The gloomy side of value co-creation for service employees

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Abstract

Purpose – There is a paucity of published research regarding service employees' side of gloomy consequences emanating from value co-creation (VCC). The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of the activities and interactions of VCC that can result in negative well-being for service employees.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a theory synthesis paper and, as such, seeks to accomplish conceptual integration of multiple theories and literature streams.

Findings – The origins of negative outcomes of VCC are infinite, and for the purpose of this study, the potential triggers of negative outcomes are limited to typical processes and behaviours initiated by VCC of services. For the purposes of this paper, dysfunctional customer behaviour, customer incivility, value co-destruction, boundary-spanning activities, organisational structure and policies and resource integration are investigated as sources of negative well-being for service employees.

Research limitations/implications – The first limitation is the focus on offline transactions. Although the accepted definition of a service ecosystem provides for it to be a "self-adjusting system" a need could emerge for some formal management structure to cope with the increasing complexity of service transactions. A theoretical implication of this paper is that it includes a few lesser researched elements in the context of VCC. A starting point to deal with undesirable VCC interactions is to distinguish between undesirable interaction outcomes that originated inside the firm (own service employees) and those that originated from outside the firm (dysfunctional customers).

Practical implications – A first suggestion on how managers could deal with undesirable VCC interactions is to distinguish between undesirable interaction outcomes that originated inside the firm (e.g. own service employees, firm policies and structure) and those that originated from outside the firm (e.g. customer incivility and dysfunctional customers), as these two types of interaction outcomes require different interventions. Firms will need to bring together, study, analyse and assess all service employee experiences and challenges generated by VCC interactions. The frequency and significance of negative incidents should indicate the amount of effort and time to be spent on types of negative incidents.

Social implications – A challenge for service ecosystems is how they will adjust to comply with novel and traditional non-business objectives in the light of transformational, upliftment and other calls from society, whilst at the same time improving the well-being of the entire service ecosystem (i.e. providers, users and society). The improvement of well-being versus reducing suffering/losses/risks is not an option. The words of Hammedi *et al.* (2024, p. 159) "we move towards the conceptualization of service ecosystem health as a harmonious state in which private, public and planetary well-being merge" are exceptionally fitting here.

Originality/value – The negative consequences of VCC impact the well-being of service employees and are costly for a firm. Suggestions to prevent or limit the impact of undesirable or harmful consequences are made. This study is of value for service businesses, service academics and society. A greater awareness of the destructive nature of negative consequences of VCC will hopefully transpire from this study.

Keywords Value co-creation, Well-being, Service ecosystem, Service-dominant logic (SDL), Value co-destruction, Dysfunctional customers

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Consumers and businesses transact for countless services daily; thus, services fulfil a major economic role. The dominance of services in economies can be seen by the percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) accounted for by services by country.

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Services account for 76.7% of the USA's GDP in 2021, while services represent 64.2%, 66.1%, 54.6% and 72.3% of the 2023 GDP of Australia, Denmark, China and the UK, respectively (World Bank, 2024).

Today, the discipline views benefits from services for customers as the result of a value co-creation (VCC) process. VCC has become a leading business mantra and is seen as significantly increasing consumer power in today's markets (Zaborek and Mazur, 2019). Customers' willingness to deploy their own resources in shaping service outcomes creates opportunities for VCC (Lagace, 2004). The use of ATMs, vending machines, self-check-in for air flights and hotels, and online banking illustrates everyday services where consumers complete tasks in service deliveries formerly performed by service providers. Firms have become progressively more dependent on the participation of customers to effect service delivery.

The discipline has received VCC in an overwhelmingly positive light. Apart from a Special Issue of the *Journal of Services Marketing* in 2010 devoted to "The dark side of customer service", with Harris and Russell-Bennett as Guest Editors, devoted to "The dark side of customer service", limited research has been published on the more gloomy side of service VCC. In the Special Issue, Plé and Cáceres (2010, p. 430) proposed and explored "the implications of value co-destruction as a then new concept which should be introduced within the framework of S-D logic". Research by Chowdhury *et al.* (2016) raised the issue of the limited number of studies that investigated the gloomy side that emanates from VCC with customers. Despite the growth in service research publications, Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder (2016, p. 96) find it appropriate to state that:

> "Service research is still not sufficiently focused on negative well-being outcomes, or value co-destruction, and their implications for individual actors or entities, as well as their effects on communities and society".

Although VCC with customers is often advantageous for firms, it does not come without potential negative consequences. For instance, the mistreatment of service employees by cocreating customers causes affective, attitudinal and behavioural outcomes such as negative and exhausting emotions, a decline in job satisfaction and organisational commitment and a decrease in job performance (Wu *et al.*, 2023; Yagil, 2021). Recently, Xu *et al.* (2023) again highlighted the limited number of studies that investigate the gloomy side of VCC activities, particularly beyond the impact on customers. Service employees experience the dark or gloomy side of various negative co-creation consequences such as increased role conflict, stress, emotional distress, opportunism, anxiety and misuse of power. These negative co-creation consequences create outcomes such as substandard service, employee absence and employee burnout, all of which impact the value equation of customers and employees.

Customer incivility represents one way that customers can contribute to undesired VCC outcomes. Customer incivility is challenging for service employees because they are obliged to control their emotions and carry on whilst experiencing stress. In 2022, a Fortune survey found customer incivility to be a growing, as well as an extensive problem in service settings, as "76% of employees experienced customer uncivil behaviour at least once a month, with 70% experiencing the same 2–3 times a month" (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2023, p. 1). A total of "98% of employees" have encountered uncivil behaviour by clients in flights, restaurants and hotels (Baker and Kim, 2020, p. 1). Shin and Hur (2022) ascribe the high turnover rate, of almost 75% in the hospitality service sector, to the fact that 70% of employees in the hospitality sector are subject to customer incivility. The prevalence of customer incivility in VCC interactions is extensive and demands management intervention to limit or prevent the occurrence of negative outcomes for service employees. Typical negative outcomes are seeking alternative employment, experiencing a reduced work–life quality and lesser desires to provide creative solutions to service customers. Customer incivility has a toxic influence on work outcomes in the form of "increased burnout, service failures, and incivility toward coworkers" that highlights the theoretical and managerial importance thereof (Wang *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, because customer incivility involves interpersonal conflict, it also depletes the psychological resources of service employees (Bellamkonda and Sheel, 2024).

From a VCC viewpoint, service employees and customers should be on "the same side" and interact towards improved service value for all stakeholders involved. In contrast, the reality is that negative VCC encounters cause short-term and long-term effects such as friction, conflict, tension, trauma and burnout for service employees (Xiao *et al.*, 2022). Initially, VCC focused on the well-being of the customer. The roles of service employees to co-create value in service systems and later in service ecosystems were identified early in the further development of S-D logic research. However, the gloomy experiences of service employees only gained prominence with the growing prominence of the service ecosystem concept (Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Larivière *et al.*, 2017).

The purpose of this article is threefold. Firstly, to identify and examine interactions with and by service employees that result in consequences in VCC efforts that negatively affect the well-being of individual service employees and, if applicable, that of a dyad or entire service ecosystem. Additionally, the paper synthesises theoretical developments related to the co-destruction of value undertaken by service employees. Secondly, the article also reflects on negative VCC outcomes with harmful consequences for service employees. Thirdly, the article endeavours to be comprehensive regarding the activities and interactions involved from the beginning of a VCC transaction, up to and including the negative consequence(s) of a failed VCC transaction. The sequence of events of successful and failed VCC and their outcomes are illustrated in Figure 1. The investigation is theoretically considerate and managerially relevant on a timely, important issue. The research and findings are likely to have an impact on a broad audience (researchers, managers, service employees, consumers, public policymakers and society as a whole). Furthermore, the research has novel elements: it brings together various theories, views and suggestions to offer new conceptual thinking, provides generalisable findings, adds appropriate value to existing knowledge, and is useful to address current managerial problems stemming from negative consequences of VCC for employees. The article is a significant topic for service businesses, service academics and society.

