

Caregiving customer value co-creation involving animal companions as vulnerable actors

Purpose

Customers play an active role in value co-creation through resource integration obtained by a range of activities and interactions. Although it was recently identified as an emerging area in service research, little is known about value co-creation in service settings involving vulnerable actors. Vulnerability emerges from a state of powerlessness and the inability to co-create value in consumption situations, which leads service exchange goals to not be realized, and it is often accompanied by dependency. As other actors in a service ecosystem often take a pivotal role in value creation for vulnerable actors, a triadic analysis of this phenomenon is necessary.

Triads are the smallest unit of analysis in service ecosystems. A service triad is a group of three actors that are directly connected to each other to ensure service provision and value co-creation. This paper studies service triads that are characterized by a customer acting as an intermediary between the service provider and a vulnerable actor. The vulnerable actor is personally linked to the customer by a caregiving relationship, cannot autonomously participate in service provision (and value co-creation) and therefore needs the caregiving customer's support. We define caregiving customer value co-creation behavior in triadic service settings as customer participation behavior that is necessary for successful value co-creation and manifests in customers' behavioral performance in the co-creative sphere of service provision (the service encounter) based on cognitive and emotional processes. This behavior can occur in various activities, and it results in value outcomes for both the caregiving customer and the vulnerable actor.

One example of such a triadic constellation emerges in the context of services for animal companions (e.g., veterinary services), as people build close relationships with their animal companions and often treat them similarly to other family members. According to Fineman's vulnerability theory, vulnerable subjects are characterized by episodic or permanent dependency on others. Similarly, animal companions are dependent on humans to provide them care and shelter. Moreover, they are not able to vocalize their will, placing them in a disadvantageous position in service encounters. Hence, we consider them vulnerable actors in triadic service settings.

In consideration of recent research, there is still a lack of empirical research regarding the identification and conceptualization of individual value co-creation activities of caregiving customers (owners), who use services for and with their animal companion and serve as mediators in service interactions with the service provider and their animal companion. Hence, this research aims to explore caregiving customer value co-creation involving animal companions as (non-human) vulnerable actors.

Methodology

Study 1 follows a two-step procedure, employing two different qualitative approaches (interviews and observations) to identify caregiving customer value co-creation activities. Study 2 serves to empirically test a higher-order structure of caregiving customer participation behavior in value co-creation and to test for differences regarding customer and service characteristics (questionnaire survey; $n = 680$). The nomological validity of the higher-order constructs was assessed by investigating the potential drivers and outcomes of caregiving customer participation behavior.

Findings

The two-step qualitative analysis revealed eight caregiving customer value co-creation activities towards the service provider: information seeking, information sharing, decision making, cooperation, observation, intervention, personal interaction, and socializing. In addition, data from the interviews and observations revealed four activities towards the animal companion: functional behavior, emotional support, physical support, and supervision. Moreover, the two-step qualitative approach allowed for identification of not only individual caregiving customer value co-creation activities but also those that occurred simultaneously or successively. This was possible because virtual ethnography substantiates the complexity of interactions in triadic service settings. The results of Study 2 suggest the existence of a higher-order structure of caregiving customer value co-creation behavior. Hence, caregiving customer participation behavior towards the service provider and the animal companion are second-order constructs that consist of various activities. There exist significant differences in individual caregiving customers' activities regarding gender, age, type of service and animal companion. Moreover, caregiving customer participation behavior is influenced by emotional attachment and has a positive effect on value outcomes for both the customer and the animal

companion (perceived relational value, perceived economic value and perceived emotional value for the animal companion).

Contribution

The present study contributes to research in three important ways. First, it extends and enriches theory on customer value co-creation behavior by identifying various activities and a new type of behavior in the context of caregiving customer value co-creation. Second, this work provides innovative insights for differences in customer value co-creation behavior regarding specific customer and service characteristics, proving that different customers obviously do not perform all activities equally. Third, it expands current knowledge on customer value co-creation by showing that caregiving customer value co-creation behavior is not only beneficial for customers themselves, but even for the vulnerable actors involved.