

How service innovation shapes value creation in multi-stakeholder systems: A social construction approach

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Abstract

Purpose.

Service innovation is more and more framed as a process of value co-creation within a multistakeholder service system. Due to the heterogeneity of actors and contexts involved in service innovation, the social dimension appears to be important, even if not adequately analyzed until now.

In this paper we adopt social construction theories as a lens to explore the relationship between service innovation and value co-creation in a multi-stakeholder setting. In particular, we focus on the role of sense-making and boundary objects in enabling service innovation through resource integration.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Close to relativist epistemology, this study is the outcome of contextual knowledge. An interactive, qualitative, multi-case-study approach is applied to gain insights into the investigated phenomena.

We studied service innovation in practice within networks of the service system. We deepened the role of social context and social structures affecting and being affected by value-enabling innovation. In this paper, findings concern a judgment sample formed by ten cases operating in the food market

Findings

In a multi-stakeholder system service innovation takes place through networked resource integration, where the resources to be integrated can be cultural, social, collective, and linked to live contextual experiences. As a matter of fact, in the cases investigated innovation is seen as a new value proposition about food provision that allows a different way of integrating resources for actors: the process of serving food changes, as well as the practices involved.

Practical implications

There is great potential in applying the concept of boundary objects to the food industry, where boundary objects could link not only the worlds of scientists and nonscientists, but those of (expert) producers and (lay) consumers.

Originality

Service innovation is framed as a collective phenomenon based on the creation and sharing of new meanings within multi-stakeholder systems.

Keywords: Service innovation, value co-creation, sense-making, meaning, social construction

Introduction

The conceptualization of innovation as a simple linear sequence of stages has been challenged by scholars who see innovation as a collective effort (Vargo and Lusch, 2011; Hakansson and Olsen, 2012). Innovation proceeds through the engagement of “diverse stakeholders around a common cause and employs emerging systems that provide opportunities for more extensive value co-creation” (Jaakola and Alexander, 2014, p. 1).

Scholars’ attention moves away from the attributes of new products/services towards knowledge, competencies, and resource integration for innovation: service innovation is “based on the application of competences,” where resource integration becomes the

fundamental way to innovate (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Ordanini and Parasuraman 2011; Mele, Colurcio, and Russo Spena, 2014).

According to Service-Dominant (S-D) logic, service innovation is a value-enabling process (Lusch et al., 2010), where actors develop more effective value propositions for participating in beneficiaries' resource-integrating and value-creating practices. Service innovation does not reflect any longer the service offering itself, but rather refers to the "service system, which is a configuration of resources including people, information, and technology, connected to other systems by value propositions" (Vargo et al., 2008, p. 145). Service systems constitute the basic context and enabler of value co-creation and thus the foundation for service innovation (Edvardsson and Tronvoll, 2013, p. 19). Service innovation is more and more framed as a process of value co-creation within a multi-stakeholder service system (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014).

By adopting a service system-level perspective, innovation should be studied by including the views of the different participants (Rampersad et al., 2010) and their sense-making activities occurring in social relationships (Edvardsson et al. 2010): "Value creation through service innovation often takes place in multi-stakeholder settings, which call for resource integration through social interactions. Nevertheless, the processes, organizational structures, and contingency factors catalyzing value creation in multi-actor interaction in both intra- and inter-organizational settings have not been sufficiently explored" (McPhee, Rajala, Toivonen, and Westerlund, 2014, p. 3). Due to the heterogeneity of actors and contexts involved in service innovation, the social dimension appears to be important, even if not adequately analyzed until now.

Seeing innovation as a collective endeavor implies widening the perspective of analysis by including sociological and anthropological theories in service innovation research in order to have a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon (Rubalcaba et al., 2012). Even in business-to-business (B2B) markets, it has been recognized that the value-in-use of complex industrial solutions is not only economic, but can be both social and emotional. This marks a deviation from traditional B2B literature, which conceptualizes value mainly in terms of the calculation of economic convenience, or in other words the trade-off between benefits and sacrifices (Blocker et al., 2011; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006).

In this paper we adopt social construction theories as a lens to explore the relationship between service innovation and value co-creation in a multi-stakeholder setting. In

particular, we focus on the role of sense-making and boundary objects in enabling service innovation through resource integration.