Various other activities and interactions, apart from customer incivility, can affect service employees' well-being negatively in VCC. Dysfunctional customer behaviour, value co-destruction, boundary-spanning activities, organisational structure and policies and resource integration are all VCC activities and processes that can initiate negative consequences

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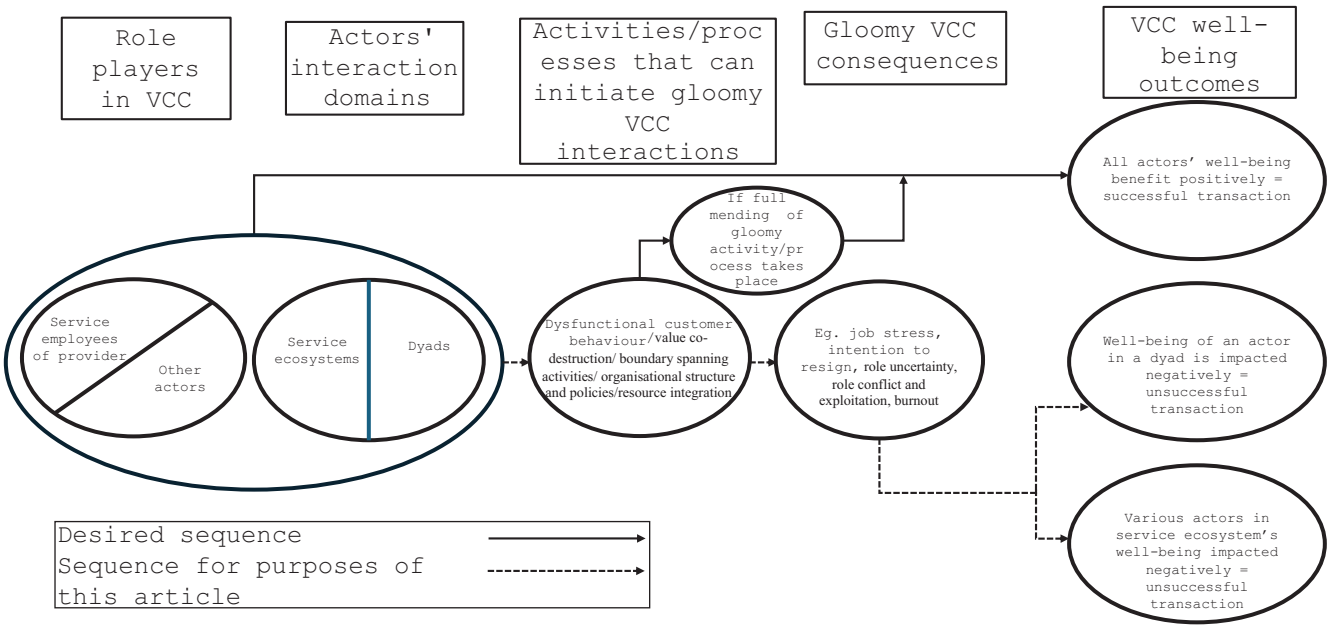
Figure 1 Value co-creation actors, domains of interaction, activities and processes with different outcomes



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and harm to the well-being of service employees (Kang and Gong, 2019; Schulz *et al.*, 2021; Farjoun and Fiss, 2022; Rosenbaum, 2024).

A VCC experience that does not positively provide value and promote well-being for all stakeholders of a service ecosystem is unsuccessful and indicates a failure of or imbalance in the service ecosystem. The views of frontline service employees (FLEs), who take care of the critical task to attend and to address disruptions of routinisation, have hardly been investigated in the VCC literature (Järvi *et al.*, 2020). Relatively few publications examine how firms and service employees deal with customers who deviate from a firm's VCC service scripts (Jerger and Wirtz, 2017; Gal *et al.*, 2021). Customers behaving in this manner upset the workflow and damage service quality and reliability negatively on the service profit chain of a firm (Adeinat and Kassim, 2019). The lack of attention to gloomy VCC consequences in the literature ought to be of significant concern to marketing scholars: it justifies an investigation because a negative interaction can harm the well-being of one or more actors and disrupt an entire service ecosystem.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. The next section provides a literature review that forms the study's conceptual basis and theoretical framework of VCC. The specific constructs that are presented in the literature review are VCC, well-being, service ecosystems and service employees. Service ecosystems have multiplied as the domains where many VCC service interactions unfold. Figure 1 illustrates service ecosystems and service dyads as the domains where the interactions of VCC actors commence. The paragraphs on the constructs are followed by the methodology applied, activities and interactions that negatively influence service employees' well-being in VCC outcomes and the consequences thereof and conclusions. The article concludes with theoretical and managerial implications of the investigation, limitations and topics suggested for further investigation as well as a summary that provides an overview of the article.

Literature review

Well-being as an outcome of VCC has grown in importance over time. The relevance of transformative service research (TSR) for commercial domains, initiated in 2007, is useful to comprehend the essence of well-being in service relationships (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2007). In 2011, the call for the promotion of the well-being of individual actors gained momentum in services research (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011). TSR contributes to the appreciation and improvement of the well-being of actors in dyads and service ecosystems (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). The latter-day focus on service ecosystems is justified by the increased role of service ecosystems in the determination of the value thereof for all stakeholders (Echeverri, 2021; Dean and Indrianti, 2020). A contemporary observation is that TSR uses a service system perspective to "zoom in and out" of a service system to enable the understanding of the "intricacies of service contexts and its implications for wellbeing" (Chen *et al.*, 2023, p. 607; Laud *et al.*, 2019).

A major advantage of TSR research is that it "focuses on the improvement of the well-being" of all the actors (Chen *et al.*, 2023, p. 606) on the premise that all services, from a positive viewpoint, "has the potential to improve well-being" (Chen *et al.*, 2023, p. 606; Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011). Studies that focus on the well-being of individuals dominate well-being in service research (Chen *et al.*, 2023; Frow *et al.*, 2019). Recently, the research focus of well-being moved towards service ecosystems, particularly those service ecosystems that consist of various levels (Gallan *et al.*, 2019; Laud *et al.*, 2019).

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Although the well-being of most actors received a fair amount of attention in service research, service employees, especially regarding their gloomy interactions in VCC, appear to be underinvestigated (Xu *et al.*, 2023; Farjoun and Fiss, 2022; Rosenbaum, 2024). The apparent paucity of published research that addresses service employees' side of gloomy VCC interactions is, in a certain way, unusual, as service firms have more than a decade ago recognised the value of co-creation with their customers because customers were free to create their own experiences (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011). As far as the service employee's side is concerned, a literature review concludes "that the quality of a service organization's people is crucial for its market success and financial performance" (Wirtz and Jerger, 2016, p. 780). The latter can be ascribed to the view that:

> "it is probably harder for competitors to duplicate high-performance human assets than any other corporate resource," and that the market, financial, and business outcomes "of managing people effectively for service advantage can be phenomenal" (Wirtz and Lovelock, 2016, p. 443).

The variety of skilful roles performed by service employees indicate their value for a firm and therefore require their continued safeguarding against any unacceptable treatment by other actors.

Despite the number of participants at the start of the transaction, the eventual value co-created could involve many actors along the entire VCC process. The success or failure of a VCC transaction, for the purposes of this article, is deemed necessary to provide an overview of the recent thinking regarding the major constructs and concepts that are present in VCC interactions. The first is a brief introduction to the domains where VCC takes place, followed by the VCC construct. This is followed by other constructs such as well-being, the service ecosystem that increasingly serves as the domain for VCC transactions and service employees.

The domains in which value co-creation is concluded

VCC is carried out in dyads or service ecosystems. Figure 1 illustrates these two arrangements and their position in the VCC process. Most of the initial service research literature presumed that service took place in an employee–customer dyad. A dyadic configuration consisted of a firm-to-customer perspective and is also referred to as the conventional simpler micro-level view. The service ecosystem, in contrast, developed to be a representation of the multi-actor realm that interacts in marketplaces. Service ecosystems represent a "more comprehensive figuration of actors" in a "more holistic, dynamic, and realistic perspective of value creation" (Vargo and Lusch, 2016, pp. 5–6). The service ecosystem view of Vargo and Lusch (2016) is a more representative and realistic image of the realities taking place in markets. Service ecosystems consist of interdependent institutions and institutional arrangements to enhance VCC. The growth and impact of service ecosystems have been remarkable, and a section is devoted to their role in VCC in a later part of this article. Although the differences in size between dyads and service ecosystems can be substantial, gloomy experiences with negative consequences for service employees take place in both.

Value co-creation

The seminal paper on SD-logic by Vargo and Lusch in 2004, initiated a great deal of service research publications. The paper by Tregua *et al.* (2021), is a fair reflection of the research papers published after and in response to the 2004 SD-logic paper. Many of these publications deal with VCC. What constitutes value also yielded various views. An earlier investigation into the process of value creation finds that differences in value creation depend on who creates value, namely, "an individual, an organization, or society" (Lepak *et al.*, 2007, p. 180). Current service literature promotes the point of view that value should always be defined as "uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary" (Vargo and Lusch, 2016, p. 6). This means that for the actors involved (customers, employees and other stakeholders) value creation is best understood against the background:

> "[. . .] of a larger value-configuration space in which each actor is its own primary resource integrator, using the application of its uniquely configured sources as the currency for resource enrichment through the exchange (economic and otherwise) of service" (Vargo, 2008, pp. 213-214).

Value is thus formed at *different levels* from different "integration of management and interaction [. . .] perspectives" by the institutions of a self-adjusting service ecosystem (Teixeira *et al.*, 2017, p. 253).

