



## Zooming in VS zooming out on value co-creation: Consequences for BtoB research



Julie Leroy <sup>a,1</sup>, Bernard Cova <sup>b,\*</sup>, Robert Salle <sup>c,2</sup>

<sup>a</sup> IAE de la Réunion, 24–26 Avenue de la Victoire, 97400 Saint-Denis, Réunion, France

<sup>b</sup> Kedge Business School Marseille & Visiting Professor Bocconi University Milan, Domaine de Luminy, BP 921, 13288 Marseille Cedex 9, France

<sup>c</sup> E.M. Lyon Business School, OCE Research Center, 23, Av Guy de Collongue, BP 174, 69132 Lyon Ecully Cedex, France

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of value co-creation is now taken for granted in the marketing community. It is the result of what we consider as a premature closure of this concept. The aim of this article is to prevent this premature closure by confronting what this discipline has produced thus far in order to highlight the breadth of situations that this concept presumes to encompass. To achieve this, we analyze a selection of articles published in special issues of marketing journals that were dedicated to value co-creation and/or service dominant logic. This sample enables us to point to the risks of being locked into a zoom-out approach to economic exchange: an arbitrary reduction of the vast heterogeneity of exchange phenomena and an inability to account for the complexity of these phenomena. Because value co-creation is a conception that is in conflict with the zoom-in approach to exchange phenomena, our intent is to conduct a healthy rebalancing of perspectives on economic exchange and thereby keep the controversy alive.

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### 1. Introduction

It is acknowledged that researchers need to switch lenses for studying the many aspects of an organizational phenomenon (Nicolini, 2009); they do that by alternatively looking at the macro picture (zooming out) and looking at the micro picture (zooming in) of the phenomenon under consideration (Moss Kanter, 2011). To zoom out is to consider the essential points rather than the finer details of a phenomenon; this approach thus searches for commonalities between phenomena. Zooming in examines more closely, or in greater detail; the focus is on the specifics of a phenomenon. The former approach, which is conventional in nearly any other scientific community, has only recently been revived in the field of marketing by Vargo and Lusch (2008b, 2011), who advocate zooming out to gain a more comprehensive perspective on economic exchanges and market theory. This approach revisits Levitt's critics (1960) of the fact that the vision of most organizations is too constricted by a narrow understanding of what business they are in. As the primary tool for zooming out, the authors have proposed the conceptual framework which they created and have continued to develop since 2004 in the context of service-dominant logic (SDL): that of value co-creation through mutual service provision between actors (actor-to-actor or A2A).

Their work is quite valuable and has given rise to the possibility of exploring potential cross-fertilization among concepts, models, and

theories in marketing and other related disciplines. However, the fact that the founders of this movement have quickly become both the originators and champions of a theory that has dominated in the field of marketing and become ubiquitous in academic journals – nearly achieving the status of an academic brand (Cova, Ford, & Salle, 2009) – presents a risk that the movement has been granted premature immunity to controversy or even reasonable scrutiny. Indeed, the originators of SDL (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) have attained a towering status, enabling them to prescribe a convenient framework for researchers to conceptualize reality for the entire discipline. This proposition thus has the potential to lock the 'zizo' movement (i.e., zooming in/zooming out, as termed by Van Mele, 2006) in the zoom-out position, effectively making value co-creation a 'black box' (Latour, 1987) – a scientific statement that is treated as fact and is exempted from close examination – despite this never having been the authors' intent. To develop further our argument, we refer to Kjellberg and Helgesson's work on generic performativity. They link two worlds, one of abstract practices that can be compared to the zoom out position, and one of concrete practices. The inherent risk of producing mainly zooming out research is to lose touch with the everyday practices of firms by focusing on polishing abstract, zooming out practices. Indeed, the success or failure at implementing a service dominant strategy is determined by the details of the service delivery process. If the research community loses track of these details (i.e. zooming in the concrete practices) the link between the two worlds will be cut, thus producing a pure abstracted black box.

The aim of this article is to prevent the premature 'black-boxization' of the concept of value co-creation by confronting what this discipline has produced thus far in order to highlight the breadth of situations that this concept presumes to encompass. Because value co-creation is

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33 491 827 946.

E-mail addresses: julie\_leroy@hotmail.com (J. Leroy), bernard.cova@kedgebs.com

(B. Cova), salle@em-lyon.com (R. Salle).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +262 262 21 16 26.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +33 478 337 774.

a conception that is in conflict with the zoom-in approach to exchange phenomena, our intent is to conduct a healthy rebalancing of perspectives on economic exchange and thereby keep the controversy alive. Given that this special issue of *Industrial Marketing Management* is dedicated to the IMP 2012 Rome Conference, our focus here is on what the discipline of industrial marketing and purchasing has produced in the area of value co-creation. The specific aim of this research is to highlight how the work of researchers may differ, both at the level of observation of exchanges and in terms of conceptualizing these exchanges. To achieve this, we analyze a selection of articles published in special issues of marketing journals that were dedicated to value co-creation and/or SDL. This sample enables us to point to the risks of being locked into a zoom-out approach to economic exchange: an arbitrary reduction of the vast heterogeneity of exchange phenomena and an inability to account for the complexity of these phenomena.

## 2. Zooming in and out and the risk of 'black-boxization' of scientific knowledge

Vargo and Lusch (2011) adopted the term 'linguistic telescope' as a metaphor for their way of looking at a phenomenon. It is as though researchers zoom in to high power in order to see the details of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Once they have these details in focus, they zoom back out in order to make sense of the phenomenon by putting what they have seen into the context of a 'big picture' (Askegaard & Troppe Linnet, 2011). Recently, Moss Kanter (2011, p. 112) synthesized the advantages and disadvantages of each movement: 'Zoom in, and get a close look at select details – perhaps too close to make sense of them. Zoom out, and see the big picture – but perhaps miss some subtleties and nuances'. These two actions alternate and combine in the evolution of scientific disciplines. Zooming in and out are achieved through continuously switching theoretical lenses and repositioning in the field so that certain aspects of the phenomenon are fore-grounded while others are bracketed (Nicolini, 2009).