A social construction approach may help in better understanding social reality, and consequently service systems. It sheds light on how actors individually and collectively create and reproduce social situations and structures and on the process by which individuals subjectively and intersubjectively explain the world in which they live (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984). The process of interpretation and meaning construction comes from interaction and conversation based on social, linguistic, and cultural resources, norms, and rules. There thus emerges “the need to understand the social context in which the service innovation takes place, in terms of the social structures and actors’ abilities to acquire, integrate, and use the available structures in the social context” (Edvardsson and Tronvoll, 2013, p. 22).

In developing service innovation as a collective phenomenon, business managers face tremendous difficulties in integrating dispersed pieces of individual cognitive views held by various actors (Mouzas et al., 2008). Also, each dyadic relationship is connected with other relationships (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989; Parolini, 1999), which form a structure of network interactions that affects other more distant network areas as well as other networks (Håkansson and Waluszewski 2002; Håkansson et al., 2007, 2009). This implies the need for a better understanding of how actors make sense of service innovation and value co-creation across companies’ and networks’ boundaries. For this reason, we will introduce the concept of boundary objects as organizational boundary-spanning manifestations of shared intent (Mason and Easton, 2009; Harrison et al., 2011). Even when applied to business-to-business markets, sense-making and boundary objects for service innovation are relevant to consider in the diffusion of a value-creation logic that goes beyond the service content to include the collective nature of many innovations, and the importance of actors and the context in affecting the service innovation process.

Empirically, we analyzed ten case studies from the food industry. These cases highlight service innovation and value co-creation in a multi-stakeholder system as socially constructed phenomena, where the role of boundary objects emerges as crucial and with different functions.

In the paper we refer to value *co*-creation to highlight the multiple-actor, systemic nature of all value creation (Vargo, 2008). Also, we will not specifically distinguish between B2B and B2C (business-to-consumer) actors, as by adopting a service

perspective all actors, individuals or organizations, are doing the same things; that is, integrating resources for service-to-service exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2011).

The paper is divided into the following sections. First, we review the literature on innovation and value according to a service perspective. Second, we examine studies applying the social constructivist perspective to innovation and value. Section 3 describes the methodology and Section 4 the findings from the empirical research carried out in the food context. We end the paper with a discussion and implications for research and practice.

1. Literature review

1.1 A service view on innovation and value

“Innovation systems” (Tether, 2002) involve a plurality of actors that transcends the boundaries of the company, but also of industries as traditionally defined; it is a systemic logic that overcomes the demarcation between manufacturing and services.

An increasing number of studies are recognizing the collective nature of innovation and the implication of the contextual character of value co-creation (Chandler and Vargo, 2011). Organizations and customers, like other social and economic actors, are resource integrators that interact through the mutual provision of services. Innovation is created collaboratively in interactive configurations of mutual exchange, namely service systems (Vargo et al., 2008). By adopting a service system perspective, Edvardsson et al. (2013) address service innovation as deriving “from changes in either resources or schemas (norms and rules) or in some a combination thereof, and which results in structural changes to the service system ... that shape customers and other actors as they integrate resources and co-create value” (p.20). When considering innovation at a service system level, the approach to innovation shifts from the traditional attribute-based views of innovation to a resource integration-based view (Mele et al., 2010).

In business to business it has been asserted that the dominant dimension of innovation management is to deal with the “importance of others” (Hakansson and Olsen, 2011, p. 8). Interactions occur among heterogeneous actors and within diverse economic, social, political, cultural, and geographical contexts (Kash and Rycroft, 2002). Understanding interaction in buyer–seller relationships during the service innovation process is needed to facilitate the management of co-innovation (Berthon et al., 1999; Desouza et al., 2008; Roy et al., 2004). Dyadic interactions are part of a wider

network of interdependencies, which can be depicted in terms of a continuous set of actions, reactions, and re-reactions in a reciprocal problem-coping process (Ford and Mouzas, 2010). Companies are dealing with the challenge of establishing and managing relationships and interactions among actors, using and combining resources, and performing activities in order to increase the value created within the network.

