

# Citizen agency in value co-creation processes – a literature review

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to address citizen agency in value co-creation (VCC) in the context of public administration. It asks how citizen agency is presented in the VCC discussion to deepen the understanding of VCC as a dynamic interplay between public organisations and citizens adopting various forms of agency.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study utilises the integrative literature review method, applying a two-round search process. Altogether, 40 scientific articles were subjected to content analysis to acquire a deeper understanding of citizen agency.

**Findings** – The VCC discussion represents citizens as resource integrators, experiencers, co-producers and beneficiaries. In addition, the study raises the questions of activity and voluntariness and the level of involvement linked to citizen agency in VCC. The connection between the VCC discussion and collective-side citizen activity is weak because the democratic aspects of the discussion are limited.

**Research limitations/implications** – This article contributes to the VCC discussion by painting a clear picture of citizen agency, which is also linked to the democratic essence and potential of VCC. It also identifies the potential weaknesses of the VCC conceptual debate.

**Originality/value** – This article sheds light on citizen agency in the context of the VCC discussion, which is an understudied issue in public administration research. The present study helps to enhance the discussion concerning the democratic potential of VCC.

**Keywords** Value co-creation, Public values, Citizen agency

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Interest in citizen participation and democratic innovations has increased in recent decades. There is a growing trend highlighting citizen agency in delivering better service outcomes (Acar *et al.*, 2023). The evolution of different citizen roles is connected to the fact that despite their development timeline, public administration paradigms occur simultaneously and overlap. Contemporary public administration paradigms have identified various citizen roles, including voter, beneficiary, patient, client, customer, service user, partner, co-producer and co-creator, but citizen agency goes beyond predefined roles, encompassing the ability to initiate, negotiate and influence co-creation outcomes (e.g. Thomas, 2013; van Eijk and Steen, 2022). Citizens can also adopt a more critical role in relation to public administration by becoming activists, who play an important role in terms of the functions of the democratic system and highlight citizens' self-deployment (van Eijk and Steen, 2022). Simultaneously,

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there is growing research interest in value co-creation (VCC; e.g. Cluley and Radnor, 2021; Osborne, 2018). The central premises are that value cannot be merely delivered to citizens by public service organisations (PSOs) and that citizens play a crucial role in the process (Osborne et al., 2016). Nevertheless, a comprehensive understanding of this role remains elusive. This article provides an overview of VCC and connects it with the public administration research discussion on various citizen roles. Focusing specifically on VCC, we recognise the multiplicity of concepts around it, such as co-creation and citizen co-production, which may be used simultaneously and be complementary (e.g. Palumbo, 2016).

We also note that a wide stream of literature focusing on co-creation and co-production has observed their relation to, for example, highlighting the importance of democratic issues (e.g. Ansell et al., 2023; Turnhout et al., 2020). We view the “co-paradigm” as a key element in addressing the challenges confronting public sector organisations: diminishing trust, citizens’ worries about the “value for money” in public services and the strain of public sector austerity (Dudau et al., 2019). However, the general co-paradigm is so inclusive that the “what”, “who” and “how” – questions related to co-production and co-creation – spread in several analytical directions (Nabachi et al., 2017). While co-creation and co-production refer to various forms and encounters between citizens and public service or policy processes, VCC highlights the client–service provider nexus, where VCC becomes “an inalienable component of public service delivery that places the experiences and knowledge of the service user at the heart of the effective public service design and delivery” (Osborne et al., 2013, p. 146). In contrast to co-creation and co-production processes, which may be citizen-initiated activities, VCC focuses more on the process of interaction that either creates or destroys value, even in the absence of active consent to participate in the process. This article focuses specifically on the VCC discussion to extend the understanding of the issue.

The recent discussion has overlooked the profound consideration of citizen agency in VCC (e.g. Osborne, 2018), and there is a lack of a profound understanding of and theoretical focus on citizen agency that clearly gathers different viewpoints together. This defective picture of citizens’ roles and agency is even more complicated because VCC, in practice, can include a wide range of processes.

This integrative literature review article aims to bridge the aforementioned gap by answering the following research question: *How is citizens’ agency presented in the VCC discussion?* In the present study, we observe agency through Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998, p. 970) definition: as the *temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.*

This article aims to deepen the understanding of the dynamic interplay between public organisations and citizens in their various roles in service encounters in which value creation is an inalienable element of the service process as value-in-use (see Vargo and Lusch, 2008). We argue that scrutinising citizen agency also contributes to the democratic essence and potential of VCC. By broadening the scope of citizen agency in VCC beyond the individual service user position, we can identify the potential weak points of the VCC conceptual debate.

