

Contemporary Digital Consumers: “Real” Versus Virtual Value Co-creation



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Abstract Digital technologies are used extensively by both producers and consumers. While this makes it easier for both types of actors to interact and co-create value, increasing the prevalence of this process, the very fact of mediating an interaction through a particular type of technology (digital media in this instance) influences its character as well. Therefore, the purpose of the chapter is to conceptualise the characteristics of digital co-creation within the theoretical framework of Service-Dominant Logic (SDL). We do this by contrasting digital co-creation with co-creation occurring in the context of the “real”, unmediated world.

We contribute to SDL literature by suggesting five characteristics of digital value co-creation, distinguishing it from co-creation occurring in the unmediated context: co-presence, automatization, simulation, antagonism and playfulness. We illustrate these traits with real-life examples. Additionally, we conceptualise how these characteristics are linked with the most important traits of modern digital consumers.

1 Introduction

Digitalization is a phenomenon that to some extent affects every person. We all are influenced directly or indirectly by “the use of digital technologies” ([25], p. 79) which is characteristic of digitalization. These technologies include social media, big data analytics, and cloud and mobile technology, which are globally used by consumers and/or companies alike. Therefore, most consumers’ consumption of products and services is no longer limited to the “real”, unmediated world, but also occurs in a virtual context, where all the actions and interactions are mediated by digital technologies. Thus, they become digital consumers who purchase products online or take advantage of digital content or search for information online [26]. Such modern digital consumers have access to many media channels, communicate

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extensively with each other as well as with companies, and are interconnected. These traits, combined with a wider choice of products and services and higher expectations, as well as reciprocity and interconnectedness between digital and the unmediated context of consumers' lives, result in the empowerment of modern digital consumers. In turn, the digitalization and empowerment of digital consumers influences how the value of companies is co-created.

Value, understood as a trade-off between the benefits and sacrifices that occur during the process of interactions [11, 33], is the main aim of companies' activities [6]. The concept of value co-creation is mostly linked with Service-Dominant Logic [27, 29], seeing every economic activity as a service-for-service exchange [29]. In SDL "value is co-created by many actors, including consumers" ([29], p. 47). The process of co-creation should end in positive outcomes [27], although one needs to be aware that destruction or diminishment of value is also possible [20].

Taking into consideration the unavoidability of digitalization and the fact that the boundaries between real (unmediated) and virtual (digital) contexts tend to penetrate each other and overlap [9], important questions arise: how is value co-created in the digital context, and what is the difference between unmediated and digital value co-creation? To the best of our knowledge, these questions have not been raised in the current literature. While the importance of digital technology is often noted, the research itself is mostly focused on the problem of the empowerment of modern digital consumers [9, 21]. Taking into consideration the indicated research gap, the aim of the chapter is to conceptualise the characteristics of digital co-creation. We do it by comparing digital co-creation to the co-creation in the "real", that is unmediated, context. We understand this "real" (unmediated) co-creation as all the interactions that occur directly and without the help of digital technologies, in contrast to virtual (digital) co-creation, where these technologies serve as an intermediary between interacting actors.

Although we focus on positive outcomes and value co-creation, we also discuss possible negative outcomes of consumers' involvement in value creation processes, that is value co-destruction.

In the chapter, we apply the conceptual review method [15] to propose a conceptual framework of characteristics of digital value co-creation. The result of applying a conceptual review is "a theoretical contribution that refines, reconceptualizes, or even replaces existing ways of viewing a phenomenon" ([15], p. 27). We analysed the latest literature in the area of digital consumers and digitalization. Based on our own conceptual work, we suggest five characteristics of digital value co-creation and co-destruction resulting from the empowerment of digital consumers.

We contribute to the up-to-date literature by suggesting five characteristics of digital value co-creation, distinguishing it from co-creation occurring in the unmediated context. These characteristics are: co-presence, automatization, simulation, antagonism and playfulness. We provide real-life examples of how these traits influence value co-creation. Additionally, we conceptualise how these characteristics are linked with the most important traits of modern digital consumers. The links between the individual characteristics of digital value co-creation and possible directions of further research are also discussed.

The remaining part of the chapter is structured as follows. First, we define modern digital consumers and identify the six most important traits characterising these consumers. Second, we discuss Service-Dominant Logic and the resulting concept and specifics of value co-creation. Based on these analyses, in next section of the paper, we conceptualise the five most important characteristics specifying digital value co-creation and propose the conceptual framework of the characteristics of digital value co-creation resulting from the empowerment of digital consumers. Our chapter finishes with managerial implications and indications of directions for further research.