Although Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) had been advocating VCC for several years, the 2006 clarification between co-production and co-creation by Lusch and Vargo (2006b) firmly established co-creation of value as part of SD-logic. The co-creation of value from then on means that "value creation is relational" and value can therefore "not be created any other way" (Vargo and Lusch, 2008, p. 8). Lusch *et al.* (2016) stated that VCC in the SD-logic perspective consists of two separate components. The first component is that only the user can create and consume value through 'value-in-use' and the second component is 'co-production' (Lusch and Vargo, 2006a, 2006b). Co-production involves taking part in the formation of the core offering itself and can take place by means of shared design, production, creativity "or shared production of related goods, and can occur with customers and any other partners in the value network" (Lusch *et al.*, 2016, p. 2961). The concept of "network bricolage" (Baker *et al.*, 2003, p. 265) is useful to understand the contribution of co-production for building and adapting "new value networks and value constellations" (Lusch, Vargo and Gustafsson, 2016, p. 2961). Network bricolage consists of two distinctive parts that are useful for actors that wish to build new value networks for co-production. The first part is where an actor has access to "existing contact networks" that can be provided as valuable input for co-production (also referred to as "as the means at hand"); the second part is "resource seeking" that attempts to identify "new useful contacts" or "opportunities and other resources" from actors that were previously unknown (Baker *et al.*, 2003, p. 265). Through the growth and expansion of networks over time, "new resources become available" and result in modified value propositions (Lusch *et al.*, 2016, p. 2961). According to Lusch *et al.* (2016, p. 2961), the latter line of reasoning confirms "that no single actor can survive on their own but rather relies upon a large network of others" and it promotes both "a systems perspective" and "an appreciation that survival and well-being is co-dependent and co-evolutionary". "The Nordic School, consistent with SD-logic, agrees with the view that the customer wants to integrate

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resources on the basis that both [all] parties benefit from such interaction" (Hansen, 2019, p. 80).

In services, opportunities for co-creation activities can occur throughout the entire value chain, namely, from both the actual service encounter as well as the service recovery process (Roggeveen *et al.*, 2012). Co-creation, irrespective of how the process was initiated, typically consists of interactions, which possess the possibility that a service employee can be negatively affected by the dysfunctional behaviour of another participant or other participants. Customers today are, because of the Internet and other sources of social media, ostensibly more informed, connected, and empowered than ever before. They contribute "effort, knowledge, or other inputs" to the co-creation of value (Blut *et al.*, 2020, p. 158). The past decade witnessed a continuation of attention on the co-creation concept (Blut *et al.*, 2020; Menguc *et al.*, 2020; Ranjan and Read, 2019). It is envisaged that VCC will continue to play a significant role in fulfilling changing market needs of customer demands that change continuously, and specialisation offers competitive advantages to suppliers. The continuation of VCC will create interactions between a firm and other actors, and some of the interactions will result in negative outcomes and consequences for service employees.

Well-being

The importance and relevance of value and well-being as outcomes of VCC is clarified in the work of Lusch and Webster (2011, p. 132), who state that "value is not created by the business but is co-created by customers as they integrate resources [...] to improve their well-being by helping them develop or codevelop solutions to problems". Value is, thus, not only instrumental to well-being, it is also likely to influence the formation of well-being (Gross and Rutland, 2021; Kang, 2020). Researchers and practitioners increasingly acknowledge the well-being of customers as an appropriate outcome for a business transaction (Falter and Hadwich, 2019). A study by Uslu and Tosun (2024) again found that the emotional well-being of a customer is a positive outcome at the conclusion of a VCC transaction.

Well-being, like many other academic concepts and constructs, evolved over time. For the purposes of this article, the definition of well-being by Falter and Hadwich (2019) is used. They define:

> [...] customer service well-being as a positive response resulting from the experiential, relational, processual and interactive character of a service or service situation with customer-employee interaction by drawing on psychological research and a more holistic view of well-being (Falter and Hadwich, 2019, p. 183).

Well-being from service is:

> [...] a positive response [that] can be affective and cognitive [and] varies in intensity of positive emotions [and] engagement during the service process, [a] positive relationship with [a] service employee, service meaning and service accomplishment (Falter and Hadwich, 2019, p. 183).

In the case of a service ecosystem with an increase in transaction interactions, the ideal outcome would be that the well-being of all the actors benefit from their interactions. The linkage between the well-being of an individual actor and that of a service ecosystem is clearly formulated by Gardiazabal and Bianchi (2021, p. 1028), who stated that, "individual well-being and the wellbeing of the ecosystems are inexorably linked, as human being's well-being is dependent on their interactions with other actors" in ecosystems. This very important link between the well-being of individuals and well-being of ecosystems has also been deliberated by various other researchers (Gallan *et al.*, 2019; Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2019; Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020). The extensive amount of attention that the well-being linkage receives in the services literature is an indication of the important role it fulfils in VCC. It is therefore imperative that the well-being linkage be diligently considered when VCC transactions are concluded, as a great deal of current and future transactions rely on the well-being of all actors.

Rosenbaum *et al.* (2007) introduced the first call for a transformative paradigm in service research. The call emphasised the importance of services to customers' well-being. TSR prioritises outcomes associated with the various aspects of well-being, such as physical and mental health, financial welfare, capacity building, decreased disparity and so forth (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). Landry and Fuller (2023, pp. 862–863) affirm "the significant contribution of TSR to well-being co-creation topics" such as "many studies focus on vulnerable consumers (Johns and Davey, 2019; Sharma *et al.*, 2017) who enter service exchanges at some disadvantage (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017)". Well-being co-creation occurs when service actors interact jointly in a "well-being co-creation sphere" that takes account of their own well-being as well as that of others (Chen *et al.*, 2021, p. 384). TSR and the co-creation of value have much in common, especially regarding how service actors' well-being can be enhanced and prolonged through service (Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016; Previte and Robertson, 2019). The well-being of actors across the entire service ecosystem must constantly adjust to keep pace with and stay on top of social transformations (Russell-Bennett and Rosenbaum, 2022). In addition, there has been an increase in the amount of attention that well-being in co-creation of services, based on the theoretical fundamentals of the SD-logic, receives (Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016).

The S-D logic acknowledges that VCC materialises through exchanges amongst service actors by integrating resources from many sources with the key purpose to co-create value, and the service actors' collective and individual well-being are improved in these processes (Vargo, 2020). According to Landry and Fuller (2023), research on well-being in co-creation transactions can be found in several contextual domains of service research, for instance, health care (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2017), hospitality (Shulga *et al.*, 2021) and nonprofit (Gross and Rutland, 2021). Well-being co-creation has also been studied in combination with diverse service themes, including service design (Patrício *et al.*, 2018), service quality (Huang and Lin, 2020), customer satisfaction (Tari Kasnakoglu, 2016) and customer loyalty (Huang *et al.*, 2019).

Landry and Fuller (2023, p. 872) propose "a conceptual framework of well-being co-creation in service ecosystems", which is in response to a call for a much needed "holistic, ecosystem approach to well-being co-creation". The call was in responses made by authors such as Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser (2020), Kelleher *et al.* (2020) and Parkinson *et al.* (2022). The conceptual framework is primarily focused on service actors' interactions across the micro-, meso- and

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macro-levels for the co-creation of different well-being outcomes. The wellbeing co-creation at specific levels of aggregation across the service ecosystem is of importance for stability in the service ecosystem and is a move away from the predominant focus on the micro level (Previte and Robertson, 2019). In their analysis of thirteen years of service literature on well-being co-creation, Landry and Fuller (2023) conclude that well-being co-creation should also rather be investigated from a multilevel service ecosystem perspective.

In their study regarding well-being co-creation on micro-, meso- and macro levels, Landry and Fuller (2023) did not single out service employees for any specific treatment when their well-being is at risk or when service ecosystems produce co-destruction that result in ill-being for service employees. This absence, despite S-D logic's established linkage between VCC and well-being, again draws attention to the insufficiency of disclosures and academic "publicity" about gloomy interactions experienced by service employees. Recent research by Vargo *et al.* (2023, p. 16) refers to disruption of markets and suggests that to "improve the resilience of service ecosystems at any scale in the face of severe disruption", it is vital to have processes and structures that permit "flexible and responsive" adjustments. This suggested approach holds true for gloomy interactions by service employees, as some gloomy interactions can disrupt an entire service ecosystem.

Mele *et al.* (2023, p. 85) proposed a "value-based well-being framework" that was "derived from service-dominant logic notions of the link between value and well-being". The service ecosystem includes the micro (customers and service providers), meso (organisational and social actors interacting necessary for collective well-being) and macro (groups of organisational actors interacting for societal well-being) levels (Lusch and Vargo, 2014; Landry and Fuller, 2023). Mele *et al.* (2023, p. 91) provide reasoning on how "well-being emerges from value that involves (1) the individual or the collective, (2) the present or the future, and (3) proximal or broader contexts". These outcomes of value sequentially "integrate three key dimensions, beneficiary, time, and space, in a holistic view of value-based well-being". A further aspect of Mele *et al.*'s (2023) contribution is the anticipation that well-being can transpire from direct, indirect or non-use of resources.

Recently, Xu *et al.* (2023, p. 650) indicate how service employees are involved in the customer VCC process and specifically mention that "most of the previous studies have been conducted from the customer perspective while how service employees are involved in the customer VCC process has been rarely examined". We are still facing a gap in the VCC research of the effect on the entire service ecosystem where the dysfunctional behaviour of a participant results in a negative outcome for the well-being of a service employee. Such a situation implies that the entire service ecosystem can be regarded as unsuccessful as it has failed to achieve the desired value (well-being) outcome. The well-being from co-creation derives when the service actors work together "in a joint well-being co-creation sphere" and in a manner that aims to ensure "their own well-being and that of others" are achieved (Chen *et al.*, 2021, p. 384). Marketing relationships, transactions and exchanges create expectations in multiple actors about well-being. Cronin's (2022, p. 35) view that it is time that both marketing theory and practice "acknowledge that social responsibility describes a marketing process where the well-being of multiple parties (i.e., providers, users, and society) are considered in identifying appropriate strategies" is thus an appropriate reminder of what we should set out to achieve in VCC in services.