Practical and policy implications highlight the importance of paying close attention even to micro-level interactions between citizens and professionals as critical moments of value creation not only on the individual level but also on the organisational and institutional levels.

Regarding the structure of this article, we first briefly introduce the reader to the premises of the VCC discussion. Second, we describe the data search and analysis process and provide an overview of the 40 reviewed articles. Third, we present the analysis results by providing an overview of citizen roles and then introducing six categories that arose from the data. Finally, we discuss the results and conclude the article by introducing future research propositions and managerial implications.

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## The role of citizens in value co-creation

The VCC discussion originates from research concerning private sector actors, partially explaining how citizen roles are perceived in it. The central idea of VCC for a citizen is often that of a service user at the centre of service processes. In contrast, in goods-dominant logic, value creation is seen as a process in which the service user's activity or contribution is irrelevant. Value is created as a result of a production process (value-in-exchange). Service-dominant logic (SDL) emphasises that value is realised only in the service user's life, when they use the service (value-in-use; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Therefore, the service's value cannot be captured by the service's characteristics because the perceived value is situationally dependent (Osborne, 2018). The service user creates value either by using the service in their own way (value creation) or by sharing the creation process with service providers (VCC; Osborne *et al.*, 2021).

VCC is central to public service logic (PSL), which introduces the ideals of SDL into the public sector context. In PSL, service user individuality and the experiential nature of service value are central (Osborne, 2020). PSL holds that a PSO cannot produce value by itself but can only create value offerings to co-create value with service users. PSL also recognises the ecosystemic nature of public services formed by different operators and service entities that aim to meet the expectations of service users while creating public value (Osborne, 2018; Osborne *et al.*, 2022; Trischler *et al.*, 2023).

Although VCC places citizens at the centre by making it possible for them to define the value of a service, the picture of citizen agency is unclear. While the viewpoints of practitioners and service organisations are often emphasised (e.g. Cui and Aulton, 2023), understanding the various citizen roles in VCC processes is key to understanding the democratic potential of VCC. Against this background, the present study integrates different perspectives concerning citizen agency. Thus, by drawing a comprehensive picture, this study adds to the theoretical discussion on VCC in the public administration context, which we see as even more emergent. Therefore, the present study also contributes more widely to the discussion of the evolution of citizen roles in that context.

## Methods

### *Conducting literature review*

The VCC discussion originated from research concentrating on the private sector and emphasising the citizen role of a customer or client of certain services. Against this background, the present study draws attention to citizens' forms of agency in relation to public administration and services, which, at least in principle, are democratically governed.

Methodically, the present study adopts an integrative literature review method (e.g. Whittemore and Knafel, 2005) to build a synthesis and examine citizen roles and agency. The review integrates studies with various methodological approaches from different public policy fields and includes both empirical and conceptual studies. The review is also descriptive because it aims to determine how different definitions manifest in the existing VCC literature. We consider this process of data search and analysis an iterative process that may be shaped by notions derived from the analysis.

The data search and analysis process, described in detail in Table 1, started with the formulation of the search statement. After some test searches, we noticed that the number of articles discussing VCC in public administration journals would be limited. In addition, we found many terms pertaining to citizens (e.g. "service users", "patients", "beneficiaries" and "customers"). For these two reasons, we decided to create a general search statement and then manually screen each article if they discussed citizen agency and VCC from some viewpoint. The search statement "co-creation of value" OR "value co-creation" was applied to the Web of Science, Ebsco and Scopus databases. Generally, important criteria for inclusion were a focus on scientific articles in public administration research, connection to VCC and connection to citizen roles. For the quality of the study, we decided to exclude journals that were suspected to be

**Table 1.** Data search process*First round of data search and screening**Identification*

Database search (full text): “co-creation of value” OR “value co-creation”

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Web of science <i>n</i> = 106   | Limitations for the search                   |
| Business Source Premier (EBSCO) | - Journal articles                           |
| <i>n</i> = 58                   | - Written in English                         |
| Scopus <i>n</i> = 46            | - The research area of public administration |

*Records identified n* = 210*Screening*

|                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Records after duplicates removed | Exclusion criteria   |
| <i>n</i> = 128                   | - If not journal article (e.g. editorials excluded)            |
| Records screened on titles       | - If journal not addressing the field of public administration |
| - Records excluded <i>n</i> = 52 |  |
| - <i>Records included n</i> = 76 |  |

