Exploring value-in-use of logistics services: The role of operant resources

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Abstract

This paper explores how operant resources are turned into benefits by the final beneficiaries in maritime logistics networks, specifically maritime service triad composed of the shipper, carrier and logistics service provider (LSP). By doing so, the paper elaborates on the value-in-use concept at the interface between supply- and logistics networks from a transport service perspective. Results identify several operant resources that are configured by either one or all triad members for the facilitation of value-in-use. In addition, they call for extended research on the larger network and resource constellations within these networks for value co-creation and value-in-use.

Keywords: Maritime logistics network, Service dominant logic, Value-in-use,

Introduction

Parallel to the theoretical transformation from a goods-dominant logic (GDL) to a service-dominant logic (SDL) (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2008) and change in practice from a focus on manufacturing of physical products to service provision (Vandermerwe and Rada, 1988), the definition of value has moved away from an embedded value focus to co-created value, and even to value-in-use focus (Petri and Jacob, 2017). Customers attain value by achieving their purposes, objectives or desired outcomes through service (Woodruff, 1997) and this value cannot be predefined by the provider; it could only be defined by the customer by evaluating the service experience (Sandström et al., 2008). Provider can only contribute with resources and facilitate value creation (Grönroos and Voima, 2013); customer as the user integrates these resources with own resources and skills at hand to create value-in-use (Grönroos, 2011).

Although the literature focuses on value co-creation both at theoretical and empirical level, attention on value-in-use is scarce. Out of few studies, Macdonald et al. (2011) explore how customers assess value-in-use for B2B services. Bahn et al (2015) take a different perspective and explore how end-users contribute to logistics value co-creation. Baron and Warnaby (2011) try to classify operand and operant resources that individuals integrate when co-creating value from a service provider. This study, also focuses on

resources, mainly operant resources but in a network setting. In particular, a freight transportation service triad and its connection with the external buyer is the main focus of attention. The purpose of the study is to explore the operant resources that shipper and importer integrate to define value-in-use from the freight transportation service.

Such a study is considered to be beneficial for understanding how operant resource utilization takes place between actors in logistics networks (Tokman and Beitelspacher, 2011). It also contributes to service management literature by exploring the specific configuration of customer and provider resources integrated (Edvardsson et al., 2011) or rebundled (Lusch and Nambisan, 2015) for value-in-use. Taking the customer's customer into consideration (Payne and Frow, 2017) serves as an input to the *matching* mechanisms (Gummesson and Mele, 2010) of service providers. Converging different sides of the logistics service provision network and understanding how value is defined by the beneficiaries elaborate logistics value from a network perspective which is important to sustain the network's competitiveness based on its established relationships. Two research questions are formulated to meet the purpose:

(1) Which operant resources are utilized to define value-in-use within the service triad?
(2) How are these operant resources utilized for defining value-in-use by both the shippers and their customers (importers)?

The literature section builds on SDL literature to define value-in-use in logistics context and underlines the necessity of a network based approach to logistics value definition by the customer. Methodology section presents the research steps and findings are summarized by tables at the discussion section. The paper ends with limitations and implications summarized in the conclusion section.

Literature Review and Conceptual Background

Value-in-use

The passive notion of the customer, the embedded nature of value and the static characteristics of resources have been challenged by SDL that considers service as the fundamental basis of exchange (Vargo and Lusch 2004; 2008). Services are commonly viewed as the knowledge, skills or deeds that are delivered through either goods or services and it is the ultimate aim of the market exchange between two parties. According to SDL, value can only be defined by the beneficiary; it is experience based and phenomenological (Vargo et al., 2017). In this view, providers cannot create or deliver value, on the contrary, they can only propose value and value can only be co-created by the interaction of providers and customers (Grönroos and Voima, 2013). On the other hand, value-in-use begins with the activation of value propositions configured by providers and takes place only after it is used by the customers (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006). It is *a customer's outcome or purpose achieved through a service* (Macdonald et al., 2011: 671). Such an approach extends the final definition of value to a further point in time when customer use is realized, and the use experience is context-based, dynamic, therefore can't be foreseen or standardized.

