	9	Distributor	Immediate profit growth	✓	Supplier
	4/10/11/12	Distributor/Customer	Innovative product	✓	Customer
	4/10/11/12	Distributor/Customer	Creative brand image	✓	Customer
	4/9/10	Distributor	Potential company revenue increase	✓	Supplier

**Service<sup>a</sup>**

- 1 Product hardware repair
- 2 Product maintenance
- 3 Technical inspection
- 4 Service consultation
- 5 Product repair
- 6 Product monitoring

**Service<sup>a</sup>**

- 7 Technical maintenance
- 8 On-site training
- 9 Product hardware repair
- 10 Product design consultation
- 11 Product branding consultation
- 12 Product customisation consultation

**Value recipient**

- S: Supplier
- D: Distributor
- C: Customer

Supplier (S-DT), depending on Distributor (D-JY)'s sales in order to generate higher revenues, responded positively to Distributor (D-JY)'s request of directly supporting Customer (C-LM) with hardware service, as well as sharing resources with Customer (C-LM) such as allowing customer's access to free samples and customised product consultation. This led to a new business relationship between Supplier (S-DT) and Customer (C-LM). At the same time, Supplier (S-DT)'s supportive response also strengthened their relationship with Distributor (D-JY), as both of them noted:

Supplier (S-DT): *"Because of Distributor (D-JY), Customer (C-LM) becomes our new customer. I am pleased to see my efforts get paid off."*

Distributor (D-JY): *"My friend, S-DT (Supplier) ... gave me face to help C-LM's (Customer) hardware issues...happy to see my introduction making Customer (C-LM) become a business customer to S-DT."*

At the same time, Customer (C-LM) appreciated Distributor (D-JY)'s favour of linking them directly to Supplier (S-DT). When distributor (D-JY) expressed their desire of gaining access to a retail chain owned by a large enterprise through Customer (C-LM)'s business network, Customer (C-LM) is willing to return the favour to Distributor (D-JY).

Customer (C-LM): *"S-DT (Supplier) told me how much effort that D-JY (Distributor) has made for us. I will find a way to introduce more customers to D-JY."*

The findings show that the change of interactions among the triad (from two dyads to three dyads) provides an opportunity for nurturing a new relationship between supplier-customer, as well as strengthening existing supplier-distributor relationship. Distributor may also seek for a potential relationship with a new customer from customer's business network.

Thirdly, the change of a dialogue between two dyads to a trilogue between three dyads led to all three parties benefiting from co-created value of coordination (CCVC) in the business service network. Supplier (S-DT) use their own specialties in helping Distributor (D-JY) to solve Customer (C-LM)'s hardware problems, covering Distributor (D-JY)'s lack of technical capability for hardware repair. This, in return, increases Distributor (D-JY)'s business orders and Supplier (S-DT)'s profit as a result of their joint service.

Supplier (S-DT): *"D-JY (Distributor) has to count on us as they don't have that skills and facility to help C-LM (Customer)."*

Distributor (D-JY): *"We don't have hardware repair skills to help our customer... with the help from S-DT (supplier), we managed to keep up our service quality."*

Supplier (S-DT): *"The profit from C-LM's (Customer) replaced hardware components is better than never. We expect that D-JY (Distributor) will increase their hardware purchasing, at least 10% more, depending on their customers' orders."*

Customer's (C-LM) reciprocal favour of arranging an event and allowing Distributor (D-JY) to access their network of a potential business customer (a retail chain) not only promotes Distributor (D-JY)'s customised software design, but also contributes to their positioning to be the market leader.

Distributor (D-JY): *"Through C-LM's (Customer) business network, we gained a business opportunity to promote our system for the chain store business. It's likely to be lucrative, 20% turnover increase. We, then, can target at other similar types of chain stores and aim to be a market leader in software customized design."*

Upon Distributor (D-JY)'s request, Supplier (S-DT) allows Customer (C-LM) to access their innovative gadgets, provided product design consultation and customised products. This gives Customer (C-LM) an advantage to design a creative brand image for their firm.

Supplier (S-DT): *"We give free sample (gadgets)... for this particular one (Customer C-LM) – not released to the market. It's a promise to my customer (Distributor D-JY). They (Customer C-LM) consulted us their ideas.... asked to us produce customized products with their firm logo. We now have Customer C-LM as our own customer"*.

Customer (C-LM): *"We had an idea and met with this hardware supplier for their opinions. Using customized products with my firm logo creates a creative brand image for my firm"*.