*Eligibility*

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Records screened on abstracts                        | Exclusion criteria   |
| - Records excluded <i>n</i> = 22                     | - If suspected as predator journal                               |
| - <i>Records included n</i> = 54                     | - If having slim or non-existent connection to value co-creation |
|  | - If article not addressing public administration                |
| Records screened on full texts                       | Exclusion criteria   |
| - Full-text articles excluded                        | - If having slim or non-existent connection to value co-creation |
| <i>n</i> = 28  | - If not addressing the role of citizens                         |
| - <i>Records included in the final review n</i> = 26 |  |

*Second round of data search (after the analysis of first round’s results)**Identification*

Database search (full text): (“co-production” OR “co-creation”) AND value

|                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Web of Science <i>n</i> = 180     | Limitations for the search                   |
| EBSCOhost Ultimate = 99           | - Journal articles                           |
| Scopus = 63                       | - Written in English                         |
| <i>Records identified n</i> = 342 | - The research area of public administration |

*Screening*

|                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Records after duplicates removed  | Exclusion criteria   |
| <i>n</i> = 224                    | - If not journal article (e.g. editorials excluded)            |
| Records screened on titles        | - If journal not addressing the field of public administration |
| - Records excluded <i>n</i> = 99  | - If involved in the first round of database search            |
| - <i>Records included n</i> = 125 |  |

*Eligibility*

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Records screened on abstracts                        | Exclusion criteria  |
| - Records excluded <i>n</i> = 72                     | - if no access to article   |
| - <i>Records included n</i> = 53                     | - If having slim or non-existent connection to value co-creation/value co-production in the context of public administration (PA) |
|  | - If not published in the same time period than the 1st round   |
|  | - If suspected predator journal   |
| Records screened on full texts                       | Exclusion criteria  |
| - Full-text articles excluded                        | - If having slim or non-existent connection to value co-creation/value co-production  |
| <i>n</i> = 39  | - If not addressing the role of citizens  |
| - <i>Records included in the final review n</i> = 14 |   |

*Altogether 40 reviewed articles*, of which 13 can be defined as conceptual, and 27 as studies with clear empirical example *Public Management Review* (22), *Journal of Public Sector Management* (2), *the Journal of Nonprofit and Public Sector Marketing* (2), *Public Money and Management* (4), *the Australian Journal of Public Administration* (2), *the International Journal of Healthcare Management* (1), *the International Journal of Public Administration* (2) and *Public Policy and Administration* (2), *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance* (1), *Policy and Politics* (1) and *Administration and Society* (1)

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work

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predatory journals [1]. After the initial processes of title screening and estimation of eligibility (by reviewing the abstracts and full texts), we ended up with 26 articles for further analysis.

After the initial analysis, we noticed that the terms “value co-production” or “co-production of value” also pertain to VCC. This realisation seems logical because of the similarity and interconnectedness of the two concepts (see Osborne *et al.*, 2016). Against this background, and to ensure the validity of the present study, we decided to run another round of database search, supplementing the previous round by adding articles using the term “value co-production” to the review. This also made it possible for us to test the validity of the first-round search statement. In the second database search round, we used the search statement “(‘co-production’ OR ‘co-creation’) AND value”. The second round followed the same phases and criteria of exclusion and inclusion (see Table 1) as the first round, providing us with 14 additional articles for the final review. Altogether, we reviewed 40 research articles [2], 13 of which can be defined as conceptual and 27 as studies with clear empirical examples.

Many of the empirical studies dealt with one policy field, while some dealt with more than one policy field. The following fields were dealt with in the studies: healthcare or public health (14 studies), social services (2), children and youth services (2), employment services (2), environment (2), community development (2), safety (2), public legal services (1), social insurance and security (2), tax agencies (1) and public sector strategic development (1). The journal *Public Management Review*, with 22 articles, stood out as the major outlet for VCC discussion in the public sector context (see Table 1).

The aforementioned search process had some limitations. For example, it might have left out articles that do in fact discuss VCC but use other terms for it. In addition, limiting the search to public administration journals only may have resulted in the exclusion of some articles that consider public administration cases but were published in journals concerning some other academic fields. However, we consider this limitation justified due to our aim of understanding citizen agency, particularly in the field of public administration, and the search process that we used enabled us to do exactly this.