2 Digitalization and Digital Consumers

Digitalization means “the use of digital technologies” ([25], p. 79), which includes amongst others: cloud and mobile technology, social media, big data analytics, the Internet of Things, virtual (augmented) reality, cognitive technology and security [25]. This global phenomenon has a tremendous impact on people and consumers all over the world. Digital technologies create new behaviours and communication patterns between consumers and companies. Therefore, the debates about e-consumers and digital consumers are very timely and take on importance. Some authors, like [9, 33], even discuss the idea of digital consumer culture which is “shared sets of consumption behaviour that directly or indirectly emanate from people’s interactions with digital technologies, such as the Internet, social media, mobile devices and applications” ([9], p. 2). An e-consumer is a person that buys products online. A digital consumer in turn may be e-consumer purchasing products online, but also a person that takes advantage of digital content published online (e.g. watching YouTube) or searches for information online. Therefore, the term digital consumer is broader than just e-consumer [26].

There are several traits that characterise modern digital consumers. These include

1. Internet usage and having access to numerous media channels,
2. information-empowerment,
3. accelerated communication (between consumers and companies),
4. interconnectedness,
5. reciprocity between digital and unmediated contexts of consumers’ own lives,
6. wider choice of products and services linked with higher expectations and requirements.

First of all, digital consumers are much more engaged with digital technologies, which especially include the Internet, social media, and “on-demand” media [9, 26]. This is also related to the fact that they have continuous access to numerous media channels, which also include different so-called “digital engagement platforms”, such as social media sites and apps [19].

Continuous access to different digital media channels is directly linked to the second trait of digital consumers, namely information empowerment [1, 9, 21].

Modern digital consumers have access to many sources of information. At the same time, in the digital context consumers are not only recipients of information but also active creators of information resources [21]. This access to information brings not only benefits such as the capability of making more conscious decisions, but also some flaws. These include information overload, confusion, and difficulty to distinguish between true and false news. The challenge is to discern useful information with minimal time, effort and energy [9].

Access to numerous digital media channels, especially the Internet and social media, facilitates communication. Digital technologies have changed the way consumers communicate with each other and make decisions [21]. Thanks to digitalization, consumers not only communicate with each other, but now it is easier than ever before to communicate directly with companies and therefore influence their activities [17]. The accelerated communication allows increased clustering and the building of consumer communities around brands which foster their engagement [18].

All the traits mentioned above result in the much higher interconnectedness of modern digital consumers compared with consumers operating only in the unmediated context [1, 9]. As ([9], p. 1) underline: “The convenience and connectedness provided by social media, mobile technology and other forms of digital technologies and applications promote assimilation, integration or acculturation beyond the users’ ‘own community’”. This interconnectedness and possible interactions between consumers reach far beyond geographical, national or ethnic borders. Digital media and technologies allow consumers to overcome the limitations of time and space, and therefore they can interact in both synchronous and asynchronous ways. The interconnectedness between digital consumers has far reaching consequences. On the one hand, digital technologies foster social interaction [18], which results in the empowerment of consumers [9] who can connect around a similar cause. It is easier than ever before to find similarly minded people. On the other hand, social media segregates and divides people. For instance, content on social media often happens not to be neutral or politically correct [9].

Although we focus on the most important traits of digital consumers, we have to underline the reciprocity between the digital and unmediated contexts of the lives and existence of these consumers [9]. Digital consumers’ activities are not limited only to the digital environment, and the two (that is digital and unmediated) contexts tend to intermingle, “as often the online and offline boundaries are blurred and overlapped” ([9], p. 2). For example, a consumer can buy a product online but consume it offline, or they use a traditional unmediated service but rate it later online as part of post-purchase evaluation. Moreover, because of social media and the constant sharing of our lives online (including check-ins, different statuses, virtual/augmented reality), these two contexts tend to overlap even more [9].

Finally, information empowerment, communication and the interconnectedness of modern digital consumers allow them to have a wider choice of products, but also higher requirements and expectations from the companies [32]. At the same time, all the above-mentioned six traits of modern digital consumers result in their empowerment [9, 21]. Empowerment, meaning “the act of giving somebody more

control over their own life or the situation they are in” ([19], is also used in the context of “empower[ing] individuals to take an active role in the design of new products and processes” ([21], p. 222), which is clearly linked with the creation and co-creation of value.