Thus, in business to business also the interest of scholars in value has shifted from an early focus on product-oriented value-in-exchange to value-in-use (e.g., Grönroos, 2008; Vargo et al., 2008), value-in-context (Chandler and Vargo, 2011), and value-in-cultural-context (Akaka, Vargo, and Lusch, 2013). This implies going beyond the economic approach to studying value, and integrating the economic view more with the sociology discipline, as the next sections will better describe.

2. Service innovation and value creation through the social construction approach

Social construction is a social and epistemological theoretical approach that analyzes phenomena in social contexts (Burr, 2003). Instead of seeing reality as a given external object to be discovered, social construction scholars aim at understanding the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the creation of the perceived social reality and how people engage in interaction and social practices. The emphasis is on processes rather than on outcomes (Burr, 2003).

Through social construction, people create a common and shared reality (Luckmann and Berger, 1991), where sense-giving and sense-making generate an understanding of how social actors shape a meaningful social world (Giddens, 1984).

Edvardsson et al. (2011) point out the role of schemas (i.e., rules and norms) grounded in values embedded in society, shared among multiple actors, and existing in many situations wider than a particular practice. These schemas are institutionalized by signification, domination, and legitimation that, in turn, shape actors' understanding of meaning, control, and what is to be considered as of value. Furthermore, the authors affirm the importance of understanding the role of shared social values and schemas in influencing service exchange and value co-creation. According to this view, value is seen as a social construction (Penaloza and Venkatesh, 2006, p. 303), co-created in a social context, whereas "service systems are

embedded in the larger social context, such that customers inevitably evaluate value-in-use in a social context” (Edvardsson et al., 2011).

Value creation through innovation takes place within social systems (Edvardsson and Tronvoll, 2013). Nevertheless within the innovation literature few scholars have been studying innovation as a socially constructed phenomenon (Colurcio et al., 2010). By adopting a socio-cognitive perspective, De Rosa et al. (1999) see market offerings as “socially constructed knowledge structures that are shared among producers and consumers” (Rosa et al., 1999, p. 64). This sharing enables interaction among market actors.

More recently, Jamison, Christens, and Botin (2011) have highlighted that innovation can be framed as a story-line of social construction, emphasizing social process rather than the economic one: “Story tellers employ a language or vocabulary of sociology, anthropology and social philosophy to recount their tale of networking” (p. 22). Actors co-construct innovation also with the contribution of non-humans to satisfy social and economic interests, whereas the expertise of innovators is not purely technical or scientific, but involves forms of social competence. The story-line of social construction focuses on actors, networks, and consensus-building. In a similar vein, other studies show the role of sense-making theories as useful to understand the influence of knowledge and cognition on innovation (Thrane et al., 2010), where actors are both active constructors and shaped by the innovative context.

In business-to-business studies, scholars have also tried to analyze service innovation and value creation through the lens of social construction theory. Actors, in fact, matter in business markets as people and organizations lead to new understanding, networks of ideas, beliefs, routines, conventions, and novelty. In this regard, for instance, Möller (2010) studied actors with respect to the construction of meanings for new products and services, while Hardy et al. (2003) investigated the way in which innovation is negotiated in ongoing communicative processes that occur through relationships in networks.

Actors are also influenced by the social context and the business activities that take place between organizations: “The company is the product of its context and, at the same time, a force that gives shape to it” (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995, p. 396). Kowalkowski et al. (2012) discusses the temporal, contextual, and actor-related nature

of value in business to business, which is not always rational or objective, but can even be emotional (Corsaro and Snehota, 2010), and affected by history and the imaginable future (Komulainen et al., 2013). Value is not intrinsic with respect to a particular asset, but it is the outcome of participation in particular combinations in the context of reference, where in fact resources, activities, and heterogeneous actors interact (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2013).