For analysing the articles, we applied content analysis with a descriptive approach to acquire a deeper understanding of citizen roles and unveil the agency within them. The coding was assisted by NVivo software. With an aim for finding descriptions concerning the citizen agency, in the first round we coded notions concerning the diverse roles (citizen, customer, service user, patient, etc.) in VCC processes, which were later divided to subcategories and main categories (see Table 2). In the second round, the additional data were coded, and the analysis was supplemented by views arising from the additional data.

Despite the basic structure of the categories emerging during the first round of analysis, the structure of the categories developed throughout the analysis process, finally taking form with the following main categories: resource integrator, experiencer, beneficiary and co-producer. In addition, two dimensions were found for these forms of agency: (1) activity and voluntariness and (2) level of VCC (individual or public).

## Results

### *Integrating the perspectives concerning the roles of citizens*

The basic idea of VCC is that the eventual value will be determined and co-created by the citizens and reflected in their own life experiences (e.g. Eriksson *et al.*, 2020; Hardyman *et al.*, 2015; Hardyman *et al.*, 2019; Petrescu, 2019). Another typical description concerning the agency is as a co-producer who, on the one hand, takes part in public service production by offering their resources (e.g. knowledge) but, on the other hand, also has some responsibility in creating the service and its value (see, e.g. Alford, 2014, 2016; Larsson and Skjølsvik, 2023; Williams *et al.*, 2016).

In addition to the term “citizen”, the terms “patient”, “service user”, “customer”, “beneficiary” and “client” are used in the reviewed articles. Especially in empirical articles, citizens represent different positions, some of which more or less depict vulnerability, such as

**Table 2.** Categories of analysis

|                      | Main categories                  | Sub categories   |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Forms of agency      | Citizens as resource integrators | Citizens bringing and exchanging their resources to VCC<br>Citizen producing and sharing knowledge<br>Citizens having sleeping resources<br>Citizens' skills and competences as a resource   |
|                      | Citizens as experiencers         | Citizens co-producers by their experiences<br>Citizens experiencing and having emotions in the services<br>Citizens experiencing the service system<br>Heterogenous needs, experiences and lifeworlds  |
|                      | Citizens as co-producers         | Citizens co-producing the services<br>Citizens acting as co-innovators<br>Citizens acting as co-designer<br>Citizen acting as partner or collaborator or participant   |
|                      | Citizens as beneficiaries        | Citizens volunteering or acting as peer-support<br>Citizens' equal access to services<br>Citizens supported or assisted in public services<br>Citizens target of public actions<br>Citizens suffering from service systems' errors or incompetence |
| Dimensions of agency | Activity and voluntariness       | Citizens as active actors<br>Citizens being empowered and engaged actors<br>Citizens as involuntary actors<br>Citizens as unconscious actors<br>Citizens as responsible actors   |
|                      | Level of value co-creation       | Citizens acting as individuals and creating individual value<br>Citizens acting active in their community<br>Citizens contributing to wider issues and creating public forms of value<br>Citizens creating simultaneously different kinds of value |

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

“homeless people” (Farr, 2016), “residents of public housing in derelict neighbourhoods” (Vanleene *et al.*, 2020), “unemployed people with disabilities” (Best *et al.*, 2019), “refugee children” (Lindqvist and Westrup, 2020), “young people” in social welfare services (Rossi and Tuurnas, 2021), “elderly people” (Eriksson *et al.*, 2020; Jaspers and Steen, 2019; McMullin, 2023) and “patients” in different healthcare services (Eriksson *et al.*, 2023; Hardyman *et al.*, 2015; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2019). Furthermore, some citizens are observed as people close to service users, such as parents of schoolchildren or family carers (Jenhaug, 2021; Komulainen *et al.*, 2023; Nasi and Choi, 2023; Osei-Frimpong and Owusu-Frimpong, 2017; Skarli, 2023).

As the VCC discussion illustrates manifold citizen roles, it recognises that citizens can play different roles in relation to PSOs simultaneously (Saha and Goyal, 2021), which can also evolve (Best *et al.*, 2019). For example, Komulainen *et al.* (2023) describe a patient's role in the service provider sphere, where value creation concerns medical procedures, but in the patient's sphere it includes preventive action and self-care. In a joint service provider–patient sphere, these two dimensions can be interconnected. Some of the reviewed articles also present citizens engaging in value creation in different kinds of co-productive or co-creative processes in their communities, such as in community development projects, enhancing public safety or in local regeneration processes (Dudau *et al.*, 2023; Kitchener *et al.*, 2023; Vanleene *et al.*, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2016) or within public service production contexts in healthcare services and in elderly and social care (Eriksson *et al.*, 2023; Jaspers and Steen, 2019; McMullin, 2023).