3 Service-Dominant Logic and Value Co-creation

The empowerment of consumers in both unmediated (real) and digital (virtual) contexts translates into their inclusion in the process of companies’ value creation, that is value co-creation. In the current scientific literature, there is no single understanding and definition of value. This is linked to the fact that value is subjectively experienced and perceived [28]. In its broadest sense, it is understood as a trade-off between the benefits and sacrifices that occur during the process of interactions between different actors (entities) [11, 34].

The concept of value co-creation, although discussed extensively within different scientific streams and marketing schools (e.g. Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group [6]), is mostly linked with Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) [27, 29]. SDL is a theoretical framework that posits that all exchange is based on services. Services are “re-conceptualised by abandoning the intangible-unit-of-output meaning they had acquired through the industrial-, production- and goods-dominant orientation” ([29], p. 47). Every economic activity is a service-for-service exchange [29]. It takes place through the integration of resources which leads to the co-creation of value [27]. The sources of competitive advantage are the so-called “operant resources”, that is knowledge and competencies, and their implication [30]. The focus on operant resources in SDL changed the interpretation of the primary unit of exchange in economic activities (Brodie et al. 2019, p. 5), whereas in SDL goods are seen only as distribution or transmission mechanisms for service provision [27].

The most important assumptions of SDL concern value and value co-creation. SDL is opposed to the traditional view of goods-dominant logic (GDL). GDL assumes value-in-exchange, where value is created (produced) by companies and delivered to customers in exchange for money. Therefore, GDL sees producers and consumers as fundamentally different and carrying out vastly different roles. SDL takes the opposing view, seeing both producers and consumers as actors capable of creating value. In SDL, “value is co-created, rather than created by one actor and subsequently delivered” ([29], p. 47). Consumers are no longer seen as passive, and are actively involved in value co-creation. As ([30], p. 146) underline: “The roles of producers and consumers are not distinct, meaning that value is always co-created, jointly and reciprocally, in interactions among providers and beneficiaries through the integration of resources and application of competences”. These consumers’ and other actors’ involvement in economic activities and business processes in the form of value co-creation is the source of companies’ advantage [21].

The fundamental premises (FP, or later called axioms) of SDL have evolved over time. Nevertheless, currently, the most relevant axioms concerning value include [28,

29]: “Value is co-created by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary” (FP6), “Actors cannot deliver value but can participate in the creation and offering of value propositions” (FP7), “Value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary” (FP10), and “Value co-creation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements” (FP11).

Value co-creation focuses mostly on positive outcomes [22, 27]. However, it needs to be underlined that mere interaction with consumers does not guarantee the creation of value [3], and the whole process of interaction between actors can result in value co-destruction [10, 20, 21]. Value co-destruction is defined as “destruction or diminishment of value for one or more actors” [20], p. 2), or as a situation “when the interaction and its outcome are perceived as unfair or unsatisfactory and lead to dysfunctional attitudes in the actors who participate in the process” [21], p. 222). It can be summarised as win-lose or lose-lose outcomes of interaction [20]. It results, amongst other things, from the negative experiences and perceptions of actors [3], misalignment of the actors’ practices, including consumer misbehaviour [10], misuse of resources [21], opportunistic behaviour, dishonouring contractual promises or other conflictual interactions [20].

It is also important to state that value co-creation and co-destruction can coexist when one actor notes positive outcomes of value co-creation and the other one mostly notes negative ones (that is value co-destruction) [10, 20].

4 Specificity of Virtual Value Co-creation

4.1 *Co-presence*

The first characteristic of digital co-creation is the so-called consumer co-presence. This term denotes a situation where the exchange between the seller and the consumer is influenced by interactions with other consumers, or an otherwise uninvolved audience (Colm et al. 2017). While this phenomenon can, and indeed does in some cases, occur during unmediated value co-creation (for instance when patients chat with each other in a clinic’s waiting room), it is much more prevalent in the digital environment, thus becoming a distinct characteristic of the digital value co-creation process.