As it is difficult to standardize value-in-use, it is important to understand its underlying process. According to SDL, all actors are resource integrators and they configure different operand and operant resources to co-create value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2008). Customers define value-in-use by using their skills to integrate both obtained and existing operant resources (Grönroos, 2017) and use them to facilitate operand resources (Koktamäki and Rajala, 2016). *Operand* resources are typically tangible resources that are operated or acted upon to perform whereas *operant* resources are the intangible resources that act on operand resources to facilitate them

(Madhavaram and Hunt, 2008). Value co-creation occurs when resources are turned into benefits (Lusch et al., 2008) and determination of value-in-use also requires the operation of resources. Accordingly, one step to understand the process underlying value-in-use is through the concept of resource constellation.

Whereas value co-creation is relatively well-established as concept, value-in-use is a more recent concept. It takes place at the interface between customer/consumer and provider networks and the roles of these actors might change due to the nature of interaction. SDL conceptualizes actor to actor networks where members change between roles of providers or beneficiaries and work towards the co-created value by the network (Ekman et al., 2016). In logistics networks, where actors are connected to various larger networks and roles change with respect to different directions of service flows, it is of importance to understand how the network proposes value and how the customers at various ends define value as they use the service. Such an objective requires to investigate the constellation of different resources by different actors in the network both for creating the customer value proposition (Payne et al., 2017) and for defining value-in-use (Grönroos, 2017). This study takes network perspective to understand how value-in-use is defined by the beneficiary in a logistics service context.

Logistics value in maritime networks

Early conceptualizations of logistics value concerns time and place utilities that are delivered by logistics services (e.g. Mentzer et al., 1989; 1997) and the ability to combine traditional logistics activities to provide customized value-added logistics services to achieve competitive advantage (Lynch et al., 2000). Langley and Holcomb (1992) identify three dimensions of logistics customer value as efficiency, effectiveness and differentiation where Yazdanparast et al (2010) emphasize the role of differentiation in the form of relevancy for the customer. As the value proposed by the logistics service becomes more relevant for the customer's need, especially at different occasions, is expected to result in customer success which is also referred as a positive definition towards value-in-use by the logistics service customer.

Value co-creation research focuses on supply networks (e.g. Cova and Salle, 2008; Wagner and Benoit, 2015; Macdonald et al., 2011) and their interaction with logistics services (e.g. Lin et al., 2015). However, the wider network in which logistics services are provided by seems to be neglected. LSPs buy individual services from other service providers, and link as such service networks to supply networks (Andersson et al., 2014). This linkage facilitates logistics value co-creation. Value-in-use defined by the beneficiary is experienced through the logistics service network. In the context of maritime transportation, shippers interact with service providers for value co-creation in maritime logistics networks.

Maritime logistics concerns management of physical and information flows within the maritime supply chain, includes ports, terminals and transport intermediaries such as freight forwarders (Panayides and Song, 2013). Freight forwarders are the key logistics intermediaries in cross-border trade (Murphy and Daley, 2000), who have been commissioning on the consolidated volume of cargo to be transported with container shipping lines (Fremont, 2009). Over time, freight forwarders have evolved into LSPs and engaged in freight logistics services to respond changing logistics needs of shippers (Saeed, 2013). LSPs configure their resources with other service providers' resources such as ocean carriers' in order to co-create value propositions for shippers who have freight to be moved by ocean going vessels. These shippers are the beneficiaries that define value-in-use and they are also linked to supply networks through their customers, i.e. importers at the other end of the service network.

To put boundaries around how value is defined by beneficiaries embedded in larger networks (Ekman et al., 2016) a service triad logic (e.g. Wynstra et al., 2015) is adopted. Triads are the smallest units of networks that study how a link affects another link or how a node affects the link that it is not connected to (Choi and Wu, 2009). Building on this, the interactions within the maritime service triad are explored to understand how value-in-use is defined by the shipper (the beneficiary) and the importer (its customer). Value-in-use is operationalized by the different configurations of operant resources.

Methodology

In this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted amongst three distinct actors in the service triad to explore which operant resources were exchanged amongst the triad and co-create maritime logistics value at the shippers' side as value-in-use (Flick, 2014).