In empirical articles, VCC is also observed in processes that takes inter-organisational perspectives and collaboration. In some of the reviewed articles, collaboration take place

between various partnering agencies, actors, organisations or levels of governance, and the cases represent contexts of cross-sectoral employment services, health and social services, social insurance and tax services and youth services (Best *et al.*, 2019; Cluley and Radnor, 2021; Engen *et al.*, 2021; Eriksson *et al.*, 2020; Rossi and Tuurnas, 2021). Inter-organisational collaboration also emerges in the empirical cases of outcome-based contracting (e.g. social impact bond; Farr, 2016) or reform-based service development (Komulainen *et al.*, 2023; Strokosch and Osborne, 2020).

One of the reviewed articles focuses more on enabling professionals' working conditions in public legal services (Tuan, 2018). Some articles observe specific programs aiming to create value, such as in Lindqvist and Westrup's (2020) article, which focuses on the programme concerning the education of refugee children. Some of the empirical articles take a more micro-level perspective by focusing on encounters and interactions in services, such as care services, cancer care or telehealth services or, more widely, in healthcare services (Hardyman *et al.*, 2015; Jefferies *et al.*, 2021; Jenhaug, 2021; Leite and Hodgkinson, 2021; Osei-Frimpong and Owusu-Frimpong, 2017; Skarli, 2023).

Overall, while a consistent definition concerning the role of citizens in VCC processes is lacking, the VCC discussion highlights the importance of creating value through meaningful interactions in which experiences are co-created for themselves, but also individuals may contribute to experiences of others by taking part in collective VCC (Osborne *et al.*, 2016; Trischler *et al.*, 2023). In addition, citizens often need to utilise several services and interact with various professionals simultaneously; accordingly, multiple actors influence citizens' value perceptions (Grönroos, 2019; Hardyman *et al.*, 2015).

### *Forms of agency*

*Citizens as resource integrators.* Resource integration is the key element of VCC. Accordingly, citizen agency is typically described as resource integration with other stakeholders to co-create value (Farr, 2016; Jefferies *et al.*, 2021; Lindqvist and Westrup, 2020; Trischler *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, co-creation can also happen without direct interaction with PSOs (Trischler *et al.*, 2023), but resource integration typically requires some sort of social exchange (e.g. Alford, 2016; Eriksson *et al.*, 2023).

The resources that citizens bring to the VCC process are knowledge, cultural or social resources and local competence that supplement the PSO's financial and professional knowledge resources (Eriksson *et al.*, 2023; Jefferies *et al.*, 2021). This realisation is important, as Eriksson *et al.* (2020) note, because knowledge concerning citizens' needs and the locus of the value-in-use is necessary to make coordinated value propositions. The knowledge that citizens bring to the VCC process is often described as experiential and reflects their life experiences, but citizens also have unique information about using the public service system (Jefferies *et al.*, 2021), which is an important asset in VCC process development, offering the possibility of gaining new perspectives and innovative suggestions (Lee, 2019). Jaspers and Steen (2019) note that to co-create value, citizens might need to improve their coping strategies related to value conflicts and possible tensions between different actors. These strategies often require improvement because people tend to avoid conflicts.

Citizens can also have a significant cache of dormant resources that can be activated through co-production (Palumbo, 2016), although citizens' perceptions of their capacity to engage in resource integration and their conceptions of the resources that they want to offer vary (Hardyman *et al.*, 2019). Hardyman *et al.* (2019) raise the importance of co-learning, which is sometimes needed to benefit from the offered resources.

*Citizens as experiencers.* As mentioned in the previous section, citizens' experiences, based on their life situations, are focal components in VCC processes and are dependent on service experiences (e.g. Osborne *et al.*, 2016; Strokosch and Osborne, 2020). Hardyman *et al.* (2015, p. 97) link resource integration and service experiences: "In viewing patients as resource integrators, we suggest that the quality of interactions between health care

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*professionals and patients with health care is key, given that these experiences potentially may travel with the patient and be drawn upon in future service encounters.”*

Also, it is the resource of experiential knowledge citizens contribute to VCC processes. Experiences may concern a single set of service encounters or service systems and can be subjective and heterogeneous (Best *et al.*, 2019; Jefferies *et al.*, 2021; Parker *et al.*, 2023). They are not limited to direct service users but can also encompass their relatives and friends or other emotionally connected third-party actors (Jenhaug, 2021; Skarli, 2023). For example, Jenhaug (2021) observes the role of family carers in PSL and the VCC context, noticing interdependence between the value-in-use experienced by the service user and that experienced by the family carer.