Due to the particular ability of digital media to overcome the limitations of time and space, leading to their compression, countless consumers can occupy the same virtual places, interacting in both synchronous and asynchronous ways, and thus create a state of permanent consumer co-presence, increasing the number of potential co-creational processes occurring at any given time. The most obvious example involves internet reviews. While gathering information on the best restaurant in the neighbourhood would normally entail asking around and require some time, digital consumers can access the opinions and experiences of others at any moment. In many cases relying on co-presence is not even a conscious decision. For instance, products in an online shop might be sorted according to their review scores, which means

that co-presence can impact the value co-creation process without the consumer’s knowledge.

Moreover, due to the nature of digital media, a large part of interactions between the company and its consumers (like those taking place in comment sections on social media, discussion boards, etc.) is recorded and visible to all the other actors. Therefore, even when consumers do not decide to consciously share their experiences in the form of reviews, these experiences still can frame and influence the experiences of other consumers.

This has some consequences for the character of the value co-creation process. On the one hand, it becomes more history- and context-dependant. On the other hand, the context itself becomes significantly broader. This matches well with the more recent trends in SDL literature, where the old approach of focusing on a singular producer-consumer dyad gives way to the studies of entire constellations of such relationships [4], as well as institutions that emerge from them and regulate them [28]. However, this can sometimes leave the company with less time for in-depth individual interactions with the consumers, since at any given moment there is the potential for co-creational processes occurring, each involving more actors. In some cases, this creates the need for automatization, which will be discussed in the following section.

For the outcomes of the value co-creation process, the broader context can have both positive and negative impacts. On the one hand, due to the involvement of more actors, sometimes there is less strain on the company to contribute to the process, since some actions can be performed by other consumers. On the other hand, however, this comes with diminished control over the entire process. A good example of co-presence being both a blessing and a curse in the value co-creation process can be found during streaming events. Many streams rely on the interactions between the streamer and the chat, which consumers use to communicate (which can take the form of a simple conversation, banter or some sort of a game). Therefore, chat becomes an essential component of the consumer experience. However, since streamers only have limited control over what is being said or done in the chat, sometimes it can lead to problems – for instance when the use of, e.g. racial slurs in the chat negatively impacts the streamer’s own image.

4.2 Automatisation

Another unique feature distinguishing digital co-creation from the traditional one is the extent to which the interactions between different actors participating in the process are automatized. In the case of unmediated co-creation, the process largely depends on individual interactions between actors. For instance, the individual consumer’s experience with a hairdressing service is shaped during their interaction with a hairdresser, with both sides exchanging information in a way that allows adjustments of the service to the needs of the consumer, leading to the co-creation of in-use value. This interaction can be formalised to some degree (e.g. with the use of

forms). However, usually at least some amount of interaction between actors themselves is required. Digital co-creation, however, can in many cases completely omit this stage, relying instead on the mediation of technological interfaces, which allow consumers to customise their experience without the need to ever directly interact with other human beings [16]. Think of computer hardware stores, where consumers can use the website to configure their rig out of available components, which will then be built by the employees and delivered directly to the consumer. While this process still constitutes an act of value co-creation, and the consumer receives his own personalised experience, the whole endeavour plays out with no direct human interaction whatsoever.

Sometimes, this reliance on technical interfaces and automatization can be purposefully obscured in the process of value co-creation. In the above-mentioned example of configuring PC hardware, the consumer is aware that they are using a tool rather than communicating with a human being. However, this fact can also be hidden from the consumer—for instance during communication via email or a Facebook chat. In similar situations, the consumer can receive fully customised messages, constructed using a number of templates and filled with consumer data. While such an effort can be transparent to more technologically savvy consumers, others may believe that they are interacting with an actual human being. At the same time, should the consumer's inquiry not match any of the predetermined templates, communication with a company's employee may be initiated. This allows for more efficient value co-creation with the consumers while avoiding the pitfalls of typical mass communication, which makes it harder to generate meaningful experiences for consumers.

Sometimes, this automatized way of value co-creation is built into the product itself. For instance, music streaming services like Spotify track the songs and bands that consumers are listening to, which is then used to suggest new artists that are similar in style, and should therefore be compatible with consumers' tastes. Again, no direct human-to-human interaction is required, but this time even the consumer's input has been automatized and does not require them to consciously engage in communication with technical interfaces. This allows companies to optimise the value co-creation process even further.

4.3 Simulation

The important characteristic of co-creation taking place within an unmediated reality is its grounding in real interactions in a specific time and place between real people. This can lead to the development of a genuine relationship between the producer and the consumer. For instance, a hairdresser may remember the consumer's name and preferences and have some insight into aspects of their life, which can fuel meaningful interactions transcending the boundaries of a market exchange, and which contribute to the process of co-creating a consumer's experience. Such interactions

are particularly important for consumers in the context of loosening social ties and the growing problem of loneliness and feeling disconnected.