The service triad in focus is composed of ocean carrier, LSP and exporter in an export shipping context. Value-in-use is defined by the shipper as the beneficiary in this triad but the shipper is connecting the triad to another network where there is a buyer, i.e. importer. The interviewees in each of the three categories were selected amongst senior managers and middle-range managers through purposive sampling; six shippers, four carriers, and five LSPs, all of which are based in Turkey. They have operations at export markets, and make regular container shipments by utilizing several operant resources through each other.

Following a semi-structured interview guide, the interviewees were first asked to make a brief description of the business context and operational process within their own organization, and then to explain the operational processes with other network partners to achieve a successful shipment service throughout the maritime logistics network until the complete delivery of the service. They were further required to discuss the resources that they exchange amongst network partners while co-creating value in maritime logistics networks.

During the data collection process and analysis, the qualitative study guidelines introduced by Halldorsson and Aastrup's (2003) and Shenton's (2004) were followed. Each interview was made on-site, face-to-face or through individual interaction, and guided by the authors themselves. Each interview lasted for 40-60 minutes, recorded, and transcribed (Fontana and Frey, 2000). In data analysis, content analysis was employed (Graneheim, 2017), and themes or patterns across interviews were searched through following an iterative process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Latent content analysis was followed by a manifest content analysis to gain an in-depth insight regarding the prevalence of codes across the dataset.

Findings

Value-in-use is achieved by the shipper through utilizing 22 operant resources (Table 1). 16 of these operant resources are generated by the contribution of all triad members; particularly *information sharing capability,* the operant resource with the strongest emphasis that turns into value at the shipper's side. This is because, the information in the service environment is supplied by multiple nodes, making it hard for the shipper to follow and reach to complete and accurate information. A carrier states: "*This is a tough information exchange environment supplied by multiple points. You share information throughout the entire process from the beginning till the end, and the primary contact for accurate and complete information exchange is the shipper*" (Carrier1).

There are also two operant resources, which are specifically utilized by the shipper itself; *network guidance power* and *requirement expression skills*. There strong emphasis

on *network guidance power* indicates that shipper perceives itself as the 'captain' of the triad, which in turn guides decision-making along the service delivery.

"*We don't know the carrier and forwarder relations, but we can direct their relation, we can directly intervene. Or, if I know them and don't like it; I suggest not to ship by that line. We can even direct the price*" (Shipper1). On the other side, *requirement expression skills* is an operant resource solely associated with the shipper, who acts a key contact that supports the value co-creation across the triad by communicating the service requirement correctly and clearly.

"*Shippers may be unable in terms of expressing their needs etc. … They sometimes cannot fully express themselves or the work. However, they can receive the best service if they express their needs well*" (Carrier1)

"*The quality of all of the services depends on the first information provided by the shipper*" (Carrier2)

Furthermore, shipper values *trustworthy business attitude* as one fundamental operant resource generated across the triad to reinforce any value that would have been created by any other operant resource.

"*It is very important that the firm we work with is reliable… Reliability not only in terms of receiving accurate information; but, for instance, you need make sure about the accuracy of the invoice issued for you in exchange for your service*" (Carrier1)

"*What matters in this business is trust; considering the other party as you consider yourself*" (Shipper3)

Besides, *internal competence* and *personal interaction skills* are also critical operant resources generated by all triad members to be utilized by the shipper as value-in-use.

"*It doesn't matter how hard you try to standardize the work, it is difficult when it comes to application. For instance, we have a client that purchases marble from the mine only via phone. I request a form with a certain content from him in the A4 format. And it is not really realistic to expect him to do that. Or, it is not legible even if you have it; there is wrong information, you have information in the wrong places etc. We complete this gap*" (Carrier3).

"*Information exchange is important for sure, but especially in Turkey; face-to-face and intimate communication is much more important… Shippers want to have someone dealing with the problems they experience and matters that require liabilities… I sit down and talk to shippers. And we can easily maintain our relation as long as they get me and my good intention and vice versa*" (Carrier1).