Citizen experiences and needs are heterogeneous because citizens are “representatives of society as a whole”, including people with different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, genders and impairments (Cluley and Radnor, 2021, p. 567; Parker *et al.*, 2023). Experiences are also connected to context and may be temporal; therefore, the value experienced may change over time, as illustrated in research on VCC in cancer care (Hardyman *et al.*, 2019). Previous interactions also affect VCC possibilities in future service encounters (Lee, 2019). As a theme connected to experiences, Osei-Frimpong and Owusu-Frimpong (2017) emphasise emotional, cognitive, social and behavioural responses as factors affecting value outcomes.

*Citizens as beneficiaries.* Citizens can also be seen as targets or beneficiaries of public action. Behind this view are fundamental ideals of public services, such as equal access to benefits, enhancement of citizens’ well-being and education (e.g. Williams *et al.*, 2016), securement of well-functioning service processes (e.g. Larsson and Skjølvsvik, 2023) and fulfilment of service user needs (Eriksson *et al.*, 2023).

Regarding the basic relationship between PSOs and citizens, citizens are expected to derive support and aid from the public service networks (Farr, 2016). From the more critical value co-destruction perspective, citizens may also suffer from errors associated with their own or other operators’ actions. An example of this is a PSO that is unable to serve citizens because its service is inaccessible or faulty or the inter-organisational collaboration is poor (Engen *et al.*, 2021).

*Citizens as co-producers.* Because citizens are expected to express their needs actively, VCC highlights the collaborative side of citizen agency (Grönroos, 2019). This highlights citizens’ activities in joint service processes as co-producers (Leite and Hodgkinson, 2021; McMullin, 2023; Osborne *et al.*, 2016; Palumbo and Manesh, 2023), which lead to VCC (Palumbo, 2016; Trischler *et al.*, 2023). Co-production is also showcased as a somewhat unavoidable part of public service use, such as due to the requirement of producing personal information before or during the service encounter (Alford, 2014, 2016; Osborne *et al.*, 2016). However, co-production may require different kinds of efforts from citizens, from engaging in a routine task with no specific training to offering more manifold capabilities and knowledge and creating more complex processes (Alford, 2016).

Citizens can also take part as co-designers in developing services or innovating solutions (Farr, 2016; Leite and Hodgkinson, 2021; Osborne *et al.*, 2016; Trischler *et al.*, 2023) and in community-developing activities (Dudau *et al.*, 2023; Kitchener *et al.*, 2023), acting as volunteers or providing peer support or expertise from experience (Eriksson *et al.*, 2023; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2019; McMullin, 2023). The level of involvement varies because this activity may fall under service interactions, improving existing services or impacting the whole service system (Eriksson *et al.*, 2023). Palumbo and Manesh (2023) emphasise the active agency of citizens and the connection of their participation to public value: citizens’ views express both their own needs and those of their community, which may be evolving or dormant. In addition, as Nasi and Choi (2023, p. 15) note, by “aligning service delivery with user needs and aspirations”, service providers can co-create public value. Some articles address VCC from a citizen participation viewpoint. Dudau *et al.* (2023) contribute to the VCC discussion by observing citizen participation in VCC from a service ecosystem perspective.

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### *Dimensions of agency*

*Activity and voluntariness.* One question arising from the VCC discussion concerns the type of citizen activity expected. Activity is connected to the ideals of value creation. For example, [Leite and Hodgkinson \(2021\)](#) as well as [Saha and Goyal \(2021\)](#) argue that active and engaged citizen involvement is needed to create value. Therefore, the activation and engagement of service users is a goal of VCC ([Komulainen et al., 2023](#)). The importance of active citizen engagement and understanding of experiences from a service user viewpoint can be argued through their embeddedness in public services (e.g. [Nasi and Choi, 2023](#)).

The nature of public services is such that citizens might be unwilling but are required to use a service ([Cluley and Radnor, 2021](#); [Lindqvist and Westrup, 2020](#)). [Osborne et al. \(2016\)](#) note that VCC could also take place through co-production, in which citizens could be involved unconsciously or involuntarily. [Alford \(2016, p. 687\)](#) notes that unwillingness is not a significant problem for value creation. For example, citizens may also have legal obligations and be “structurally locked” to co-production and societal-value creation, as in some cases of child support ([Alford, 2016, p. 686](#)). Willingness is also connected to aspects of motivation and facilitation (e.g. [Alford, 2014](#)). [Alford and Yates \(2016\)](#) also link the question of VCC ability to the level of willingness. They state that “the greater the sense of self-efficacy, the greater it resonates with citizens’ intrinsic motivations” and add, “at the same time, the more the citizens’ capacity relative to the task is enhanced, the more their sense of self-efficacy is boosted” ([Alford and Yates, 2016, p. 162](#)).