Companies interacting with consumers digitally face the challenge of replicating these interactions within the technologically mediated environment. However, despite many digital interfaces offering tools for personalised communication, due to its scale and simultaneousness, it essentially remains mass communication. Moreover, communication through digital media lacks some of the social cues that allow the contextualisation of consumer experience (the so-called social presence; [23] and make it truly unique and memorable, which hurts its co-creational potential. For instance, while an unmediated interaction is informed and contextualised by facial expressions, body language, tone of the voice, as well as physical surroundings, the interactions occurring in digital media oftentimes are limited to the exchange of text and image-based messages. This results in a lower overall feeling of physical and emotional proximity with the partner during the interaction [23].

To counteract this limitation of digital communication and foster meaningful co-creational experiences for the consumers during interactions, companies rely on the process of simulation to artificially produce social cues and context where there are none, creating what philosophy refers to as simulacra [2]. A simulacrum is an imitation, which in the process of signifying something else becomes its own thing and eventually cannot be distinguished from the original (becoming a part of hyper-reality). [2] described this process using the example of simulating an illness. If in the process of simulation, one manages to trigger the same symptoms that are caused by the illness, then the simulacrum of illness becomes a part of reality to the same extent as the illness itself, and the two become effectively indistinguishable. Thus, the understood process of simulation has always been a vital part of marketing endeavours, becoming a subject of theoretical elaboration by marketing scholars, particularly those from the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) literature stream [12, 13, 31]. However, while simulation has always been utilised to project meanings onto products and services to turn them into symbols (e.g. Apple products becoming simulacra of creativity, artistic nature, etc.), in the digital environment this process occurs on a much larger scale and encompasses new areas.

Most importantly, simulation becomes an answer to the previously described problem of low social presence characteristic of digital media. Companies use it to try and infuse brand profiles on digital media with different personalities, thus humanising them, creating simulacra of real people. This contributes to the consumer’s feeling of interacting with an actual human being, which diminishes the detrimental effects of the low social presence of digital media. For instance, Wendy’s Twitter profile is notorious for its brash communication, oftentimes poking fun at both consumers and competitors. Conversely, Denny’s Twitter profile builds its personality around sharing memes and partaking in *non-sequitur*-filled conversations with consumers. These clearly defined personalities provide consumers with co-creational experiences which would otherwise be difficult to evoke.

That being said, while the simulation allows companies to overcome the limitations of the digital environment, it is still incapable of providing a perfect substitute for a genuine unmediated interaction. While consumers may communicate with

brand social media profiles as if they were their friends or at least acquaintances, such interactions lack the depth and substance of real-world interactions. Consumers may develop some sort of emotional attachment towards the brand, but these feelings will remain unreciprocated, as the brand profile in question remains a carefully crafted fictional character. And even though it could be argued that the social media managers behind these profiles could develop relationships with these consumers, this remains highly unlikely due to the sheer number of these interactions (which is not limited by time and space, as is the case for face-to-face interactions).

Moreover, while these interactions with brand simulacra can provide consumers with unique experiences, thus leading to value co-creation, there are situations when the simulation fails, and the attempt itself comes to light, which can become a source of conflict leading to value co-destruction. For instance, when the Twitter profile of SunnyD tweeted “I can’t do this anymore”, and other brands, such as Little Debbie, entered the conversation as if it was a real person going through a crisis, offering tips and emotional support, many consumers saw it as brands simulating depression for marketing purposes and found it inconsiderate or downright offensive.

4.4 Playfulness

Another key characteristic of value co-creation occurring via digital media is its playful character. This is another direct consequence of digitalization and mediation itself, with the internet and social media influencing the way consumers and companies communicate and interact, thus impacting the overall experience. The common challenge faced by actors utilising said media is the overabundance of available information (commercial and otherwise), which leads to cognitive overload and makes attention a key resource, sought by companies and consumers alike—leading to the development of concepts such as attention economy [8, 14, 24]. This means that, on the one hand, companies need to compete with each other for consumers’ attention, and, however that consumers themselves will try to capture the attention of the company and fellow consumers.