Service ecosystems

Over time, the demands to include the multi-actor realm of the market as part of VCC increased. The response to this call was to expand the firm-centric view to incorporate extensive actor networks and systems operating in the marketplace as part of SD-logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). The concept of the service ecosystem, defined by Vargo and Lusch (2016, pp. 10–11) as a "relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange", emerged from this increase in service interactions and participants. For Vargo and Lusch (2016), the exceptional feature of the ecosystem structure is the institutions and institutional arrangements that are interdependent groupings to improve co-operation for VCC. A range of aids, including "rules, norms, meanings, symbols and practices", enhance VCC collaboration (Vargo and Lusch, 2016, p. 6).

The service ecosystem and its three levels of aggregation undoubtedly became a prime source for consideration in service assessments. In the extant literature, the three levels of service ecosystems have a propensity to be evaluated at distinctive levels of clustering (Landry and Fuller, 2023). Each level comprises of diverse types of actors, each with its own requirements for well-being (Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020; Frow *et al.*, 2019). A micro level consists of dyadic interactions of individual actors who mutually co-create value and well-being in a safe VCC sphere and host the well-being of service businesses' employees and management; the meso level comprises aggregated and service firm actors and the well-being of formal institutions, such as service businesses; the macro level encompasses the wider environment and the *locus* of overall societal well-being is found there (Vargo and Lusch, 2017; Frow *et al.*, 2019; Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020).

Although the micro, meso and macro levels are distinct, they are interdependent within the entire service ecosystem (Chandler and Vargo, 2011). The service ecosystem is the "focal sociomaterial system" in SD-logic (Vargo *et al.*, 2023, p. 8). Other characteristics of service ecosystems are that they are nested and overlapping and are often examined at the three different levels of aggregation mentioned earlier (Vargo *et al.*, 2023, p. 8). Beirão *et al.* (2017, p. 228) caution that the character of a service ecosystem changes at "every instance of resource integration, service provision, and VCC". This means that in such situations, the outcomes for interaction and VCC are adjusted because of the context changes. It is important to grasp how resources integrate at the different system levels (micro, meso and macro), as such integration ultimately forms the distinctive social contexts that enable VCC (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011; Chandler and Vargo, 2011).

Bricolage (see earlier VCC section for more details) consists of combining existing contact networks with new resources from formerly unknown actors and enabling the development of networks and value constellations. The growth of networks

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and the availability of new resources lead to the evolvement of value propositions over time, and this line of reasoning confirms that single actors cannot survive on their own but are dependent on a network of other actors to prevail (Lusch *et al.*, 2016). This acknowledgement promotes both a systems perspective and an evaluation "that survival and well-being is co-dependent and co-evolutionary" (Lusch *et al.*, 2016, p. 2961). The more specialised actors' demands become, the bigger the probability that other actors and suppliers will follow suit to co-create value.

The continuous increase in the complexity of business systems does not only stem from the domains of firms as such; the increasingly polarised social, political and cultural positions insisted on by the public could be deemed to trigger dysfunctional outcomes that result in negative effects on the co-creation of value for other service ecosystem actors (Rosenbaum, 2024). The roles of entrenched business practices applied in service VCC, such as customer engagement and co-innovation, as well as organisational structure/policies, transaction complexity, dysfunctional customer behaviours and customer incivility, can obstruct VCC and the well-being of actors.

Major incidences happening globally that influence various service industries seem to have prompted an interest in considering the adaptability of service ecosystems to ensure their uniqueness and distinctiveness (Lusch and Nambisan, 2015; Mustak and Plé, 2020). Recent research indicates that the well-being of every human being and the well-being of ecosystems are inevitably connected, as the well-being of a human being is dependent on collaborations with other actors in a service ecosystem (Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2019; Gardiazabal and Bianchi, 2021). Because multiple parties' pursuit of well-being is originated by marketing relationships, transactions and exchanges, it seems that the time is right that both marketing theory and practice "acknowledge that social responsibility describes a marketing process where the well-being of multiple parties (i.e., providers, users, and society) are considered in identifying appropriate strategies" (Cronin, 2022, p. 35). A service ecosystem, as defined by Vargo and Lusch (2016), indicates the comprehensive marketing structure within which VCC can materialise. In brief, if value is not co-created, one or more of the stakeholders do not experience well-being, and in such an instance, the service ecosystem fails, and its future existence can also be jeopardised.

Service employees

The quality and experience of a service firm's employees are vital for the firm's financial performance and success in the market (Wirtz and Jerger, 2016). Experienced service employees regularly undertake various skilful tasks as part of their job. The cost to replace such staff when they resign because of ill treatment by other actors is costly for a firm. It is better to train them to deal with negative situations and safeguard them against undesirable treatments by other actors. Competitors find replicating the tasks performed by highly skilled service employees more challenging than imitating other corporate resources (Wirtz and Lovelock, 2016).

The functions that employees must fulfil in services are described by Bowen (2016, p. 5) as a "game between persons". A summary of these changes in the theory and practice of services includes:

- the theoretical focus shift from the employee as service provider to a co-creator of customer value;
- the employee as the service provider supplemented or replaced by technologies;
- the context in which services are offered now includes both service dyads and increasingly complex service ecosystems; and
- broadening of customer service outcomes from perceptions of service quality and customer satisfaction to holistic, extended customer experiences and customer journeys.

Expanded and complex service systems demand the undertaking of more complicated roles by service employees. Service employees must now fulfil roles of enablers, innovators, coordinators and differentiators, roles that are vital for VCC (Larivière *et al.*, 2017; Xu *et al.*, 2023). The increase in the number of participants and the concomitant increase in transaction interactions increase the workload and stress for service employees, who must ensure that all participants are afforded timely responses to and conclusion of transactions. The increase and uncertainty in workloads cause negative outcomes such as role uncertainty, role conflict and exploitation in the workplace. Recent service marketing literature recognises the negative influences of increased workloads caused by VCC activities on the wellbeing of service employees, such as stress and falsifying emotional adjustments (Choi and Lawry, 2020; Menguc *et al.*, 2020).

Service research that deals with the gloomy side of VCC is mostly focused on individual elements such as job stress or burnout (Choi and Lawry, 2020; Xu *et al.*, 2023). Specific negative consequences of VCC, such as job stress, for instance, surfaced in several earlier studies. Some service research investigations did, however, deal with more than one element of the gloomy side of VCC (Shulga and Busser, 2020; Boadi *et al.*, 2022). The nature of the consequences of gloomy interactions can, however, impact different actors in the various VCC processes (Järvi *et al.*, 2018), while value co-destruction can result in negative effects for all the VCC processes (Sthapit *et al.*, 2023). Generally, the following outcomes surface from gloomy VCC interactions for service employees: job stress, role conflict, job dissatisfaction, customer-related burnout, employee fear-based silence, workaholism, value co-destruction and a decrease in innovative behaviour (Boadi *et al.*, 2022; Choi and Lawry, 2020; Menguc *et al.*, 2020).

In hypothetical terms, a negative or destructive VCC result can "disable" a service employee to the extent that such an employee is unable to render the desired type and level of service required in an interaction with another actor. A service employee's inability to fulfil a required role can result in a chain of negative events that can lead to the failure of a transaction. The "disabled" service employee self can also experience a negative disorder that renders her/him unfit to function properly for some time. Customer disengagement can follow where a service employee neglects, and this results in reduced or even complete termination of interactivity with a firm by a customer (Do and Bowden, 2024). In disengagement instances, customers prefer to avoid contact with a firm and

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rather spread negative word-of-mouth about the firm. The net result of customer disengagement is damaging for a firm as the potential to build an on-going business relationship with the customer is annulled.

The usual view is that service employees must always fulfil a role that engages and empowers customers to co-create value, as not all customers have the necessary knowledge to improve the value embedded in services (Boadi *et al.*, 2022). The nature of the roles that service employees must fulfil has also changed over time, because of an increase in the "complexity of service systems" that transform service encounters (Xu *et al.*, 2023, p. 651). One of these new roles is the empowerment of customers to undertake complementary service literacy roles for resource integration and joint value creation (Davey and Grönroos, 2019). A lack of sufficient knowledge is at times a major barrier obstructing customers' ability to contribute to their own well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2016). In response to the call by Bieler *et al.* (2022) for consumer boosting to achieve transformative VCC, Pham *et al.* (2022) developed the concept of customer service co-creation literacy (SCL). SCL provides a consumer with the literacy necessary for the purchase and consumption of a service, as well as the "ability to perform co-creating activities in the interaction processes" (Pham *et al.*, 2022, p. 940).