Despite their manner of involvement, VCC places some responsibility on citizens. First, they are responsible for defining the value of the service because PSOs can only make service offerings ([Grönroos, 2019](#); [Osborne, 2018](#)). Second, citizens may also be expected to act in a certain way or alter their behaviour, such as in drug treatment ([Alford, 2016](#)). Third, citizens may also have responsibility for service provision, such as with neighbourhood safety patrols ([Williams et al., 2016](#)). [Grönroos \(2019, p. 778\)](#) describes responsibility from a service logic perspective: “*The service users create value out of the service they are provided with, and they may, if they choose to do so, invite service providers to engage with them and their value creation. In such cases, the service providers get opportunities to co-create value with the users. The users, not the providers, are in charge of value creation.*”

*Level of value creation.* The question regarding the level of appropriate citizen involvement leads to a discussion of whether citizens contribute to a single service or to the entire service system and whether citizens can create only individual value or can also contribute to public value. As a concept, VCC originates from private sector research and thus strongly emphasises private value ([Engen et al., 2021](#)).

Citizen-created value is logically addressed at the micro level of a service ecosystem because VCC is understood as service users’ efforts to realise the value of a service in their life worlds. Thus, the personal experiences of service users play a significant role in VCC. Overall, the literature suggests that the micro-level value of co-creative endeavours also affects the organisational level and the service system level (e.g. [Jefferies et al., 2021](#)). For example, substance abusers who actively take part in rehabilitation create value in the private sphere but also in the surrounding communities and even societally, creating public value ([Alford, 2016](#)). Citizens may also help others navigate public services ([Jenhaug, 2021](#); [Skarli, 2023](#)).

Public value is created through active citizen involvement in co-productive processes ([Williams et al., 2016](#)). While citizens are often described as contributing to individual value creation, some articles discuss their ability to enhance more public forms of value. Citizens also acknowledge the societal side of value creation, which goes beyond individual preferences and interests ([Alford and Yates, 2016](#)). For example, [McMullin \(2023\)](#) observes group value connected to collective co-production. Group value can include political value aiming at democratic outcomes or societal value aiming at social cohesion, which [McMullin \(2023\)](#) observes in relation to a project fighting the social isolation of older people. Furthermore, [Palumbo and Manesh \(2023\)](#) describe citizens’ roles as public value co-generators, taking part in the configuration of public service delivery and co-arranging

solutions on both the individual and collective levels. [Dudau et al. \(2023\)](#), on the other hand, argue that value could be represented on a spectrum in which different forms of public value (value-in-society) and private value (value-in-use and value-in-context) coexist and may even develop from one to another. However, they note that public value creation is dominant in community engagement and public empowerment practices, whereas in service provision, private value is highlighted (see [Hardyman et al., 2019](#)). In fact, in the reviewed articles, in the service provision context, navigation in services and service encounters are often highlighted as empirical cases that describe collaboration processes between different organisations often leave citizens with a small role as service system developers. On the other hand, in the context of communities and living environments, the aspect of citizens as active and empowered participants is emphasised. Also, what is worth noticing is that citizens may also be in the middle of conflicting values and coping skills for such situations are needed ([Jaspers, 2021](#)).

### Discussion and conclusion

This literature review scrutinised citizen agency in the VCC discussion. We argue that questions regarding citizen agency are linked to questions regarding the democratic potential of VCC. As a research question, we asked how citizen agency is presented in the VCC discussion. The main argument is that citizen roles in VCC beyond the service user role must be scrutinised. The results offer several perspectives that contribute to the theoretical and practical advancement of the VCC discussion. First, citizens' roles, personal choices, experiences and personal activities as service users are highlighted. These have common features with the role of a citizen as seen in the paradigmatic discussion of new public management (NPM). This notion is inconsistent with the VCC principles because VCC acts as a response to the deficiencies in the NPM paradigm (e.g. [Osborne, 2018](#)). However, although citizens often act in their personal service processes, and despite the focus on individual perspectives (micro-level), VCC suggests that citizens can have a broader impact, encompassing processes at the organisational meso- and even macro-level service systems. This means that citizens can also create forms of public value, such as group or even political value ([McMullin, 2023](#)). This is also essential for policy and practical implications.