2.1. Conversation, knowledge, and boundary objects in service innovation

Shared understandings are needed in a multi-stakeholder system as there are “prohibitive costs in terms of the time and effort needed to access other actors, to negotiate the terms for interaction, to conclude and manifest deals and to oversee and enforce agreements” (Mouzas and Ford, 2009, p. 495). Looking at innovation according to a social construction perspective, the attention moves from the content of innovation to the role of sense-making; that is, to how actors make sense of reality and shape meanings (Weick, 1985). As Colton (1987, p. 346) observed: “... human society is characterized by the use of symbols and meanings, and ... the meanings of various social and non-social objects or symbols are derived through the interaction process.” By interacting, a conversational process occurs. As Mengis and Eppler (2008) note, conversations are not a means to exchange information, but a process for social knowledge practices and sense-making in networks “where new configurations of meaning are constructed (Steyaert, Bouwen, and van Looy, 1996, p. 67). The result of conversations is that actors learn and act through a process and elaboration of multiple perspectives, information, and experience given by comparison and collaboration among them. Discourses and conversations produce new shared knowledge and meanings that are able to build the social reality as a common experience. The social constructionist perspective views knowledge no longer as an object that can be brought into companies from the outside, but as knowledge that is transformed in learning processes between innovation network partners across organizational boundaries (Carlile, 2002). Learning and acting become social processes developed in a social context where actors, by interacting, construct knowledge and meanings as a basis for innovation. A process of socialization arises that comes from participation in shared activities, based on shared understandings of the rules that guide actors’ behaviors and which thus support coordination.

One way to reach coordination in a multi-stakeholder system is through boundary objects. Boundary objects consist in devices, artifacts, and images that support the construction of meanings by the different actors (Carlile, 2002). By acting and interacting, people can in fact transform their subjective meanings in artifacts, giving meaning to reality and therefore constructing it. Boundary objects translate, coordinate, and align the perspectives of the different parties (Klimbe et al., 2010). The plastic character of boundary objects lies in being adaptable to local needs and in being robust enough to maintain a common identity across different uses: “they are a means of translation” able to maintain “coherence across intersecting communities” (Bowker and Star, 1999, p. 297).

Boundary objects have different meanings in different social contexts, but their structure is common enough for all intersecting social worlds to recognize and to use them as a means of translation, bringing coherence across intersecting social contexts (Nenonen and Storbacka, 2012). They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual site use.

Boundary objects can be abstract or concrete. Wenger (2000) identifies three different types of boundary objects: artifacts, discourses, and processes. Artifacts correspond to standardized forms, methods, objects, models, and maps; discourses represent a common language that allows people to communicate and negotiate meanings across boundaries; and processes include explicit routines and procedures in an organization. When identified by multiple actors, boundary objects serve as a common point of reference to facilitate conversation around contested issues at the same time. Boundary objects by definition have an array of meanings associated with them, each useful in individual situated practices (Marick, 2002).

Wenger also describes boundary objects as entities that can link communities together, as they allow different groups to collaborate on a common task. These objects satisfy the informational needs of a community of practice and facilitate coordination without consensus, as they enable an actor’s local understanding to be reframed in the context of some wider collective activity.

In new product development, boundary objects help to establish a “boundary infrastructure” (Bowker and Star, 1999) or “boundary process” (Carlile, 2002) that individuals use to manage knowledge across a given boundary.

In business to business, boundary objects have been studied by Geiger and Finch (2010), who have explored how network pictures – business actors’ subjective mental

representations of their surroundings – underlie decision-making in networks (Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, and Snehota, 2003). Other scholars have studied similar concepts, like the role of intercognitive representations developed through interaction practices between business partners (Öberg et al., 2012), or the role of value representation, defined as “the way an actor translates its own idea of value in something that can be observed by the other actors, and its meaning shared among them” (Corsaro, 2014). Recently, Akaka et al. (2014) also found symbols to be the central factor for value co-creation by supporting coordination of interactions, communication among groups, as well as the integration of resources. Value co-creation, in fact, results from the integration of resources (i.e., the enactment of integrative practices) among multiple actors, which, in turn, requires communication and coordination (Maglio and Spohrer, 2013).

3. Research approach

3.1. Research design

This research is part of a wider research project on service innovation and value creation carried out by CFMT (Training Center for Service Management) in Italy. The project aims at highlighting the factors behind value-creation processes through service innovation.

Close to relativist epistemology, this study is the outcome of contextual knowledge. An interactive, qualitative, multi-case-study approach is applied to gain insights into the investigated phenomena (Gummesson, 2000, 2003). By adopting an abductive approach, the researchers went back and forth between theory and empirical evidence during the research process (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), with the final aim of gaining theoretical insights through the analysis and description of new phenomena (Baker et al., 2008) and not necessarily to reach an objective truth.