This changes how the communication is carried out. Since there is too much information for anyone to comprehend, the actors strive to distinguish themselves from all the others to capture as much attention as possible. Therefore, to-the-point and generic business communication quite often do not provide satisfactory results, and actors instead try to introduce some playful elements into the interaction, to make it more interesting and engaging, and thus capable of capturing more attention (and keep it for longer). This can include using less formal language, or incorporating jokes, wordplay or Internet memes into communication. Playfulness can also lead to more elaborate interactions involving different actors. For instance, when fans of the DotA 2 video game tried to persuade its producer, Valve, to organise the annual game event called Diretide, their efforts took a strange turn, and consumers ended up posting their demands on the fan page of another brand with a similar sounding name—Volvo. These messages were so numerous that Volvo decided to respond.

However, rather than simply moderating the communication and deleting all the comments that had nothing to do with their business operations, the brand decided to play along, and actually petitioned Valve to organise the event in question in a joking manner. This support for the consumers’ cause from a company that seemingly had nothing to do with the entire situation and was included as a form of soft trolling created a unique experience for consumers, and met with their positive response.

However, this playfulness can sometimes become a hindrance to the process of value co-creation, or even lead to value co-destruction. When consumers act in a search for the attention of their fellow consumers, their goals do not necessarily align with those of the company. This is particularly evident in the many cases of failed attempts at crowdsourcing made by companies, where consumers make suggestions that are meant as jokes (sometimes highly inappropriate and offensive ones), rather than treating this interaction seriously. For instance, when BC Ferry Services asked consumers to name its new ferry via an open poll, the consumers proposed a myriad of suggestions that were clearly poking fun at the company, such as “S.S. ShouldveBeenABridge” or “Queen of No Other Choice”. This mean-spirited playfulness, while providing the participants with a memorable experience, can be considered one-sided value co-destruction from the company’s point of view, once the incident became widely discussed.

4.5 Antagonism

Another characteristic distinguishing digital value co-creation from that occurring in an unmediated environment is the higher level of antagonism between actors. Since digital interactions between consumers and companies, as well as between consumers themselves, occur in selected communicational hubs, like social media profiles (both official and fan made), dedicated groups, and discussion boards, consumer communities are more likely to surface than in an unmediated environment (when the geographical distance becomes a limiting factor). While members of such communities are usually very passionate about the brand or the product, this usually leads to high expectations as well, which cannot always be met by the company, leading to consumers becoming disillusioned with the company. This leads to a paradox, wherein consumers, despite spending large amounts of time interacting with the company and other members of the community, are highly critical, or even hostile towards the company. At the same time many still remain avid users of the products offered by the said company. Sometimes, these negatively inclined consumers constitute a definite majority of the entire community, or even consumer base. Such a situation can obviously lead to value co-destruction – at least from the perspective of the company. This can be illustrated by the case of Games Workshop, a company that sells tabletop wargaming miniatures. Around this company a particular type of community has been created, one which [7] refer to as a “counter-brand community”. Despite loving their games, consumers were frustrated with the high prices of the

miniatures, which led to them turning to 3d printing and other methods of creating substitutes themselves, appropriating the value, which would otherwise go to the company.

However, antagonistic interactions can also lead to value co-creation for both sides. For instance, fans of the *Elder Scrolls* video game series have been highly critical of its parent company Bethesda. The company became notorious for releasing games lacking features and filled with bugs. However, consumers still enjoy their core experience, and the company provides them with a robust co-creational framework that allows them to create complex modifications (mods) of the game. This leads to a situation where consumers, despite being clearly frustrated with the company, begrudgingly take it upon themselves to fix the bugs and introduce the missing features themselves, and even creating new content for the game. Thanks to this, despite Bethesda's poor reputation amongst consumers and limited support after release, their games have remained popular.

5 Summary of Digital Value Co-creation

Digital value co-creation differs significantly from the co-creation occurring in an unmediated environment. We claim that digital consumer empowerment resulting from digital consumers traits influences the characteristics of digital value co-creation (see Fig. 1).

The traits of modern digital consumers include Internet usage and having access to numerous media channels, information empowerment, accelerated communication (between consumers and companies), interconnectedness, reciprocity between digital and non-digital (unmediated) contexts of own lives, a wider choice of products and services linked with higher expectations and requirements. The resulting characteristics of digital value co-creation are co-presence, automatization, antagonism, playfulness, and simulation.