Table 1. Operant Resources utilized by the Shipper

Which Operant Resources are utilized to define Value-in-Use	**How Operant Resources are utilized as Value-in-Use?**	**Mentioned by…**
Adaptation Skills	Agility to comprehend service market dynamics	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Employee Capability	Enhanced process management and ability to intervene to problematic issues	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Environmental & Social Compliance Capability	Putting pressure on partners to comply with environmental & social standards	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Information Processing Capability	Taking off the challenges and complexities associated with the shipment and provide easy information flow	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Information Sharing Capability	Ensuring timely, accurate, full information exchange environment	Shipper, Carrier, LSP

Intelligence Generation	Avoidance of misunderstanding and disunity among multiple partners	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Internal Competence	Closing the competence gap among partners	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Know-how and Experience	Extensive accessibility to know-how, experience and improved responsiveness towards unexpected issues	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Negotiation Power	Increased bargaining power with cost and contract advantage	Shipper, LSP
Network Guidance Power	Direct influence on business relationships	Shipper
Personal Interaction Skills	Impact of close and direct communication on service performance	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Proactiveness	Securing the service process towards potential disruptions and possessing alternative options/solutions	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Process Improvement Capability	Receiving professional support to improve service process for achieving cost and quality advantage	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Process Integration Skills	Organization of ad hoc service bundles and providing integrated service options	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Relationship-based Initiatives	Flexibility in service standards achieved by close relationship	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Reputation	The value of the image in the market in service management process	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Requirement Expression Skills	Defining the correct service requirement clearly and fully to ensure a smooth and true service flow	Shipper
Requirement Reliability	Securing the legal compliance throughout service process	Shipper, LSP
Speed of Response	Reinforcing the competitive positioning by responsive actions	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Technological Competence	Supporting the service performance by accelerating the processes through technology	Shipper, Carrier
Trustworthy Business Attitude	Mutual confidence in service environment	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Value Creation Mindset	Outsourcing sub-processes and focusing on the main area of business	Shipper, LSP

Shipper also utilizes 3 operant resources as value-in-use which are exchanged between the shipper and LSP. One is the *negotiation power*, which highlights the bargaining power of LSPs gained by consolidating shipments from various shippers.

"*Forwarders may from time to time bargain on our behalf. It is maybe not possible to get 10-day free time as the shipper, but they can do that for us… They can be better at bargaining*" (Shipper2)

Second one is the *requirement reliability*, that is associated with the shipper's and LSP's efforts to align to legal issues while fulfilling the shipper's requirements.

"*Shippers should not ask for something that cannot be arranged. They need to understand me; my feasibility; what I can do, what I cannot do… They need to evaluate and know accordingly what I can do… Additionally, they should not require me to do illegal things… You cannot do everything; there are things you can do and there are*

things you cannot do, but unfortunately, shippers push to the limits in terms of things that cannot be done" (Carrier1)

Another operant resource that is importantly exchanged between the shipper and LSP, and creates value for the shipper is *value creation mindset.* This is associated with the benefit provided by the LSPs through supplying additional value-added services to the shippers, helping them to focus on their main area of business.

"*There are many value added services that forwarders can provide and alleviate the complexity at shippers' side. For instance, they assign some specific operations to logistics partners*." (LSP2)

Different from LSPs, shippers exchange and utilize only one key operant resource with carriers as value-in-use. This is *technological competence,* which is associated with the value generated by accelerating the processes through the use of technology.

"Actually, when they use technology, I mean the system, you can get fast feedback. But, of course, it is very difficult to explain the system to someone engaged in the marble mining/marble business in some village of Denizli, for example… You can explain to a certain extent. I mean, we also have customers bringing their goods here and asking us to ship them." (LSP4)

Other operant resources utilized by the shipper as value-in-use are *adaptation skills, employee capability, environmental and social compliance capability, information processing capability, intelligence generation, know-how and experience, proactiveness, process improvement capability, process integration skills, relationship-based initiatives, reputation,* and *speed of response*. These operant resources are utilized by the shipper, but generated by all triad members multi-dimensionally. For example, one carrier (Carrier1) mentioned that "*Know-how and experience can bring benefits for many partners. Sharing your experience that you gain until then from other clients is quite a valuable source*", and an LSP (LSP1) stated that "*Everything is based on experience in this sector*".