That said, the risk for a scientific discipline resides in the possible lack of equilibrium in the zizo approach brought about by excessive emphasis on one of the two extremes. In the case of an imbalance favoring zooming in, proximity to the phenomenon is achieved to the extent that it cannot be suitably theorized. In cases where the imbalance favors zooming out, greater abstraction and framing are possible, but at the expense of an anchorage in concrete practices (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006). This imbalance favoring zooming in can be seen, for example, when marketing scholarship does a huge amount of empirical research, but achieves little in the way of theoretical development (Hubbard & Lindsay, 2002). This is the case when empirical research consists of original works looking for significant differences rather than significant sameness between neighboring phenomena. An imbalance favoring zooming out can be seen when an overarching model is embraced by the scientific community, obscuring any possible empirical differences.

The black box concept has already been employed to address the limits of some marketing theories. Grönroos (2006, p. 319) points to 'the black box of consumption', a closed system promoted by goods-marketing models. The term 'black box' comes from the field of cybernetics, where it is used whenever a set of commands or a piece of machinery becomes too complex to contemplate in the context of a given issue; thus it can be disregarded, for only the input and the output of this black box matter for the current process, without any knowledge of its internal workings. Its implementation is 'opaque' (black). In terms of science, the logic is the same: despite increasing reliance on computing in every domain of scientific endeavor, the computer source code critical to understanding and evaluating computer programs is commonly withheld, effectively rendering these programs 'black boxes' in the research workflow (Morin et al., 2012). Indeed, economists have long treated technological phenomena as events transpiring inside a black box and, on the whole, have adhered rather strictly to a self-imposed

ordinance not to inquire too seriously into what transpires inside that box (Rosenberg, 1982).

Our views are informed by the concept of the black box as it pertains to the theoretical background of the sociology of science proposed by Latour (1987). Latour focuses on 'science in the making', which he differentiates from established scientific knowledge, or 'ready-made science'. His purpose is to understand how science is typically built: scientific statements are first presented to the scientific community in the form of a written document; then, they can be incorporated into other statements and quoted (or possibly ignored) by the scientific community; researchers discuss them, and these debates are deemed controversies; according to the degree of convergence between researchers, controversies can stop for good and lead to scientific facts (e.g., black boxes) or continue. The conclusion of a controversy is a rare event and happens when a statement 'is turned into facts by whoever borrows it later on. The discussion, at least on this point, is ended. A black box has been produced' (Latour, 1987, p. 41). Latour shows that, by being quoted regularly, the scientific statement takes a more and more stylized shape. It can thus be reduced to a unique sentence whose original author is no longer quoted. As a black box, the scientific statement reaches such a high degree of 'compactness' that it is extremely difficult to re-open the black box and return it to controversy. What for some researchers is a simple and closed black box may be riddled with highly sensitive and problematic issues for the researchers who originally concocted it.

The zoom-in and zoom-out approaches are part of our usual practice of science in the making. These approaches can fuel the controversies between members of the marketing community with an eye toward re-entrenchment (zoom out) and those who favor deeper examination (zoom in) by presenting alternatives that cannot simply be taken for granted depending on the researcher's agenda. Ultimately, whether the approach of zooming in, like zooming out, may itself achieve black-boxization depends on whether the propositions of a publication gain traction on a large scale; the fate of what one researcher says or writes is ultimately in the hands of other researchers (Latour, 1987). Collective interests are projected onto scientific frameworks, and the dynamic is such that it often transcends (or even runs counter to) the intentions of the original creator: like a sorcerer's apprentice, he has conjured something that is beyond his control. The end effect is that the scientific framework becomes iconic, its scientific dimension overshadowed by its newfound meaning.

## 3. Risk of black-boxization of the value co-creation concept

The question that we face as researchers of marketing science in the making is thus how to take into account the zoom-out proposal of Vargo and Lusch (2011) regarding value co-creation. If we let it stand without questioning it, then we further bolster its iconic status, carrying the risk of contributing to the premature black-boxization of this concept and thereby precluding any further controversy. Alternately, we may seek to re-open this black box, which is the aim of this article.

The extreme zoom-out movement led by Vargo and Lusch (2011) has led to a risk of premature black-boxization of the concept of value co-creation, whose proponents have come to dominate the field of marketing. One needs only to conduct a bit of bibliometrics to see how dominant SDL has become. Vargo & Lusch's, 2004 *Journal of Marketing* paper received the Harold H. Maynard Award, which recognizes the author(s) of the article that has made the greatest contribution to the advancement of marketing theory and thought. It is the most-cited article in the *Journal of Marketing* over the last decade (2000–2009). With over 3,370 citations in a nine-year period (2004–2013), this article ranks third in the number of citations among all scientific articles on marketing of all time. What is more, the co-option of Vargo and Lusch's strategy based on its inclusiveness (Lusch & Vargo, 2011) has given rise to the branding community's most influential discipline: 'The research stream initiated by Vargo and Lusch (2004) is building a worldwide community by co-opting researchers who adopt its all-encapsulating principle of

service logic. In developing this mindset, SDL can be interpreted as a covert brand strategy which is penetrating many fields while integrating previously existing research streams' (Cova et al., 2009, p. 572). Their initial aim with the SDL (Lusch & Vargo, 2011) was to provide a pre-theoretical foundation for a revised and transcending logic about exchange in society. The zoom-out surrounding value co-creation, however, has risen from pre-theorization to becoming a scientific statement. Now any economic exchange is one of value co-creation between actors (A2A): 'As indicated, we think the appropriate perceptual lens for that theory of the market is one of value co-creation through mutual service provision' (Vargo & Lusch, 2011, p. 186). Considering the prominence of these authors and of SDL in the field of marketing, we believe that the pre-theorization of value co-creation has escaped of its creators' control. The concept has been taken up by an ever-increasing number of researchers who, rather than holding it up to the light of inquiry, instead advocate its use for apprehending an extreme heterogeneity of situations. This has only further solidified the predominance of SDL in its current form and accelerated the risk of black-boxization of the value co-creation concept. Zooming out is becoming increasingly embraced by leaders in the marketing discipline, running the risk that the broad abstractions this approach generates will become the black boxes to which all future research will defer, just as it happened in business strategy and related fields with Porter's cluster theory (Martin & Sunley, 2003).