The continual expansion in the quantity and complexity of interactive activities and the increase in actors that participate in a co-creation transaction are increasing the potential to negatively impact the value delivered or well-being of all stakeholders in a service ecosystem. Interactions between customers and a firm can consist of a variety of activities that involve service employees and can take place over varying periods of time. Service employees must regularly deal with interpersonal stressors such as maltreatment by customers and abuse by supervisors (Al-Hawari *et al.*, 2020).

Value co-creation activities and interactions that could affect service employees' well-being negatively

Services are, at best of times, vulnerable to failures because of characteristics of "intangibility, dependence on human performance, and the inseparability of service provision and consumption" (Heidenreich *et al.*, 2015, p. 281). To provide 100% failure-free services with the assistance of customers "will be cost prohibitive, if not impossible" (Parasuraman, 2006, p. 591). The well-being of actors can be initiated negatively by service employees, other actors or both employees and other actors in VCC transactions. The following paragraphs deal with VCC components and interactions that can produce negative VCC outcomes, with the focus on unacceptable consequences thereof for service employees.

Dysfunctional customer behaviour

The variety and divergence of undesired customer behaviour include terms such as deviant consumer behaviour (Moschis and Cox, 1989), aberrant consumer behaviour (Fullerton and Punj, 1993), consumer misbehaviour (Tonglet, 2001), problem customers (Bitner, Booms and Mohr, 1994), inappropriate behaviour (Strutton *et al.*, 1994), dysfunctional customer behaviour (Harris and Reynolds, 2003) and jaycustomers (Lovelock, 2001). Other terms were also used over time for negative customer behaviour. The term "dysfunctional customer behaviour", defined as "actions by customers who intentionally or unintentionally, overtly or covertly, act in a manner that, in some way, disrupts otherwise functional service encounters" (Harris and Reynolds, 2003, p. 145), is used in this article. Dysfunctional customer behaviour could be a source of conflict, misunderstandings, untruths, entitlement and misrepresentations in VCC for service employees. FLEs, as a type of service employee, regularly face interactions in boundary-spanning jobs with customers behaving dysfunctionally and consequently, experience tension that follow from such interactions (Kim *et al.*, 2021). Kang and Gong (2019) emphasise that routine exposure to dysfunctional customer behaviour contributes to exhaustion, burnout, withdrawal and employee absence and affects employees' well-being negatively.

Dysfunctional customer behaviour can, apart from customers, also emanate from physical servicescapes and interactions amongst customers themselves. Waiting areas and unsuitably designed venues that result in cramped and uncomfortable levels of customer density cause environmental stressors, which in turn may cause unpredictably violent behaviour. Generally, "ambient conditions affect the five senses" caused by physical characteristics "of the environment such as temperature, lighting, noise, music, and scent" (Bitner, 1992, p. 66). Loud environments can cause disruptive customer behaviour (Grove *et al.*, 2004). Environmental psychologists suggest that cognitions, emotions and behaviours of individuals are affected by the signals originating from the physical design of outlets (Hopkins, 2002).

The "actions and reactions" between strangers (fellow customers) cover the "emotional spectrum from enjoyment, gratitude, and amusement through annoyance, avoidance, and disgust" (McGrath and Otnes, 1995, p. 268). It is thus possible that dysfunctional customer behaviour acts as a contagion spreading to others in the service environment. Customer rage, irrespective of the origin or cause thereof, can be directed at "other customers, employees, or elements of the service environment" (Grove *et al.*, 2004, p. 42).

The term domino effect, a description for "dysfunctional customer behaviour that has a knock-on effect on the conduct of other customers who witness incidences of such behaviour", was phrased by Harris and Reynolds (2003, p. 153). Sport venues are the places where various types of dysfunctional customer behaviour take place amongst customers who disagree with decisions on the playing field as well as spectators that humiliate security staff. The aforementioned unacceptable customer behaviour has the potential for a 'knock-on effect' among other customers present. Dysfunctional customer behaviour can thus result in a wide range of negative consequences that can damage or annihilate the well-being of actors in the service ecosystem.

Customer incivility

Customer incivility is defined as low-intensity disrespectful behaviour performed by customers with an ambiguous intention to harm the target (Hur *et al.*, 2022; Abubakar *et al.*, 2018). Customer incivility, portrayed by rude, disrespectful or inconsiderate behaviour towards employees, has grown into an

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issue encountered by service providers across sectors (Kashif *et al.*, 2023; Zhan *et al.*, 2023). Customer incivility also has frustration and insulting manner dimensions (Doğantekin *et al.*, 2023; Sliter *et al.*, 2012). It is furthermore deemed as "the current centerpiece of the literature on the dark side of customer behavior" (Lages *et al.*, 2023, p. 1). The major difference between customer incivility and coworker incivility is that customers that display unkind behaviours are from outside the organisation (Doğantekin *et al.*, 2023). Coworker incivility predicts "work-to-family conflict" and employee burnout and amongst service employees (Zhou *et al.*, 2019, p. 1007).

Customer incivility can place severe demands on service employees because it compels service employees to control their emotions and carry on with providing services while they experience tension (Yang *et al.*, 2020). It also implies interpersonal conflict with customers that can deplete the psychological resources of service employees for some time (Hur *et al.*, 2022). The conservation of resources (COR) theory and the jobs demand-resources (JD-R) model of burnout enable the comprehension of negative consequences of customer incivility. The COR theory also serves as the foundation for the JD-R model (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Essentially, the COR theory posits that service employees aspire to maintain and sustain current resources and get new resources. The COR theory possesses "an evolutionary-based built-in and powerful bias to overweight resource loss and underweight resource gain" (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018, p. 104). The consequences of this basis are firstly that stress occurs when essential or fundamental resources are at risk with loss, secondly when essential or fundamental resources are lost, or thirdly when there is a failure to acquire essential or fundamental resources following significant effort. Stated otherwise, job resources act as buffers against job demands by reducing role stress and assist with goal attainment (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). However, adding job demands to job stressors aggravates the development of job strain that emanates from the stressor (Demerouti and Bakker, 2011).

Uncivil customers are part of service interaction in various service industries (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2023; Lages *et al.*, 2023). Customer incivility is a problem for firms because of the rude, disrespectful or inconsiderate types of behaviour towards employees (Daunt and Harris, 2012; Zhan *et al.*, 2023). The after-effects of customer incivility can be far reaching and have intense negative effects on "employees' well-being and organizational performance" (Lee and Gong, 2024, p. 252; Wang *et al.*, 2022). Customer incivility appears to be a growing problem in service settings. A Fortune survey conducted in 2022 found "that 76% of employees experienced customer uncivil behavior at least once a month, with 70% experiencing the same 2–3 times a month" (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2023, p. 1). A total of 98% of employees have encountered uncivil behaviour by clients in flights, restaurants and hotels (Baker and Kim, 2020, p. 1). Shin and Hur (2022) provide an explanation for the high turnover rate of nearly 75% in the hospitality service sector: 70% of employees in the hospitality sector are subjected to customer incivility.

Extant literature predominantly focuses on the negative consequences of customer incivility for employees that include, for instance:

> [. . .] negative emotions such as, intention to quit, decreased job satisfaction, levels of job dissatisfaction, the perception that their work life is low in quality and feeling that the job they perform is not rewarding or fulfilling as well as a lack of creativity (Chaudhuri *et al.*, 2023, p. 12).

Recently, an extensive list of the negative consequences of customer incivility on employees was compiled, and the list includes, among others, emotional exhaustion, increased anger, decreased job satisfaction and burnout (Lee and Gong, 2024, pp. 253–254). A summary of the negative consequences of customer incivility results in decreased service performance, service quality, increased employee incivility and turnover intentions (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2023). The aforementioned consequences could lead to negative transaction outcomes, which, in turn, lead to undesired impacts on the well-being of the actors involved in VCC.

Value co-destruction

Value co-destruction, defined as "an interactional process between service systems that results in a decline in at least one of the systems' well-being", places further emphasis on the reality that "interactions between service systems cannot only co-create value, but also have adverse consequences leading to actual value co-destruction" (Plé and Cáceres, 2010, p. 431 and p. 432). Value co-destruction occurs when one or all the actors involved use value in a damaging manner. A motor vehicle that is not maintained and the purchaser conveys negative comments of a firm's value proposition to other people by negative word of mouth, constitutes a value co-destruction process for both parties (Plé and Cáceres, 2010).

A survey undertaken by Ostrom *et al.* (2021, p. 345) indicates that "VCC for well-being and value co-destruction for ill-being" is justification for additional research to better understand customers' participation in value co-destructive behaviour. VCC activities can thus result in either positive or negative outcomes for any actor involved. While some research (Yin *et al.*, 2019) attends to value co-destruction, the studies embracing the S-D logic perspective focus mainly on VCC. The bias in favour of VCC emerged from a "search in the electronic library of the Association for Information Systems (AISeL) on 10 January 2020", which yielded 629 hits for 'value co-creation' with just 15 hits for 'value co-destruction' (Schulz *et al.*, 2021, p. 4). Of the co-destruction hits most dealt with, value co-destruction in online and mobile games (Lintula *et al.*, 2018). The positive bias in the S-D logic literature value is described as "co-creation myopia" by Plé (2016, p. 154). Various other researchers called for more research on value co-destruction (Laud *et al.*, 2019).