Operant Resources utilized by the Shipper's Customer – The Importer

The analysis revealed that shipper's customer, who is the importer, also appreciates 8 operant resources as value-in-use (Table 2), which are generated amongst the triad members. This shows the strong link between the service triad to the importer; introducing the unavoidable dependence to the importer to define the key operant resources as value-in-use. Therefore, shipper should not be perceived as the sole customer by the service triad, rather, shipper's customer should be targeted for a complete value delivery as an outcome of the triad through utilizing key operant resources valued by the importer.

"*We consider our client as much as we consider ourselves to allow them to receive good service"* (Shipper4)

Table 2: Operant Resources utilized by the Importer

Which Operant Resources are utilized to define Value-in-Use	**How Operant Resources are utilized as Value-in-Use?**	**Mentioned by**
Global Service Capability	Service continuity and thorough information sharing by the use of international agencies	Carrier, LSP
Know-how and Experience	Easy accessibility to extensive know-how	Shipper, Carrier, LSP

Network Guidance Power	Customizing the transportation process	Shipper
Personal Interaction Skills	Reaching direct information through close communication	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Proactiveness	Providing fast solutions and timely intervention	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Process Improvement Capability	Advancing the service process quality of partners in response to problematic cases	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Process Integration Skills	Integrating the process of distinct partners for better service quality	Shipper, Carrier, LSP
Trustworthy Business Attitude	Working in an environment of confidence	Shipper, Carrier, LSP

Particularly, the shipper mentions that, importer, although takes the back seat in the service triad, has the main corner, guiding the decisions in the entire service network. This introduces *network guidance power* as one operant resource that is essentially utilized by the importer. They basically discuss that any resource created by triad members are targeting the satisfaction of the end-customer. This is further supported by the carrier and the LSP, who mentioned that the service process ends at the point where the service delivery reaches the end-customer, and thus, the importer has to be served at equal quality as the shipper. That is why *global service capability* is mentioned as one key operant resource utilized by the importer.

"Overseas network of the firm is very important. Receiving the load from here and delivering it to the other party are both very important… (Shipper2). *"It is very important for forwarders to have global agencies to eliminate any disconnection/information deficiency. We must be providing very quality service for the opposite party (importer), because this is the service sector"* (LSP4)

Furthermore, it is evident that *know-how and experience* is utilized by all triad members multilaterally to provide a qualified service experience throughout the entire process until the service reaches the end-customer.

"The firm providing the service knows the target market well, the order, the operations in the market...etc. This makes both our business easier and the importer comfortable at the same time" (Shipper4)

Other operant resources, that are utilized by all triad members and further transferred to the importer, quote the importance of face-to-face communication, problem-solving capability, progress-orientation, process alignment skills, and trust.

Concluding discussions

These preliminary results contribute to the literature by providing an empirical attempt to study operant resources integrated by users for achieving value-in-use in business markets. They point out an idea about the resource requirements (Petri and Jacob, 2017) that customers in the maritime logistics context use while defining ultimate value. They also extend the value-in-use concept to the customer's customer, in this case the importer. In SDL networks, customers are perceived as operant resources (Yazdanparast et al., 2010) and the results indicate that they contribute to a better match with the downstream actors and network co-created value. Operant resources like network guidance power, know-how and experience, global service capability are turned into benefits by the importers while defining value-in-use; therefore, they need to be acquired or maintained.

The results complement previous findings about relevance characteristics of logistics value for customers. They also emphasize that relevance characteristics for customers' customers are important while value-in-use is defined by beneficiaries. Actors in networks take their downstream networks into consideration while defining value for their benefits. Therefore, a network perspective to value-in-use is required.

Convergence of supplier and customer networks (Altuntas Vural, 2017) can be utilized to understand the nature of exchanges at the network level and understanding the resource exchanges at these interfaces is an attempt for this objective. Considering the extent of networks that these actors are embedded in, this study can be extended to a larger service network or supply chains that they serve. Extending the list of operant resources, might lead the way for a comprehensive classification of them. Such an effort would contribute to practice for a successful understanding of value-in-use concept.

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