This is not the first time in the field of industrial marketing and B2B exchanges that a sweeping theoretical approach has been adopted by a large number of researchers. Such a movement took place in the 1970s/1980s with the development of the interaction model promoted by researchers at the IMP Group (Håkansson, 1982). However, unlike what is now happening with the concept of value co-creation, the interaction model was subjected to a constant back-and-forth between zoom in and zoom out, leading to other, different conceptualizations, such as the network approach (Axelsson & Easton, 1992; Håkansson & Snehota, 1989) and the ARA model (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). The IMP group work started with a critique of the traditional ways of examining industrial marketing and purchasing and with the establishment of four proposals upon which all scientific developments would be built (Håkansson, 1982). These proposals were deemed axiomatic and played the same role as the eight fundamental premises of SDL (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This led to the development of a vast literature of empirical zooming-in (see for example the size of the sample of case studies collected by the IMP group in the late 1970s) in order to unveil all the anomalies present in the universal scope theory, and ultimately led to the development of a specific model: the interaction model (Håkansson, 1982). Since then, based on these empirical studies and those which continually followed, a zoom-out (conceptualization aimed at embedding new dimensions or points of view) and zoom-in (empirical studies) combined process has taken place, consolidating and modifying the models and theories. This type of movement within the IMP group has been undertaken with a number of precautions, without disproportionately lofty ambitions, without the desire to generate and multiply concepts, and to some extent with apprehensions about the idea of building a grand theory. One might even describe this as a modest approach: 'We could say that our project is less about "zooming-in" on particular phenomena or subsets of economic activity and more about "zooming-out" in order to see them with a wider perspective [...]. We also did not wish to add to our already existing set of concepts or build a grand theory. Instead, we simply planned to examine some of our own experiences using a parsimonious and well established set of concepts: actors, contexts and interactions' (Ford, Cova, & Salle, 2010). This example of the IMP Group is not intended to be normative – that is, it is not intended to show us what to do – but it does help us to understand how a community of marketing researchers was able to avoid black-boxization of its ideas through a continuous zizo approach, rather than being locked in a zoom-out position.

#### 4. Opening the value co-creation black box

Black-boxization is, generally speaking, the conclusion of a controversy, meaning that scientists have reached a consensus. In the case of value co-creation, we consider the black-boxization to be premature because, rather than reaching consensus, the controversy has been virtually extinguished by the ascendancy of its originators (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a, 2011) (for a rare attempt to continue the controversy, see critical articles in a special issue of *Marketing Theory*, 2011). The precociousness of this black-boxization translates into an incoherence in the research that value co-creation has spawned: despite using all the same words and the same construct, researchers have offered such varied, if not opposing, reflections of reality that the only thing their work has in common is the construct itself. In addition, the level at which reality is observed or conceptualized by researchers has varied immensely: the 'granularity', to borrow a term from the hard sciences meaning the extent to which a system is broken down into small parts, has differed greatly from one study to the next. The concept serves as an umbrella – a brand, perhaps – to integrate all that the discipline has produced, no matter how idiosyncratic.

In order to highlight the impressive halo effect surrounding the scientific output of our discipline regarding the concept of value co-creation, it is necessary that we reopen the black box. To do this, we employ the observational approach put forward by Desjeux (1996) which allows for varied granularity in observing and conceptualizing reality. This methodological tool is based on the simple principle that what a researcher can observe on a certain level will disappear on another. This scale of observation is constructed from five levels (see Fig. 1). The macro-social level includes collective actors that structure society, such as institutions, cultures, generations, genres, social classes and lifestyles. The meso-social level deals with action systems such as the organization as a whole or power structures as, for example, in power struggles in industry standards. This is linked, but not limited to, with inter-organizational interactions. The micro-social level deals with the life of small groups, the micro-decisions they make, and the interactions that take place between members. This is linked, but not limited to, with intra-organizational interactions (at this level, the researcher can indeed focus on the networks). The individual level focuses on a single actor – his cognition, his motivations. Finally, the biological level deals with the brain and its activities – it is the observational level that is of interest for the neuro-marketing trend. For each level of the scale of observation, the granularity is different: from the smallest cells (biological level) to the broadest social classes (macro-social). And at each level, the unit of analysis of what is observed is different: from individual actors to the processes they are

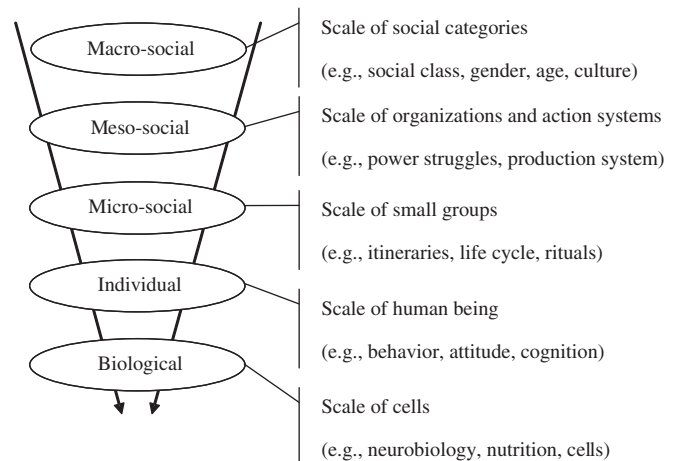


Fig. 1. The scale of observation.  
Adapted from Desjeux (1996, 2006).

involved in. In applying this scale of observation to analyze our discipline's scientific output in the area of value co-creation – a label used in the title of numerous articles – we hope to highlight the need to resume the controversy and to reopen this black box.

In so doing, we also answer Chandler and Vargo (2011, p. 36) claim about the need 'to better understand both the value co-creation process and the embedded, contextual nature of value' by using a multi-level perspective of context. Based on Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006) study of markets, they propose three levels of context – micro, meso, and macro – that coincide with three of Desjeux's levels of observation to organize how context frames exchange. However, their aim is not to analyze researchers' production but, to lay the foundation for an ecosystems perspective of markets.