Resource-based perspectives are also found in research on value co-destruction. Value can also be co-destroyed because of the misuse of resources, i.e. failure to integrate and/or apply resources in a manner that is both appropriate for and expected by another service system or human being (Plé and Cáceres, 2010; Laud *et al.*, 2019). The misuse of resources has also been described as resource misalignment and suboptimal value realisation (Prior and Marcos-Cuevas, 2016). Irrespective of the standpoint, co-destruction demolishes resources and value, and service employees will have to accept some responsibility for such an outcome.

An extensive list labelled "Description of customer in activity of co-creation" and compiled by Ranjan and Read (2019,

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p. 907) shed light on why employees are treated unfairly by customers. Only eight of the 31 studies that Ranjan and Read (2019, p. 912) investigated belonged to "the dark side" class of VCC studies. However, these studies explicated the non-positive effects of VCC. Specific origins of "gloomy" interactions, such as cause of co-destruction because of poor resource integration, varying nature of co-destruction and the customer perception and experience of co-destruction, were uncovered in extant literature (Stieler *et al.*, 2014; Prior and Marcos-Cuevas, 2016).

The limitation inherent to the one-dimensional view of value co-formation, namely, VCC or value co-destruction is highlighted by Echeverri (2021). This perspective of VCC places high value/well-being at the positive end, and value co-destruction, misalignment and low value/less well-being at the negative end (McColl-Kennedy and Cheung, 2018; Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Fortunately, this limitation has inspired "researchers to conceptually develop more dynamic spatial-temporal models of how value is co-formed during the interaction" with the aid of dominant theories related to service ecosystems, resource integration and practice (Echeverri, 2021, p. 28; Echeverri and Skålén, 2021).

Customer misbehaviour prompts mental stress and other negative feelings in front-line employees (the employees experience a decrease in their well-being) (Kashif and Zarkada, 2015). The rise of social media and the ability to portray a negative experience on various platforms are continually moving the balance of power from firms to consumers (Järvi *et al.*, 2018). Other triggers, apart from customer misbehaviour, that instigate value co-destruction are the "absence of information, an insufficient level of trust, mistakes, an inability to serve, an inability to change, the absence of clear expectations, and blaming" (Järvi *et al.*, 2018, p. 69). The consequences of value co-destruction can be severe for service employees. Value co-destruction's integral destructive nature points to a transaction failure and the concomitant imbalance in or failure of a service ecosystem.

Boundary-spanning activities

Service employees involved in boundary spanning dwell in a true "no man's land" between the firm and its customers (Darrat *et al.*, 2016, p. 236). An investigation using social identity theory to explore what happens when an employee is involved in boundary-spanning activities found that service employees are obliged "to interact with external stakeholders whose objectives and values might diverge substantially from those of the organization they represent" (Korschun, 2015, p. 612). The complexity and emotionally taxing task of how boundary-spanning employees who identify strongly with an organisation cope with the "combination of intimacy and separateness" resulting from interaction with external stakeholders was confirmed by Bartel (2001, p. 381). Boundary spanning requires "the cognitive and political boundaries created by differences in professions, expert domains, or disciplines" (Kaplan *et al.*, 2017, p. 1387).

Ideally, boundary-spanning participants should be willing, able and sanctioned to connect with one another. Willingness is driven by a motivation to take part, while ability is determined by the competence required and sanctioned means that the actor(s) have the mandate to undertake the task. The relevance of boundary spanning in both "open and closed" domains for co-creation is obvious, as the complexity and magnitude of a service will determine whether only actors inside the firm or actors inside as well as outside of the firm will be involved in co-creating the value for the beneficiary.

The boundary-spanning roles that service employees fulfil in service delivery and the building of relationships with customers have been recognised earlier (Babakus *et al.*, 2009). Service employees undertake daily internal and external interfaces by executing the marketing strategy from the firm's side, as well as shape customers' perceived service quality and satisfaction by behaviours and attitudes towards customers (Brown *et al.*, 2002). The latter directly impacts a firm's performance and profitability (Menon and Dubé, 2004). The double-edged nature of FLE's daily interactions often causes chronic work stress that results in burnout (Arndt *et al.*, 2006; Singh *et al.*, 1994). The complexity and strain under which boundary-spanning FLE's operate can be illustrated by regarding them, from a theoretical viewpoint, as quasi-customers of their employer. The boundary-spanning FLE as such then "consumes" the policies and procedures of the employing firm. The FLE then chooses whether to "consume" these offerings or rather to engage in dysfunctional behaviours that can lead to "gloomy" or reduced/negative VCC for both the relevant ecosystem provider and the user (Rosenbaum, 2024).

Organisational structure and policies

Sometimes a customer's demands require interactions between different levels, divisions, or departments within a firm to provide the desired service value proposition. To understand the undesirable or harmful consequences of co-creation for service employees originating from their own firm's structure and policies, it is useful to briefly consider organisational structure and policies. An organisational structure outlines the activities that are necessary to achieve the goals and strategic mission of an organisation. Rules, roles, obligations and policies are usually part of such activities. An organisational structure indicates how information should flow between the different levels within a firm. Furthermore, an organisational structure is the combination of resources at different levels to ensure that every employee clearly understands her or his responsibilities, power and approval procedures. The modern-day trend is that organisational structures change rapidly. Given the rigidity inherent to many organisational structures and policies, it is worthwhile to briefly consider some possible negative effects it can have on service employees in VCC interactions.

"Rules by nature are inflexible, and as a result, employees sometimes deviate from formal rules to meet situational demands and to safeguard customer, co-worker, and organizational interests" (John and Shafi, 2020, p. 2). Internal tensions are always prevalent in a firm's social structure and strategy (Farjoun and Fiss, 2022). A list of the variety of sources of internal tensions that can frustrate employees contains, for instance, how the structures in which firms (or parts of them) are nested, asymmetrical interests and incompetence, and others (Farjoun and Fiss, 2022). The friction caused by layers of decision-making is simplified by the statement that:

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> [...] it's easy to become inured to the insidious ways in which bureaucracy undermines resilience, innovation and initiative. [...] The number of 'signoffs' required to advance an idea goes up, adding time and friction to decision-making (Hamel and Zanini, 2016, p. 2).

Time-consuming rigid approval processes can cause immense frustration for service employees.

In S-D logic studies that used institutional theory to:

> "[...] associate innovation and change in service ecosystems with processes of institutional change, in which taken-for-granted rules are altered and resources and practices are recombined to develop novel solutions to new or existing problems", the change processes revealed actors and activities that were not foreseen (Tuominen *et al.*, 2020, p. 575).

The foregoing discussion clearly demonstrates the potential of organisational structures and policies to cause obstructive or harmful consequences for service employees. In a statement about the dark or gloomy side of relations, Farjoun and Fiss (2022, p. 357) mention that "the 'dark side' of tensions is most prevalent in relational conflicts, that is, when conflict centres on people, personalities, and status".

The addressing of societal and public demands, such as a specific contribution to certain nonprofit organisations that work towards, for instance, reducing unemployment or hunger alleviation, could also become a condition for a transaction's conclusion. In other instances, firms might have to adhere to certain employment diversity or sustainable resource requirements to conclude a transaction. These requirements vary in the context of a firm's policies and are usually beyond the influence of a service employee. The non-adherence to such requirements or time consumed to source acceptable alternatives may result in missing sales or other targets and cause traumatic consequences for a service employee. To prevent severe disruptions in both firms and service ecosystems, it is vital that flexible and responsive processes and structures are in place at firms to ensure that service ecosystems remain resilient (Vargo *et al.*, 2023).

Resource integration

Resource integration is an integral part of the VCC process. Interactions that take place as part of VCC in a service setting are a major source of value for the actors involved, as service actors participate in both integrating their resources and facilitating the integration of resources for other actors (Vargo *et al.*, 2020; Vargo and Lusch, 2017). The following 12 resources can feature in customer participation and S-D logic in co-creation processes (Plé, 2016, p. 155):

> [...] emotional resources; physical resources; financial resources; temporal resources; behavioral resources; relational resources; social resources; cultural resources; role-related resources (role size, role awareness and role clarity); customer ability; and customer willingness.

Apart from the benefit of identifying the 12 resources, Plé (2016, p. 155) also mentions that resource integration is a continuous process that combines resources that can result in value co-destruction.

The importance of how resource integration impacts VCC and the differences between operand and operant resources is emphasised by Ghatak (2020). The nature of a resource (operand or operant) is relative and dynamic as it evolves as a function of when or how it is exploited or perceived. It is therefore not static or absolute but rather continuously evolving. This distinction could be problematic as the operand/operant resources distinction apparently falls short on the context of their usage (Lusch and Vargo, 2014; Ng and Smith, 2012). The context of their usage can be different between service employees and other actors.