Second, we argue that there is a gap concerning the collective side of the citizenry aspect in the VCC discussion. According to the VCC logic, citizens are undoubtedly at the centre of services or even part of the success of service processes, while being able to create public forms of value, such as by producing knowledge or acting as partners. However, although some studies connect value creation to participatory and more collective questions ([Alford, 2016](#); [Dudau et al., 2023](#); [McMullin, 2023](#); [Palumbo and Manesh, 2023](#)), this stream seems to remain quite weak. According to [Trischler and Charles \(2019\)](#), the collective citizenry is important in public policy analysis and design. In addressing public problems, it would supplement the resource integration necessary for VCC by acknowledging citizens' views and supporting citizen empowerment.

Third, based on previous notions, we argue that the VCC discussion does not recognise citizens' opportunities to raise neglected issues, address biases or challenge existing structures or processes ([Dahl and Soss, 2014](#); [Thomas, 2013](#)). In addition, while citizens do participate, the power relations remain unchanged, and citizens do not have control over VCC processes (e.g. [Arnstein, 1969](#); [Osborne et al., 2021](#)). The viewpoint of citizens' roles as voters or activists aiming to influence wider systemic questions is also almost non-existent in the VCC discussion. Concerning the analytical interest in service processes, this may make sense, but we believe that it is essential to recognise this gap.

Fourth, in everyday interactions, citizens have multiple simultaneous roles and can simultaneously be portrayed as collective and individual actors ([van Eijk and Steen, 2022](#)). For example, a patient availing of healthcare services and creating value for it in their own life could also voice their opinion on the healthcare system by voting or through activism. We suggest that not only the viewpoints of service professionals and citizens are at odds ([Rossi and](#)

Tuurnas, 2021) but also the different sides of activities in private or public value creation. Restricting citizen agency to either individual or collective roles masks essential aspects of it in the context of public services.

Finally, VCC can also be linked with core questions related to different politico-administrative contexts and welfare state traditions. From a Nordic perspective, the emphasis on efficiency as an ideal outcome of VCC may be at odds with the ideals of universalism as a principle of the welfare state (Tuurnas, 2016). VCC is not just a service management issue but also an essential public service policy issue. As Trischler and Charles (2019) note, recognising users' value creation processes is crucial in public policy analysis and design because it enables the identification of the optimal resource allocation for both individuals and the collective citizenry to integrate and function effectively.

As we note the foregoing essential for practice, we identify two main implications of the present study's findings for practice and policy. First, analysing citizens' roles, forms of engagement and levels of agency provides a foundation for developing value propositions – configurations of resources designed to promise future value to users (e.g. Skälén et al., 2015). Second, we propose that a nuanced understanding of the diverse forms of citizen engagement can significantly enhance experience design (e.g. Trischler and Westman Trischler, 2022). Recognising and addressing the varied ways in which citizens interact and participate enable more responsive, inclusive and user-centred service solutions and possibly more democratically developed ones.

Further empirical research on citizen agency in VCC is needed because citizen-centricity merits deeper scrutiny from the viewpoint of democracy, which is an inseparable part of public administration and public service systems. This could be done, for example, by exploring citizens' roles in different kinds of concrete VCC processes and by observing citizens' views concerning their agency by comparing these views in different policy fields or in different politic-administrative contexts. The relationship between citizens' value perceptions and public value and democracy must be elaborated upon because VCC on an individual level could conceivably be at odds with democracy on the service system level (Steen et al., 2018). This could be done in empirical studies by comparing the value perceptions of service users within certain services to the value perceptions of service professionals. Another potential avenue for future research is the analysis of the coexistence of diverse citizen positions in VCC processes. As a key discovery of this study, and in line with the former studies by Saha and Goyal (2021) and Best et al. (2019), citizens may possess various, evolving roles in VCC with PSOs simultaneously, thus changing the nature of citizen agency. An ethnographic approach, such as the shadowing technique (e.g. Ferguson, 2016) in VCC processes, could help to understand the spectrum of citizen roles and agency in VCC.

## Notes

1. We know that defining a journal as a predatory one is not simple. However, we decided to leave out the journals of publisher, whose practices have raised discussions and measures in academia because of their possible predatory practices, such as “prioritizing self-interest, forsaking the best editorial and publication practices” (Oviedo-García, 2021, p. 417).
2. All of the articles are included in the reference list.

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