Desjeux's (2006) scale highlights the effect of the level of observation (i.e., the choice of unit of observation) on the discovery of similarities (zooming in) and disparities (zooming out). It is a tool that helps the researcher assessing the zizo movement at a particular level of observation. Indeed, this movement can occur at each level independently of the chosen level. Thus, zooming out does not necessarily coincide with macro level, as zooming in does not coincide with micro level. To take an example from hard sciences, it is possible to have zooming in astronomy and zooming out in chemistry even if astronomy and chemistry deal with quite different scales. Using this scale led us to define our research question as follows: what is the level of observation that researchers have employed to study the subject of value co-creation? This question is divided into four sub-questions:

- What is the unit of observation used for studying offer?
- What is the unit of observation used for studying demand?
- What is the unit of observation used for studying the interaction between offer and demand?
- What is the unit of value that one measures?

For simplicity in presenting our results, we discuss units of offer, units of demand, and processes of interaction.

**5. Methodology**

In order to achieve the aim of keeping the controversy surrounding value co-creation open, we wanted to know what researchers in this field of inquiry had observed. Maintaining the controversy alive will allow future research on value co-creation to deepen the understanding of the concept, by exploring theoretical approaches likely to explain value co-creation other than SDL, which is still criticized even on its labeling. Indeed, Grönroos (2011) questions the label 'Dominant' in the service dominant logic as it leads to confusion and false impression of what this perspective is about. As he explains, a dominant logic has an objective of influencing the practices (p. 284) that can be compared to a management process that aims at linking strategy to operations so that the latter reflects the former. This leads to a perspective on business and marketing based on a service logic where other logics cannot apply.

We thus carried out a critical literature review of a specific sample of original research (Thorne, 2008), which took on the characteristics of meta-analysis (Schreiber, 2008) and can be summarized as 'the analysis of analyses' (Glass, 1976). Here, it has been applied in its qualitative form: 'Qualitative meta-analysis, also referred to as meta-synthesis, follows the same replicable procedures of a quantitative meta-analysis' (Park & Gretzel, 2007, p. 51). This method is suitable for cases where a large number of previous studies have been conducted on the same subject (Hunter, Schmidt, & Jackson, 1982). Considering the increasing amount of work on value co-creation, it is necessary to adopt an approach that highlights the structures that are repeated across a range of circumstances (Bass, 1995). Below, we detail the individual steps of our critical review of the literature.

Our analysis focuses equally on empirical and theoretical work and uses the scale of observation (Desjeux, 1996, 2006) as our interpretive framework (Fig. 1), which allows for determining the level of observation

**Table 1**  
Overview of the special issues on co-creation and/or SDL

Year	Journal/issues
2008	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i> , Volume 37, Issue 3 'The Transition from Product to Service in Business Markets'
2008	<i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i> , Volume 36, Issue 1 'Special Issue: Service-Dominant Logic: Continuing the Dialog'
2011	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i> , Volume 40, Issue 2 'Special issue on Service-Dominant Logic in Business Markets'
2011	<i>Marketing Theory</i> , Volume 11, Issue 3 'Special issue: Critical Perspectives on Co-Creation'
2012	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i> , Volume 41, Issue 1 'Value in Business and Industrial Marketing'

adopted by researchers. A critical review of the literature requires that specific and narrow criteria be selected in order to increase the reproducibility of the analysis (Park & Gretzel, 2007). Based on the seminal work of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and research by Grönroos (2011) on the core elements constituting value co-creation, we selected three criteria on which to assess the level of observation adopted: offer, demand, and process. The term 'process' should be understood as the way in which offer and demand meet, whether that be the market, as it is for Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), or interaction, as it is for Grönroos (2011). These criteria allow for the classification of studies according to level of observation (i.e., biological, individual, micro-social, meso-social, macro-social).

We chose to focus our analysis on articles from special issues of academic journals dedicated to value co-creation and/or service dominant logic (SDL). Among the five selected special issues, three were from *Industrial Marketing Management*, one from the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, and one from *Marketing Theory*. In total, 31 papers were included in the analysis (Table 1). The articles ranged from 2008 to 2012. Eighteen papers were published in *Industrial Marketing Management*, seven articles in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, and six in *Marketing Theory*. Seventeen articles among the thirty-one analyzed are of a theoretical nature, fourteen are of an empirical nature. We ensured to include in our sample research that was similar, in the sense that it dealt with the subject of value co-creation, but conducted in a variety of contexts.

To determine the level of observation in each study, we assessed the triptych of offer–demand–process according to the levels of observation proposed by Desjeux (1996, 2006). The results are presented chronologically in Table 2. Information is provided for each article (i.e., year of publication, information on the publishing journal, authors, main topic of the research). We also include the results of the meta-analysis (the level of observation employed in the study<sup>3</sup>, as well as the units of analysis for offer, demand, and process). We use the definition by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) for the units of offer and demand as collaborators in the value co-creation and competitors in the search for economic value. We complete this definition with the work of Grönroos (2011) posing that both units are very different in their aims and behaviors, where the offer side of the process is a facilitator of value and the demand side of the process is mainly a value in use creator.

**6. Results**

The results of the study are detailed in Table 2. In addition to the general information mentioned above, this table shows the main topic addressed by the authors, the level of observation as assessed by comparing the authors' approach to Desjeux's (1996, 2006) scale of observation, and the units of analysis used to capture value co-creation. An article is classified at a specific level of observation when the main

<sup>3</sup> For reasons of editorial efficiency, we assigned a number to each of the levels of observation proposed by Desjeux (1996, 2006): (1) biological, (2) individual, (3) micro-social, (4) meso-social, (5) macro-social.