Actor access to resources can be unequal. Resources such as "competencies, relationships, institutions, past experience or information about one another" are, generally, not equally accessible for all actors (Dehling *et al.*, 2022, p. 19). This unbalanced condition of resource asymmetry can, deliberately or unintentionally, result in the misuse, misalignment or failure to use the available resources. Where resource asymmetry leads to a misintegration or exclusion in the process of VCC, tension can develop in the relationship between the actors with service employees likely to be blamed for the situation. The possibility that actors, after evaluating the "qualitative and quantitative asymmetries by comparing perceived resource relations before and after an interaction", can refrain from further interactive value formation that can result in transaction failure and a breakdown in the service ecosystem (Dehling *et al.*, 2022, p. 20). Possible future transactions can also be precluded because of such a breakdown.

Conclusions

Firms undoubtedly endeavour to create attractive working conditions and uphold employment undertakings to ensure that employees remain satisfied and safe. The introduction of co-creation with customers typically requires new and demanding roles and mindsets by employees to provide desired value propositions to customers. Life can be made difficult for service employees. The demands from customers, co-workers and managers can require service employees to weigh up a set of diverse requests at times. The origin of negative consequences flowing from VCC interactions can be initiated through any of the following:

- psychological, e.g. dysfunctional customer behaviour and fellow employees;
- physical violence, e.g. customers;
- social, e.g. other customers;
- organisational, e.g. organisational structure and policies; and
- physical, e.g. facets of the physical servicescape.

Typical negative consequences after co-creation interactions by service employees range from minor incidents such as customer entitlement to severe outcomes such as burnout. The unpleasant and negative nature of the behaviour of other actors experienced by a service employee can result in a variety of undesired consequences. The type of consequence is largely dependent on the type of experience that the service employee underwent. The severest consequences are probably burnout, or at worst for the firm, the resignation of the service employee. A service employee suffering from burnout is emotionally exhausted and feels negative towards and disconnected from their work, are less productive, show less creativity and innovation, cause workplace accidents, stay away from work and experience physical and mental illnesses.

Burnout is a serious outcome for service employees as they experience a deficiency in personal achievements, and burnout can furthermore negatively impact human life, firm profits and society. Burned-out employees' physical health is affected in ways such as that "burnout may be a risk factor for coronary

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heart disease" (Toker *et al.*, 2012, p. 840); chronic health impairments and medical issues such as "gastrointestinal disorders, muscle tension, hypertension, cold and flu episodes, sleep disturbances, other psychosomatic symptoms" (Umehara *et al.*, 2007). People close to the burned-out individual can also negatively suffer, as colleagues and teams could be exposed to increased personal and task-related conflicts (González-Morales *et al.*, 2012). The impact of burnout or resignation can result in the late, sub-standard or no attempt to conclude a VCC transaction. The common denominator of the potential outcomes is that the VCC transaction is a failure. Such a non-finalisation of a transaction means a failure or imbalance of the service ecosystem. The failure of the service ecosystem will result in costs or loss of profit for the actor(s). Future transactions with the provider are also put at risk.

The three purposes envisaged in the introduction of this article have been attended to. The first purpose, namely, to identify and examine interactions with and by service employees that result in negative consequences in VCC efforts that negatively affect the well-being of the actors, has been addressed. The second purpose, to reflect on the negative VCC outcomes with harmful consequences for service employees, has been dealt with. The third purpose, namely, to provide a comprehensive overview of the activities and interactions involved from the start of a VCC transaction to the negative consequence(s) of a failed VCC transaction, has also been attained.

Managerial relevance and suggestions to deal with undesirable co-creation interactions between employees and other actors

To provide guidance, recommendations and suggestions as to how service employees could deal with requests for VCC is challenging. To identify and elucidate the proliferation of the burdens on service employees that could result from an increase in the quantity and complexity of the activities and participants, inside or outside of the firm, is perplexing because of the unknown, unexpected or unusual demands that customers and suppliers might seek for co-creating value. In a certain sense, an organisation that promotes co-creation with customers fulfils the role of an organisation that offers custom-made services. The variety of potential undesirable and harmful consequences of VCC interactions demand thought-provoking and creative recommendations and suggestions that can be used to solve, soften or prevent the occurrence of negative consequences. Marketing relationships, transactions and exchanges involve many actors, and VCC interactions must take the well-being of the societies in which transactions are conducted into consideration. It is likely that environmental pressures will filter through to all actors in the form of demands over time.

A starting point with suggestions on how managers could deal with undesirable VCC interactions is to distinguish between undesirable interaction outcomes that originated inside the firm (e.g. own service employees, firm policies and structure) and those that originated from actors that are outside the firm (e.g. customer incivility, dysfunctional customers). These two types of interaction outcomes require different managerial interventions. Firms will need to bring together, study, analyse and assess all service employee experiences and challenges generated by VCC interactions. The frequency and significance of negative incidents should provide an indication of the amount of effort and time that should be dedicated to addressing distinctive types of negative incidents. Obstacles that VCC interactions create might warrant a review and reassessment of existing firm policies and strategies and possible changes to existing organisation structures and policies.

As a service ecosystem typically consists of various service providers necessary to achieve VCC, it might be meaningful to introduce some management system or structure that can serve as a mechanism to oversee and coordinate the diverse requirements of service providers involved in VCC (see Monferrer Tirado *et al.*, 2024). Such a management system or structure should enhance customer experiences to value proposals that result in memorable customer experiences. The design of a service ecosystem management structure must delineate value creation as well as value distribution objectives among ecosystem participants. Strategic challenges cause difficulties because of the limited hierarchical control in a service ecosystem. Furthermore, to prevent severe disruptions in both firms and service ecosystems, established processes and structures must be flexible and responsive. This is to ensure that service ecosystems remain resilient. A service ecosystem cannot be cast in stone, as it evolves over time. Adaptability must remain the strength of a service ecosystem.

Experienced and well-trained employees are usually a firm's greatest asset. It is therefore of utmost importance for management to be sensitised for and aware of the types of mistreatment service employees must endure to reach VCC objectives. It is important that managers are aware of means to avoid any mistreatment of a service employee and, in the unlikely event thereof, know how to deal with the situation to restore an employee's emotional and physical well-being. Employees rendering service should have access to programs that assist them in overcoming stress and prevent burnout by offering them private and confidential counselling and provision for any issue related to mental health, substance abuse, anxiety, finances and family. Support of this nature should enable service employees to rise above challenges and enhance their personal well-being on the job.

A further consideration relevant for the investigation and analysis of negative co-creation incidents is the context in which the interaction takes place. Apart from co-creation experiences generated internally, new consumer trends and market reactions present their own challenges to service employees. To be aware of and cope with new "market-generated" ideas and trends that might come from customers and suppliers, regular sessions with staff that are interacting with customers and suppliers need to be held, and customer requests, experiences and expectations need to be shared. During these sessions, possible future phenomena and events that are likely to occur should be discussed; the expected relevance of these future phenomena and events must be recognised in efforts to pre-empt possible future ways to address such likely customer requests, experiences and expectations.

The growing emphasis of the desired repositioning for firms to be more than only customer-centred, namely, to focus on providers, users and society, offers opportunities to firms to

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depict themselves and service ecosystems as adhering to and operating by practices that promote environmental outcomes that are in the interest of society at large. It has been submitted that the sharing economy and Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) markets can benefit from "VCC and resource integration" (Gebauer and Reynoso, 2013, p. 493). This can materialise as BoP consumers can be involved "as value co-creators and thus contribute to the development of better services and the alleviation of poverty in the longer term" (Apostolidis *et al.*, 2021, p. 861). This perspective also underlines the importance of the 'value-in-use' and a firm's adaptation and addressing of societal issues.

It is desirable for firms to identify potential sources of "hot spots" in service ecosystems to timely prepare for dealing with potential unfortunate co-creation outcomes. Such identification can also help to prevent or manage such possible negative occurrences from happening or reduce the destruction of value where it does happen. Service organisations must provide training to equip and empower service employees with self-protection and coping strategies. Supervisory and managerial intervention to minimise and deter future mistreatment by customers should always be a high priority and available to service employees. An agreed-upon management structure to come into action when extensive damage to the entire ecosystem may be at stake might also offer some means to keep service ecosystems intact or limit damage thereto.

Firms' performance measures have moved away from measures such as reaching sales targets, service quality levels or handling time as accomplishment indicators (de Ruyter *et al.*, 2020). For a service ecosystem to operate at maximum potential, it has become necessary to involve and consider both "back-end" (societal and public demands, suppliers and co-producers) and "front-end" (users) actors when designing service marketing strategies for implementation of VCC transactions. The increased complexity of transactions demanded by service ecosystems complicates institutional rules, which are interwoven with changes in routines, artefacts and everyday interactions associated with VCC. The demands for institutions to adapt to changing VCC routines involve the alignment of a firm's own structures with those of other institutions. These changes in routines and complexities require employee retraining to work productively in the new settings.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The first limitation of this article is that it mainly focuses on offline transactions. The online environment certainly also experiences negative consequences in VCC transactions. Given the number of transactions conducted online and customers access to seamless transacting in the omnichannel environment, there are opportunities that can benefit from investigation. Only secondary sources were studied and included in this article. Although the extant literature is sufficient to address the specific research issue, the benefits of sound empirical research, qualitative or quantitative, will always be beneficial. The secondary sources consulted do report empirical research such as scale development, but there is room for more empirical research.