In summary, interactions of the triad are intertwined in the network. The involvement of an actor (e.g. who may initiate a service request) triggers and coordinates the interactions of the other two stakeholders in the triad. This enables a change from interactions between two dyads to three dyads, a shift from dialogue to trilogy and contributes to value creation/co-creation in the network (see Figure 3). The findings are discussed in the following section.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This study employed a triadic approach to identify the service interactions among the multiple stakeholders and the value creation/co-creation process in a closed triad. The findings support Hsieh and Hsieh's (2015) claim of the importance of the dialogic co-creation process where mutual engagement between parties is evident, yet extend it into a wider network perspective, drawing attention to the direct and/or indirect engagement of a third party in the network which forms a tri-logic process. In the tri-logic process of value creation/co-creation in a closed triad, many of the service interactions were initiated and requested by the distributor, which led to direct service interactions between supplier and customer, removing the procedure barriers (Woodruff, 1997), facilitating and enhancing supplier-customer value co-creation (Karpen, Bove and Lukas, 2012) in the network.

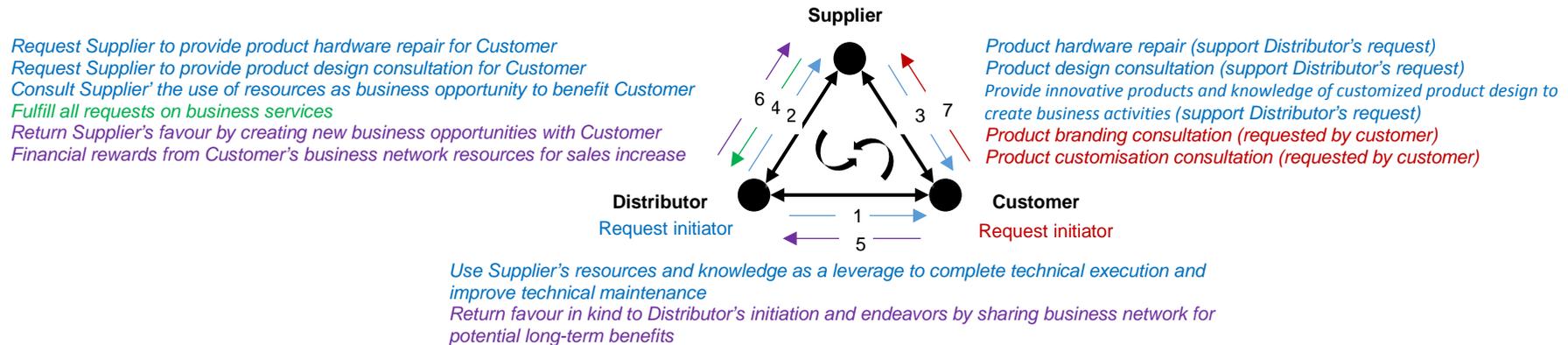
The findings show that in a triad, multiple actors may directly and/or indirectly (i.e. the participation of a third actor intrigues the interactions between another two actors in the triads) contribute to value creation/co-creation in a business network. In other words, value co-creation may not be restricted by the interactions between a dyad. Rather, a third party in the triad may facilitate dyadic value co-creation and achieve value creation in business networks. Neglecting a third party's role in business networks and focusing the value co-creation process only between two counterparties may hinder value creation in the wider network. The findings also show that co-created value outcomes may not only benefit dyads that directly interacting with each other, a third party in the triad may also be an indirect value recipient in the service network. It highlights that value co-creation is not a linear but a rather dynamic process (Grönroos, 2011b). This leads to the following research propositions.

RP1a: Supplier may facilitate the process of Distributor-Customer's value co-creation and become an indirect value recipient in a closed triad.

RP1b: Customer may facilitate the process of Supplier-Distributor's value co-creation and become an indirect value recipient in a closed triad.

RP1c: Distributor may facilitate the process of Supplier-Customer's value co-creation and become an indirect value recipient in a closed triad.

Reduce logistic complexity (CCVO)  
 Project time management (CCVO)  
 Product quality control (CCVO)  
 Network expansion to connect Customer directly (CCVR)  
 Gain a new customer (CCVR)  
 Immediate profit return from product hardware repair (CCVC)  
 Potential company revenue increase (CCVC)



Reduce logistic complexity (CCVO)  
 Gain Supplier's support to cover technical incapability (CCVO)  
 Gain Supplier's support for technical maintenance (CCVO)  
 Complete technical maintenance execution (CCVO)  
 Gain face from Supplier to access their resources (CCVR)  
 Reputation endorsement (CCVR)  
 Gain a strategic account customer from customer (CCVC)  
 Stable company turnover (CCVC)  
 Market leader (CCVC)  
 Network expansion to new network (CCVC)