**Table 2**  
Detailed results of the meta-synthesis.

Year	Journal	Authors	Main topic	Level of observation	Unit of analysis		
					Offer	Demand	Process
2008	IMM 37,3	Cova and Salle (2008)	The authors apply SDL framework to Solution Marketing to understand the co-creation process between a supplier and its customer. They find that the co-creation arises when the actors share their network with one another.	3	Supplier	Customer	Network relations
2008	IMM 37,3	Sheth and Sharma (2008)	By examining what changes and the reasons for changes in sales organizations, the authors observe a shift of focus from products to customers, sales automation and global account management.	3	Sales organization and sales people	Customers	Commerce/sales automation/global account management
2008	IMM 37,3	Vargo and Lusch (2008b)	The authors compare evolutions of mainstream marketing alongside BtoB marketing and other sub-disciplines in marketing and show how the focus has shifted from goods to services and from dyads to networks and thus involve the consideration of economic actors in value creation processes rather than any other denomination	4	Economic actor	Economic actor	Value creation
2008	JAMS 36,1	Abela and Murphy (2008)	The authors examine the ethical tensions and conflicts arising from a 'classical' marketing perspective, and how the SDL can help overcome this tendency enabling the ethical accountability in decision making to be taken into account	4	Supplier	Customer	Service encounter
2008	JAMS 36,1	Arnould (2008)	The author calls for an examination of the role of resource theories in an SDL perspective	4	Firm	Customer	Resources exchange
2008	JAMS 36,1	Ballantyne and Varey (2008)	The authors compile a genealogy of value and then explain how SDL can be an innovating answer to the renewal need of the marketing field. They argue that the network notion has an impact on a linear process from production to consumption thus putting an end to it. They also attach an IMP stream of research to LDS by its research tradition considering service relations between networks (of firms and/or customers)	4	Production	Consumption	Market
2008	JAMS 36,1	Gummeson (2008)	The author introduces the notion of network of activities that involve taking stakeholders into account. Based on the stakeholder concept, he proposes a many-to-many marketing where a balanced centrality gives stakeholders the right to have their needs and desires satisfied.	4	Stakeholder	Stakeholder	Network/Many-to-many
2008	JAMS 36,1	Maglio and Spohrer (2008)	The authors explain how SDL can be a philosophical basis for a developing Service Science, where the service system is the basic theoretical construct	4	Service system	Service system	Information, work, risk and good sharing
2008	JAMS 36,1	Payne et al. (2008)	The authors develop a conceptual framework to understand and manage value co-creation	4	Supplier	Customer	Service encounter
2008	JAMS 36,1	Vargo and Lusch (2008a)	The authors revise and defend several criticized points of SDL	4	Firm	Consumers	Service exchange
2011	IMM 40,2	Ballantyne et al. (2011)	The authors examine the concept and functioning of value propositions and how reciprocal value propositions can be fostered with a communicative interactive platform. They also examine how assumptions about market can prevent innovation	4	Focal Initiator/ Participant	Participant/ Initiator	Communicative interaction platform
2011	IMM 40,2	Baron and Warnaby (2011)	The authors examine the appropriateness of a resource-based view model of consumers in an organizational context by analyzing customers' messages posted on an organization support forum and leading a collaborative research process with its managers	2	Organization	Individual customer	Exchange episodes that produce relationship
2011	IMM 40,2	Berry (2011)	Based on past in-depth field studies, the author draws four lessons on interaction in the service industry	4	The server	The served	Service
2011	IMM 40,2	Flint et al. (2011)	The authors carry out two survey studies to test a model linking a supplier's customer value anticipation capacity to customer satisfaction and loyalty	2	Supplier	Customer	Value anticipation, satisfaction and loyalty
2011	IMM 40,2	Ford (2011)	The author compares SDL and IMP views on two conceptual issues that need further developments: the identity of the business actors involved and the nature of value creation and delivery	4	Business actor	Business actor	Network interactions and relations
2011	IMM 40,2	Purvis and Long (2011)	The authors use a distributed multi-agent literature coming from the information science discipline to explore interactions between market agents as depicted in SDL. They propose considering marketing practices as conversations where the market agent tends to be organized as a superior architecture agent	4	Initiator	Participant	Conversations
2011	IMM 40,2	Storbacka and Nenonen (2011)	The authors propose considering markets as configurations, where firms can alter the shape of markets using market scripting, aimed at creating shared market views between actors	4	Focal market actor	Market actor	Market scripting
2011	IMM 40,2	Vargo and Lusch (2011)	The authors try to make the marketing discipline take a step backward in order to comply with a more macro view of exchange systems, allowing them to introduce the notion of a complex and dynamic A2A relational value co-creation system.	4	Actor	Actor	Relational value co-creation in a complex and dynamic system

Table 2 (continued)