Interestingly, some of the traits of digital value co-creation seem to pull digital co-creation in different, mutually exclusive directions. Co-presence makes the scope of value co-creation larger, increasing the number of potential co-creational processes taking place, which can leave less time a company can devote to a single interaction. Automatization is a partial answer to this problem; however, these two traits lead to a dehumanisation of the entire process of digital value co-creation.

Conversely, simulation aims to counteract this effect and to reenchant the process of digital value co-creation by projecting personalities onto a brand's social media profiles and making them more human-like. Similarly, playfulness and antagonism also result in reintroducing the human factor into the digital value co-creation, by introducing non-rational and emotional elements into the process—for better or worse.

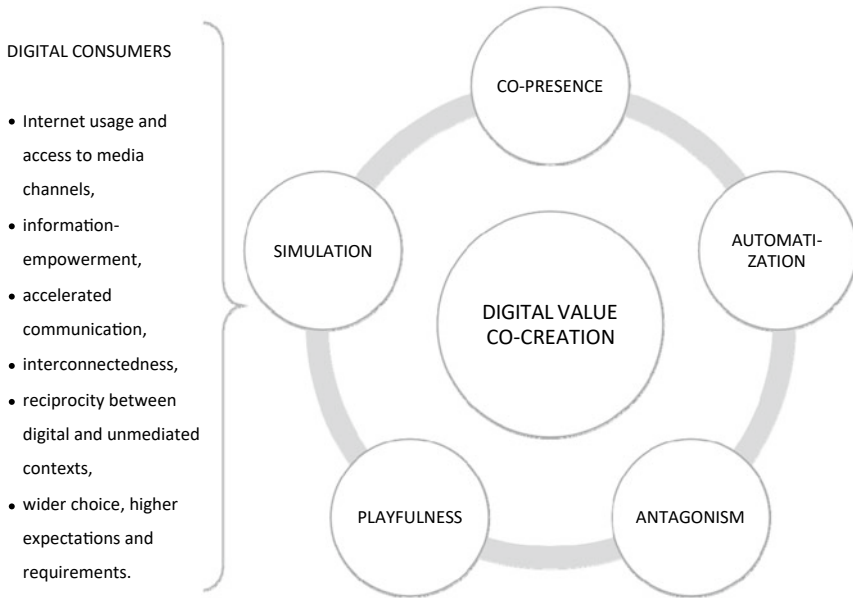


Fig. 1 The characteristics of digital value co-creation resulting from the empowerment of digital consumers

6 Conclusions

The study contributes to the value of co-creation literature, particularly the SDL stream. This is achieved by identifying key characteristics of value co-creation and co- destruction processes that occur in a digital context, as opposed to those that are unmediated by digital technologies. This is particularly important, as digital value co-creation becomes more and more prevalent due to the ever-increasing popularity of social media, mobile devices with access to the Internet, and e-commerce.

From these theoretical developments, some managerial implications can also be derived. First and foremost, business practitioners need to take into account the duality intrinsic to digital consumers. In the digital context, due to co-presence, automatization and simulation, it is possible to increase both the scale and the depth of value co-creation by engaging more consumers in the process and/or to a larger degree. However, due to other characteristics of digital value co-creation, such as playfulness and antagonism, this does not always yield positive results (at least from the perspective of the company), and can oftentimes lead to value co-destruction rather than co-creation. The examples provided in the chapter indicate that despite the theoretical cooperativeness of value co-creation, in the digital context there can also exist a strong competitive element, or even open hostility between different actors. However, this can be somewhat counteracted by properly designing co-creational frameworks and systems, allowing consumers the amount of freedom that reflects the quality of the relationship between the company and its consumers (though it

can of course change dynamically). For instance, should these relationships turn sour, utilising more closed and moderated methods of co-creation (like closed polls) would create fewer opportunities for playful trolling from consumers than more open, unmoderated ones. However, companies boasting an exceptional rapport with their consumers should be able to use more open methods (like hashtags, fan art contests, polls where consumers can add their own propositions) which would allow them to leverage consumers' knowledge, skills and enthusiasm to a higher degree.

As this is a purely theoretical chapter, further research on the subject could involve empirical testing of the prevalence of the specified characteristics in digital and non-mediated value co-creation, as well as its impact on the outcomes of the process. For instance, creative inputs of consumers during online events and real-life fan meetings within the same fandom could be compared to assess the respective playfulness and antagonism levels and establish how they influence the value of these inputs. Similar studies could be carried out for other characteristics as well.

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