The value of empirical research is based on the possibility of providing more and alternative insights. Although sustainability was briefly mentioned in this article, the potential impact and demands from the environmental and societal domains, especially in respect of sustainability, are likely to confront services marketing in the future with challenges that might require an extended investigation. The interactions between the micro, meso and micro levels of service ecosystems are likely to cause issues that arise from the environments and societies in which firms operate and that require further exploration for the benefit of service ecosystems at large. Increased specialisation with its concomitant increase in productivity and shorter delivery times could also cause pressure on the forementioned interactions.

Another area that could benefit from inquiry is the influence of organisational structures and policies on VCC transactions to streamline co-creation processes. The management of organisational flexibility is likely to provide fertile input to accommodate increasing pressures to act swiftly to demands from the firm. Although the accepted definition of a service ecosystem provides for it to be a "self-adjusting system", a need could emerge for some kind of formal management structure to cope with the increasing complexity of service transactions. Therefore, new inputs are necessary for "formalising" some management structure or framework to deal with transactions and their negative outcomes that could jeopardise a service ecosystem.

The continuous utilisation of new technological advancements, especially where "traditional focal employees" are replaced by machines with the ensuing loss of human interaction, could also benefit from the "formalising" of some management structure or framework in the future. A challenge for service ecosystems is how they will adjust to comply with novel and traditional non-business objectives in the light of transformational, upliftment and other calls from society, whilst at the same time improving the well-being of the entire service ecosystem. The improvement of well-being versus reducing suffering/losses/risks is not an option. The text of Hammedi *et al.* (2024, p. 159) "we move towards the conceptualiation of service ecosystem health as a harmonious state in which private, public and planetary well-being merge" is exceptionally fitting here. Service scholars are likely to continue to study well-being co-creation. A compelling need thus exists for a well-defined assessment of how service actors can co-create well-being that serves multiple parties such as providers, users and society (Ostrom *et al.*, 2021; Cronin, 2022).

Summary

The article attends to a great deal of antecedents, interactions and consequences regarding the gloomy experiences of service employees in VCC transactions. Table 1 is a summary of the article and provides a condensed overview of the gloomy experiences of service employees' VCC interactions that can assist in the identification and execution of activities to address and mitigate such gloomy experiences.

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Table 1 Summary of premises, research propositions and proposed actions to mitigate the impact of gloomy experiences for service employees in VCC interactions

Premises	Research propositions	Proposed actions
1) The service employees of a firm that strongly promotes VCC frequently encounter various forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour that disrupts service interactions. Many of these employees consequently experience detrimental effects from a variety of undesirable wellness, such as emotional exhaustion, burnout, withdrawal and tension that damage employees' well-being	1) Effective organisational interventions, training and education programs and emotional control techniques can limit the negative impact of dysfunctional customer behaviour on service employees and lead to the maintenance of or the improvement of service employees' well-being	1(a) Identify the major forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour that have the biggest negative impact on service employees' well-being 1(b) Examine all the psychological and emotional consequences of dysfunctional customer behaviour on employees' well-being, including tension, burnout and emotional exhaustion 1(c) Evaluate mechanisms that employees currently use to deal with dysfunctional customer behaviour, including emotional regulation techniques, avoidance strategies and peer support to maintain or enhance their well-being 1(d) Assess organisational interventions such as training, service employee support programs offering private and confidential counselling and provision for any issue related to mental health, substance abuse, anxiety, finances and family and management strategies aimed at limiting the impact of demanding customer interactions and preventing harm to service employees' well-being
2) Customer incivility, portrayed by rude, disrespectful or inconsiderate behaviour towards service employees in VCC, has grown into an issue encountered by service providers across different sectors. Customer incivility places severe demands on service employees because it requires service employees to control their emotions and carry on with providing services while they experience tension. The negative outcomes of customer incivility are decreased service performance, service quality, increased employee incivility and turnover intentions by service employees	2) A combination of employee resilience training programs, organisational support, pragmatic customer management tactics and strategies and cultivating a supportive work culture, the negative consequences of customer incivility on service employees can be relieved, leading to improved employee well-being and execution of job requirements	2(a) Identify all the distinct types of customer incivility that most often affect service employees and their well-being 2(b) Analyse the psychological and emotional consequences of customer incivility, such as, for instance, stress, burnout and decreased service performance experienced by service employees 2(c) Assess and consider present-day coping strategies used by service employees to deal with customer incivility 2(d) Evaluate organisational practices that empower service employees to mitigate the effects of customer incivility, such as training, co-worker and supervisor support, and management intervention
3) Value co-destruction occurs in firms when one or all the actors involved in VCC use value in a damaging manner that results in value co-destruction. Value co-destruction is initiated by, inter alia, customer misbehaviour, absence of information, an insufficient level of trust, mistakes, an inability to serve and blaming experienced by a service employee. The consequences of value co-destruction are generally relentless for service employees	3) The negative effects of value co-destruction on service employees can be reduced or eradicated, by introducing sound communication procedures, training service employees in conflict resolution and providing organisational support structures, which will result in enhanced job performance, customer satisfaction and service employee well-being	3(a) Record, describe and classify all types of value co-destruction that occur in service interactions and their precise effects on service employees 3(b) Analyse the emotional and psychological impact of interactions emanating from value co-destruction on service employees, including, for instance, mental stress, an insufficient level of trust, mistakes and an inability to serve 3(c) Examine current coping mechanisms used by service employees and how they manage value co-destruction service interactions 3(d) Investigate interventions from the firm's side such as training, supervisory and managerial support and conflict management methods that enable the alleviation of the negative consequences of value co-destruction 3(e) Assess the effectiveness of communication strategies and customer engagement projects aimed at decreasing the occurrence of value co-destruction in service settings
4) The complexity and emotionally taxing task emanating from boundary spanning activities are generated by interactions with external stakeholders whose objectives and values might diverge substantially from those of the firm the service employee represents. The combination of intimacy and separateness inherent to the boundary-spanning task, stemming from daily interactions, often causes chronic work stress that results in burnout in service employees	4) Targeted interventions such as role clarity, emotional resilience training and organisational support, the undesirable effects of the complexity and emotional demands of boundary-spanning activities on service employees can be diminished, resulting in enhanced job performance and service employee well-being	4(a) Identify the significant boundary-spanning activities and interactions that can cause complexity and emotional tension for service employees 4(b) Investigate the mental and emotional impact of boundary-spanning tasks on service employees, chronic work stress resulting in burnout and role overload 4(c) Evaluate whether organisational structures and support sufficiently mitigate the negative impacts of boundary-spanning activities on service employees 4(d) Explore if training programs are comprehensive and appropriate to prepare service employees with the required skills for managing taxing boundary-spanning tasks 4(e) Determine whether the roles and tasks of service employees are clearly delineated to prevent ambiguity and cognitive overload in boundary-spanning functions
5) Firms with too complex organisational structures and policies, such as multiple layers of management and decentralised processes for decision-making, result in delays in service provision. Delays in decision-making can cause obstructive or harmful consequences for service employees. Such negative consequences can result in missing sales or other targets and cause traumatic outcomes for service employees	5) A combined effort to simplify organisational structures, streamlining policies, and providing clear communication lines should enable firms to reduce the extent of emotional and mental stress on service employees and result in improved well-being, job performance and job satisfaction of service employees	5(a) Identify vital elements of organisational complexity (e.g. indistinct lines of authority, unnecessary rules and regulations, overlapping responsibilities) that create service employee strain 5(b) Analyse the mental and emotional effects of circumnavigating complicated organisational structures and policies, including tension, annoyance and role overload 5(c) Evaluate the role of organisational transparency in improving service employee well-being and reducing the cognitive load required to succeed in complicated processes 5(d) Consider the influence of shortened policies and simplified structures on the proficiency and job satisfaction of service employees 5(e) Investigate the value of training programs to enable service employees to deal with organisational complexity whilst sustaining emotional resilience

(*continued*)

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Table 1

Premises	Research propositions	Proposed actions
6) Resource integration in VCC in service settings are major sources of value for service employees and the actors involved as service actors participate in both integrating their resources and facilitating the integration of resources for other actors. Resource asymmetry between actors can result in the misuse, misalignment or failure to use the available resources. Where resource asymmetry leads to a misintegration or exclusion in the process of VCC, tension can develop in the relationship between the actors with service employees likely to be blamed for the situation. The outcome after evaluating the qualitative and quantitative asymmetries by comparing perceived resource relations before and after an interaction, can lead to evading further interactive value formation that can result in transaction failure and a breakdown in the service ecosystem	6) By providing clear parameters, training and support mechanisms, firms can reduce service employees' emotional and cognitive burdens from resource integration with customers and resulting in improved service employee well-being	6(a) Examine the details of tasks necessary for resource integration that complicates the task and cause cognitive burdens for service employees 6(b) Identify the emotional and psychological stressors in managing the integration of diverse resources 6(c) Gauge the effectiveness of organisational support structures such as training programs, tools and managerial support to assist service employees in achieving resource integration 6(d) Assess the capabilities offered by technology to simplify resource integration and limit the burden on service employees 6(e) Consider process improvements and streamlined workflows to diminish the challenges accompanying resource integration for service employees

Source: Authors' own work

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