Year	Journal	Authors	Main topic	Level of observation	Unit of analysis		
					Offer	Demand	Process
2011	MT 11,3	Akaka and Chandler (2011)	The authors explore the social role concept and position it as a stability and change resource in a value network where there is value co-creation	3	Actor, its social role and social position	Actor, its social role and social position	Value network/Service encounter
2011	MT 11,3	Arvidsson (2011)	The authors explore the concept of ethic in the Aristotle sense to define coproduction value, where 'ethics' means the ability to create the values that make a multitude into a community.	3	Brand	Audience/Consumers	Exchange and use values
2011	MT 11,3	Echeverri and Skälén (2011)	The authors examine value creation interactive practices during a service encounter	3	Provider	Customer	Service encounter
2011	MT 11,3	Fisher and Smith (2011)	The authors try to understand theoretically and empirically the processes and subtleties between coproduction and co-creation from a consumer community point of view. They use an interpretive approach built on ethnographic interviews and netnography on Indiana Jones brand communities	3	Brand	Brand community	Experience
2011	MT 11,3	Grönroos (2011)	The author makes a distinction between firm production process as value facilitator and customer value-in-use creation process	4	Production/Provider	Customer's value creation/ Customer Brand community	Interaction
2011	MT 11,3	Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2011)	The authors identify individual roles within a brand community (providers and beneficiaries) and examine how a process of consumer resources transformation works in a co-consumption context	3	Brand	Brand community	Collective value creation
2012	IMM 41,1	Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola (2012)	The authors study the value co-creation process in the context of knowledge intensive business service. They interviewed 75 suppliers and 45 customers in an iterative research design where the collaborative activities of joint problem solving emerged. They also identified the roles and the resources mobilized by each actor in the process in order to create value-in-use.	4	Supplier of knowledge intensive business service	Customer	Value creation through joint problem solving
2012	IMM 41,1	Haas et al. (2012)	The authors study the role of the sales function in the process of creating value with the customer. They create a framework of value creation where the tasks of the sales function are detailed, through 43 interviews with sales managers and salespeople, within the steps of jointness, balanced initiative, interacted value and socio-cognitive construction.	3	Sales function (sales managers and salespeople)	Customer	Value-creating process in business relationships
2012	IMM 41,1	Lindgreen et al. (2012)	After reviewing the literature on value creation ranging up to and around 2005 and post 2005, the authors propose a process model of value orchestration in business and industrial markets that goes through value analysis, creation and delivery and is supported by building, leveraging and structuring activities.	4	Businesses and industrial marketers	Buyer	Value analysis, creation and delivery
2012	IMM 41,1	O'Cass and Viet Ngo (2012)	The authors evaluate the role of market orientation, product innovation and marketing capabilities on the creation of superior performance, relationship, and co-creation value. They conducted a quantitative study across 155 large Australian firms, among which the majority of the participants were marketing managers. They found that product innovation capability and marketing capability partially mediate the relationship between a firm's market orientation and its ability to create value for customers.	4	Large supplier firm	Customer	Creation of superior performance, relationship, and co-creation value
2012	IMM 41,1	Salomonson et al. (2012)	The authors led a micro-analysis study of conversations between customer service representatives (CSR) and customers that helped them understand which communicative skills the CSR needs to possess (attentiveness, perceptiveness, and responsiveness) in order to help the customer reach his interactional goals (information seeking, ordering, change and complaining).	3	Customer service representative	Customer	Interactive value creation
2012	IMM 41,1	Sullivan et al. (2012)	The authors study the effects of value creation competence of the selling firm on its sales performance. This competence is notably mediated by strategic account management and the perception of the relationship held between buyer and seller.	4	Seller	Buyer	Sales
2012	IMM 41,1	Toon et al. (2012)	The authors conceptualized the creation of value in the relationship process by developing and testing a relational value model in non-equity strategic alliances in which specific asset investment and technical exchange as value creating interactions play a mediating role.	3	Architect	Building contractor	Relationship interactions within non-equity alliance

object under study corresponds to Desjeux's definition of a level of observation (1996, 2006). Once the level of observation is assessed, we then determine which units are employed to study value co-creation. To help reproduction of the protocol, we present an example of the coding process. In Toon, Robson, and Morgan (2012), the authors study how actors in a dyad build a relationship that will create value for

both. Their focus is on non-equity strategic alliances as a context for interactions that create value. Putting into perspective the context of the construction industry and the relationship built between the actors their research falls within the definition of Desjeux's micro level of observation (2006). In this article, the units of analysis are detailed in the methodological section (p. 190): the offer is the 'building

contractor'; the demand is the 'architect' that both share 'specific asset investment and technical exchange'.

We highlight three levels of observation in particular (see the column labeled 'level of observation' in Table 2). The meso-social level (level 4 in Table 2) covers all items that observe value co-creation within action systems. These action systems include both the organization as a whole as well as the industry or market. The micro-social level (level 3 in Table 2) covers settings where individual actors are operating in a group. This level thus concerns, among the articles identified in this study, interactions and relationships between individual actors forming a community. The individual level (level 2 in Table 2), meanwhile, is concerned with the mental functioning (representations, emotions and attitudes) of an individual actor, without taking into consideration that actor's interactions and exchanges with other individuals or a larger community. The level of observation thus defined, we now turn to the labeling of the units of analysis. Each label refers to a particular conceptual field, highlighting the abundance of theoretical inspirations used by the authors to understand value co-creation. Both at the level of the actors involved and of the processes that were analyzed, one can observe extreme heterogeneity. So, rather than defer to a shared set of scientifically established concepts for direction, the researchers rely on their own understanding of the concept of value co-creation, presuming that this understanding is representative of a common understanding. Below, we present the distribution of units of analysis according to level of observation.

### 6.1. The meso-social level of observation

The meso-social level of observation was adopted in 19 of the selected articles. The main subject of the articles at this level is the discipline of marketing as a field of investigation and a complex system comprising many actors (Ballantyne, Frow, Varey, & Payne, 2011; Ballantyne & Varey, 2008; Gummesson, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008a, 2008b, 2011). The authors made use of units of analysis whose labeling was by choice very broad and abstract, enabling them to include a gamut of theoretical and conceptual areas in substantiating their conceptualization of value co-creation. The offer unit may be identified as 'actor', 'economic actor', 'focal initiator or participant', 'stakeholder', 'firm' or 'production'. The demand unit might be 'actor', 'economic actor', 'initiator or participant', 'stakeholder', 'consumers' or even 'consumption'. Interaction processes include the following units: 'relational value co-creation in a complex and dynamic system', 'value creation', 'communicative interaction platform', 'network/many-to-many', 'service exchange', and 'market'.

At the meso-social level of observation, some authors focused on more specific subjects for investigation, notably the service system (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012; Ballantyne et al., 2011; Berry, 2011; Grönroos, 2011; Maglio & Spohrer, 2008; Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008b). The service system thus becomes a configuration favoring value co-creation — an approach to the market based on services promoting the construction of a network, resource exchange, and dialog during service encounters. Units of offer include: 'economic actor', 'service system', 'supplier', 'focal initiator/participant', the 'server', 'production/provider' or 'supplier of knowledge-intensive business service'. Units of demand might be: 'economic actor', 'customer', 'participant/initiator', 'the served', or 'customer's value creation/customer'. The interaction processes studied encompass a vast range of units: 'value creation', 'information', 'work', 'risk-' and 'good-sharing', 'service encounter', 'communicative interaction platform', and 'service', 'interaction', 'value creation through joint problem-solving'.