Reduce logistic complexity (CCVO)  
 Network expansion to connect supplier directly (CCVR)  
 Innovative product (CCVC)  
 Creative brand image (CCVC)

**Figure 3: Service interactions and value creation/co-creation in the closed triad**

At the same time, this study shows that multiple stakeholders are interdependent in the value co-creation process and the interactions are conditioned by other parties involved in the service network. The findings suggest that multiple stakeholders in the service network also require new capabilities for value co-creation. Firms need operational capability (Kowalkowski et al., 2013) as well as relational capability (Möller and Törrönen, 2003) to be competitive. This findings agree with Ordanini and Pasini's (2008) emphasis on the importance for service providers to access customers' resources, yet draw attention to balance this view that distributor needs access to supplier's and customer's resources and vice versa in the triad. Multiple stakeholders need a network perspective to allow other actors' access to their operand and operant resources in order to co-create value in the service network, as the competitive advantage is developed in constellation rather than at an individual firm level (Kowalkowski et al., 2013). This leads to the following research propositions.

RP2a: Access to one another's resources among triads is necessary for value creation/co-creation in business networks.

PR2b: Coordinating service interactions among the triads (e.g. extending dialogues between two dyads to tri-logues among triads) intrigues value creation/co-creation in business networks.

Finally, this study affirms distributors' opportunity in generating value in business networks (Gadde, 2014), yet it furthers the understanding and highlights distributors' contribution to value creation/co-creation in the networks by facilitating and enabling the direct interactions between supplier and customer in a triad. It supports Nätti et al.'s finding (2014) of mediators playing a facilitator role in triadic service relationships. More specifically, it shows that distributors need to bring together suppliers' capabilities and resources to provide service and respond to distributors' customer needs in the network. Distributors' networking behaviour (Naudé, Zaefarian, Tavani, Neghabi and Zaefarian, 2014) is also crucial for value creation/co-creation. This finding challenges the claim that actors in the network (upstream and downstream) having the same opportunity to co-create value (Lay et al., 2010), as the findings suggest that actors having different positions in the network vary in their roles and their access to resources and service performance for value creation/co-creation in the service network. This leads to the following research proposition.

RP3: Distributor plays a crucial role of orchestrating the interaction and value co-creation process between supplier and customer in a closed triad.

### **Managerial contribution**

This study shed lights on the service activities that are appreciated and valued by participants in the network. Organisations could actively use service interactions as 'a platform' (Grönroos, 2011a, p. 290) to manage and influence participants' processes and practices in value co-creation. It enables companies to appreciate the fact that actors, depending on their network position, may have different requirements for the access to operand and operant resources and support for business. With such recognition, companies could have a better utilisation of their resources for activities that are valued by other stakeholder in the network.

At the same time, actors in the network benefit from a better understanding of the objects of service interactions in the value co-creation process, the co-created value and the recipients of value outcomes. This not only highlights the importance of service efforts in the value co-creation process in the network, but also alerts organisations of the danger of a myopic view of focusing on direct actors and direct value outcomes. It encourages and enables companies to re-examine their service interactions from a network perspective and include indirect actors and indirect value outcomes in the service network into their business and management horizon.

## Limitation and future research

This study has limited its context to the information and technology service in an emerging market which may restrict the generalisation of the findings to other contexts. There is much room to further investigate value co-creation among triads in different contexts. At the same time, the actors in the case study interact with each other willingly and cooperatively, this could possibly be explained that actors are likely to be collaborative if they provide complementary or interdependent products/services in a triad (Wu and Choi, 2005). However, this may not always be the case in other contexts, where multiple stakeholders may have conflicts and interact uncooperatively which may cause obstacles in the value co-creation process.

This study only looked in-depth into one triad. Further investigation on value co-creation in a wider network, encompassing customers', suppliers' and distributors' networks is needed in order to capture the complexity of upstream and downstream stakeholders in the value co-creation process in service networks.

This study has focused on the positive side of value co-creation, yet the negative side of value co-creation needs to be considered as well (Plé and Cáceres, 2010; Cova, Dalli and Zwick, 2011; Echeverri and Skålén, 2011; Lindgreen, Hingley, Grant and Morgan, 2012; Chowdhury, Gruber and Zolkiewski, 2016). The complexity of value co-creation relating to power issues and value conflicts (Zolkiewski, 2011; Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012) in networks needs further investigation. Further understanding on multiple stakeholders' conflicting behaviour and the related outcomes in value co-creation/co-destruction is needed.

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