Some authors specifically take up the market and its functioning as the subject of their investigation (Ford, 2011; Lindgreen, Hingley, Grant, & Morgan, 2012; O'Cass & Viet Ngo, 2012; Purvis & Long, 2011; Storbacka & Nenonen, 2011; Sullivan, Peterson, & Krishnan, 2012). These authors appear to associate with this subject a susceptibility to the marketing practices of actors, whether the scope be strategic (e.g., market orientation, innovation policy or preferred approach to

analysis, creation of or delivery of value), relational or interactional. Units of offer include 'business actor', 'initiator', 'focal market actor', 'supplier of knowledge-intensive business service', 'businesses and industrial marketers', and 'large supplier firm'. Demand units include 'business actor', 'participant', and 'market actor', 'customer', and 'buyer'. The interaction process oscillates between 'network', 'conversations', 'market scripting', 'value creation through joint problem-solving', 'value analysis', 'creation and delivery', and 'sales'. Lastly, two more-specific subjects of investigation are mobilized at the meso-social level of observation: resources (Arnould, 2008) and ethics (Abela & Murphy, 2008). The study of value co-creation by way of resources implies integration of consumer resource allocation models into organizational processes. The units of analysis covered here are: 'firm' (unit of offer), 'customer' (unit of demand) and 'resources exchange' (interaction process). The ethical approach, meanwhile, is more transversal, calling on market actors (organizations, stakeholders, and marketers as a function) to consider their strategic orientation and corresponding practices from an ethical angle. The units of analysis are 'supplier', 'customer' and 'service encounter'.

### 6.2. The micro-social level of observation

The micro-social level of observation was adopted in nine articles in our sample. The primary focus of this level of observation is on interactions between members of small groups, which are specifically studied through the prism of services. It is through these interactions that value is created. These interactions include brief encounters (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Salomonson, Åberg, & Allwood, 2012) but may also constitute the development of long-term relationships (Akaka & Chandler, 2011; Toon et al., 2012), and typically concern the individual actors seeking to attain a given social status, or to acquire or implement competencies. They may also concern the interaction process, with actors sharing and combining resources. Units of offer are: 'the actor', 'the actor's social role and social position', 'the provider', 'the customer service representative', and 'the architect'. Units of demand are: 'the actor', 'the actor's social role and social position', 'the customer', and 'the building contractor'. Interaction processes studied are: 'value network', 'service encounter', 'interactive value creation', and 'relationship interactions'.

Researchers were also drawn to another subject at this level — the community of consumers (Arvidsson, 2011; Fisher & Smith, 2011; Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011). The focus here is on the lived experiences, practices, and the roles played within the community. The unit of offer is the brand, while the unit of demand is essentially the brand community, which is often referred to as 'the audience'. The interaction processes are varied and concern exchange and use values, experience, and collective value creation. The two other subjects studied at the micro-social level concern the sales function and the network of individuals both inside and outside the organization (Cova & Salle, 2008; Haas, Snehota, & Corsaro, 2012; Sheth & Sharma, 2008). The units of offer are 'sales organization and salespeople', 'supplier', and 'sales function' (sales managers and salespeople); the unit of demand is the customer; and interaction processes are identified as 'sales', 'network relations', and 'the value-creating process in business relationships'.

### 6.3. The individual level of observation

Articles by Baron and Warnaby (2011) and Flint, Blocker, and Boutin (2011) are situated at this level of analysis, corresponding perfectly to Desjeux's (2006) target subject of a single actor in terms of the actor's cognition, motivations, and mental context. The authors concentrate on the customer and his attitude, motivation and behavior with regard to both his relationship with the firm and the value proposed by the firm. The units employed for these studies are: 'supplier' and 'organization' (offer); 'customer' (demand); 'exchange episodes and

relationships', and 'value anticipation, satisfaction and loyalty' (interaction process).

## 7. Synthesis of results

It can be seen in Table 2 that the level of observation most frequently adopted by researchers when they are interested in value co-creation is the meso-social level. At this level, the focus tends to be on the marketing discipline and its evolution. Several studies, however, have directed their inquiry at the market, particularly in the service sector. Other studies carried out at the micro-social level focus on interaction between actors. It is a level of observation where the notion of community is prevalent, as can be seen where authors sought to understand the experiences of brand communities. Finally, the level least frequently used by researchers in our sample was that of the individual. We would like to point out one article, by Ford (2011), which professes to carry out analysis at three levels of observation: meso-social, micro-social, and individual. The author explains very clearly that, as he understands it, the business actor may be an individual, a sub-group or a company.

## 8. Discussion: between pre-theoretical foundation and metaphor

The synthesis of the results presented in Table 2 supports our proposition that our discipline risks premature black-boxization of the concept of value co-creation. Value co-creation, rather than providing an end-all conceptualization of reality, functions more as a zooming out metaphor that operates at all levels of observation, and as a building-block of a theoretical foundation. This raises questions regarding the willingness professed by some advocates of the concept of value co-creation to nullify the differences between levels of observation; it is a willingness that, in effect, serves as a vehicle for this premature black-boxization.

As a metaphor, the value co-creation perspective helps researchers to 'construct the world and give meaning to reality' (Alajoutsijärvi, Eriksson, & Tikkanen, 2001, p. 93). However, no metaphor is without its flaws: 'every metaphor is selective, it offers one perspective, but it leaves out the others' (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2001, p. 97). One way of seeing can also be a way of not seeing. In the same vein, it appears that the value co-creation concept highlights and accentuates certain elements of a studied phenomenon to the disadvantage of others. In particular, it focuses on the service dimension ('for mutual service provision' according to Vargo & Lusch, 2011) of what is to be observed, even if this dimension is not observable in the phenomenon when the level of observation changes. Seen from afar (zoom out) and at a meso level of observation of exchange, everything becomes service, but this is not what is described by the articles adopting the micro-social and individual levels of observation, nor even by some at the meso-social level. And yet all describe their subject as value co-creation. But again, the metaphorical power of the value co-creation concept obscures any relevance of considering the level of observation. Faithfully zooming out, the researcher does not concern himself with other levels of observation. On the contrary, their mere possibility is seen as disruptive – a thing to be banished so that the black box might be closed once and for all. Thus Baron and Warnaby (2011) insist on the notion of a continuum, where the frontier between consumer and business market contexts (and the behavior within them) may be blurred rather than strictly dichotomous. This position is also supported by Wilson (2000), who, in a review of this area states that insights can be gained from regarding individuals and organizations as axiomatically similar and comparable (not the same), rather than treating them as empirically, theoretically and conceptually different. Vargo and Lusch (2011), in their definition of key components of an ecosystem, ignore the different levels of observation in reference not only to the senses, but also language and symbols, as well as spatial and temporal structures. It is thus impossible to know whether they are referring to the belief system of a company, a system, an organization, a group or an individual when they are

speaking, for example, of symbols. Similarly, Payne et al. (2008) place the individual level and the meso-social level on the same plane.

Not all authors, however, are comfortable with this idea of doing away with varying levels of observation. For example, focusing on the firm, Arnould (2008) calls for specific examination at different levels of observation using the appropriate theoretical tools. Arnould (2008) offers evidence that the resource-based theory takes the firm as a whole that possesses skills, knowledge and cultural competencies; organizational ecology focuses on the firm as the unit of analysis within a resource space; cluster theory understands the firm in terms of its geographic and social relationships with external players; and interpersonal resource exchange theory and, more specifically, its renewal, operates more on a micro-social level. Thus, one could imagine a similar approach to value co-creation that takes different levels of observation into account.

Arguing for inclusion of different levels of observation of value co-creation indeed seems quite pertinent. As our results show, the majority of researchers are not comfortable with the idea of embracing all levels in the same model, the same research, the same observation, or the same labeling. Only the metaphorical power of the concept and the academic prominence of its originators may therefore explain the heavy reliance on value co-creation in the articles we analyzed. The declared willingness among the concept's supporters to erase the differences between levels of observation does not suit an interest in theory building. Defending against certain attacks, Lusch and Vargo (2011, p. 1305) argued that their purpose 'was to provide a pre-theoretic foundation for a revised and transcending logic about exchange in society. It represented a logic that we saw emerging in marketing scholarly thought, practice and education. However, the overriding purpose was to be fairly abstract and to begin to construct a lexicon to function as a foundation for theory building and eventually empirical testing'. The authors themselves stress that this is an abstract pre-theoretical foundation, and one that asserts their own interpretation of recent developments in marketing scholarship, practice and education. It is anchored in the meso level of observation and, despite encompassing the individual and micro levels, neglects to integrate them or really even take them into account.

Faced with such an approach, one may consider it fallacious to believe that, in order to perceive a pattern, an order, a logic, it is necessary to be detached from capricious details and embrace a panoramic view of vast phenomena (Tarde, 1999). And to believe that social principals trace their source to some very general fact is to believe that men may meddle in them without consequences in the evolutionary law that guides and therefore determines them. The same principle is at work in the reasoning promoting zooming out on market exchange. As a result, locking into a zoom-out position on economic exchange in our discipline risks leading to a reduction of the vast heterogeneity of exchange phenomena and an inability to account for their potential complexity.

## 9. Conclusion

Like all scientific disciplines, the marketing field is an arena for many debates and controversies in which concepts and theories are challenged by researchers. These debates and controversies may be interrupted, temporarily or permanently, when the theories or concepts are deemed by the scientific community of a discipline to be facts exempted from close (re)examination. It is a process that has come to be called black-boxization (Latour, 1987).

With the abstraction approach of zooming out advocated by Vargo and Lusch (2011) by way of the concept of value co-creation, there exists a risk of premature black-boxization of the concept; however, we believe the controversy on the subject to be far from over. By showing how the levels of observation and units of analysis adopted by researchers on value co-creation vary, this article sheds light on the current inability of the concept to account for the heterogeneity of the reality of exchanges and, in particular, BtoB exchanges. The concept indeed functions more as a metaphor than as a genuine scientific



construct. In order to forestall the value co-creation black box, we propose a scale for observing reality that allows any researcher to zoom in to better determine the level of granularity that suits the inquiry at hand. This tool is part of a controlled methodological relativism enabling our scientific community to continue the debate over value co-creation and thereby develop strong concepts on which future scientific developments may be built.

The implications of our research are more concerned with the management of research than the management of organizations. More precisely, they concern the management of research in the field of BtoB exchanges. If the community of researchers in BtoB marketing wishes to avoid the risk of a black-boxization of concepts, and particularly that of value co-creation, our work introduces a pragmatic tool that may help. Reflection on the use of the scale of observation affords a dual approach (Desjeux, 2006). First, this tool enables one to completely let go of any dogmatic approach while ensuring the validity of the results of a study. This tool then facilitates accounting for reality by means of a comprehensive approach — a permanent deconstruction of reality and of interpretations that facilitates the goal of a comprehensive understanding of a particular phenomenon. The phenomenon can be analyzed at any level of the scale. For example, to study the concept of power, one might address the macro level (that of power itself), the meso-social and micro-social (to capture power relations), or the individual level (to capture authority). No single level is inherently more revelatory than another. And at each level, researchers can zoom in and out (zizo) on the reality of the phenomenon and its conceptual representation.

Employed in the context of BtoB exchanges, this tool allows one to change the level of observation in order to see other aspects of a given reality. Where one level has been chosen for observing a phenomenon such as value co-creation, other levels may be used to provide the context or even context for the context (Askegaard & Troppe Linnet, 2011). This ensures that the diversity of approaches to value co-creation is maintained such that we may continue to build our understanding of phenomena without being locked prematurely into an overarching abstraction.

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**Julie Leroy** is Lecturer at the University of La Réunion. Her research activities focus on value co-creation, the actor-network theory and the impact of time and space on ethnographic data and on consumption phenomena.

**Bernard Cova** is Professor of Marketing at Kedge Business School Marseille in France and Visiting Professor at Bocconi University in Milan, Italy. Since the early 1990s, he has participated in postmodernist streams of consumer research and marketing, focusing on a tribal approach. He is also a B-to-B marketing researcher, primarily in the field of project marketing.

**Robert Salle** is Professor of Business Marketing at the EM LYON Business School, France. His research activities focus on project marketing and solution selling. He also lectures and consults on BtoB marketing for industrial companies.