We studied service innovation in practice within networks of the service system. We deepened the role of social context and social structures affecting and being affected by value-enabling innovation. In this paper, findings concern a judgment sample formed by ten cases operating in the food market (Table 1). In line with interpretative research guidelines, these cases have been selected for different reasons. First, the collective and relational view of service innovation is particularly evident and the role that actors collectively play in service innovation and in value-creation processes is assumed as central. Second, all the cases reflect a multi-stakeholder context where

both organizations and individuals as consumers are involved, allowing a richer perspective of observation. Third, since all the cases belong to the food industry, differences among them about the mechanisms for value co-creation are more evident.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

We collected data through multiple methods. We conducted 26 in-depth interviews with people who are considered highly knowledgeable, such as entrepreneurs, founders, and other key informants both inside and outside the companies (e.g., media partners and consultancies). During the interviews, audiotaped recordings were made and detailed notes and observations taken. This information was supplemented by documentary analysis of relevant company reports, brochures, and other business literature. We also make several observations within the company's contexts by taking part in the service provision as customers. Consistent with the social construction approach, we see social facts and actions linked to the context and influencing factors as complex, interconnected, and difficult to evaluate.

The interview guide was structured around four main themes: (i) the firm's innovation strategy and philosophy; (ii) the firm's orientation to value-creation processes; (iii) the firm's network perspective; and (iv) the social context in which networks deploy service innovation.

Consistent with the social construction method, we adopt a narrative approach to empirical analysis with the aim of offering an interpretation of the investigated phenomena. By looking at social contexts, we focused on multiple issues referring to innovative practices, specifically actors, resources, interaction, languages, rules, norms, and values.

Data analysis was a two-stage process. First, an intra-case study was conducted to evaluate each firm's approach to the management of the investigated phenomena. Secondly, a cross-case analysis was conducted to analyze similarities and differences among cases. The aim of this two-stage process of data analysis was to establish consistent findings across the case-study firms and thus to identify theoretical and managerial implications.

Reliability requirements were assured by using a protocol for each case that included transcripts of the audiotape recordings from all the interviews, field notes, and observations as well as secondary data. Findings were discussed in two workshops organized by CFMT with other researchers and managers.

Table 1 – The cases.

Company	Activity or Mission	Network
Eataly	A high-end Italian food market/mall chain comprising a variety of restaurants, food and beverage stations, bakery, and retail items.	Local farmers, fishermen, butchers, bakers, cheesemakers, winemakers, and other partners (among which Slow Food)
Eat's	A food store designed to increase the “food-shopping experience” with a wide and excellent wine and food offer.	Wine and food producers and farmers
Gambero Rosso	Italian food and wine magazine and publishing group. There is also the Gambero Rosso TV channel and Gambero Rosso's Città del gusto (City of taste) featuring TV studios, cooking school, wine bar, and professional and educational activities	Food and wine producers, restaurateurs, artisans, and other partners (among which Slow Food)
Diet To Go	A diet delivery service that provides nutritionally balanced, freshly prepared, real food for weight loss and a healthier lifestyle	Nutritionists, chefs, catering providers, communication agencies, and other partners.
Niko Romito Formazione	A higher education and specialization school dedicated to catering and haute cuisine A school to enhance Italian food, regional traditions, and gastronomic products through research and teaching An initiative connected to Reale Restaurant and Casa Donna Hotel	Food producers, universities, and other partners (among which Slow Food)
Grom	Ice-cream producers and retail chain Researching the best products the agricultural world has to offer: only fresh fruit from the best consortium in Italy and from its own organic farm Mura Mura®	Italian fruit consortia and other partners
Bioexpress	Network of small producers of organic food dedicated to local production; through a detailed production plan, it provides a wide and varied selection of fruits and vegetables, respecting features of seasonality and regionality	Organic farmers and producers, Ikea, and other partners
Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (G.A.S., Italian for ethical purchasing groups)	An Italian-based system of purchasing goods collectively; these groups are usually set up by a number of consumers who cooperate in order to buy food and other commonly used goods directly from producers or from big retailers at a price that is fair to both parties	Food producers, retailers, and consumers

Cortilia	The first online agricultural market for the sale and distribution of local food, which puts in contact producers and consumers and organizes shopping delivery	Food farmers and producers, consumers
Eccellenze Campane	Small businesses operating in different areas of the food and wine sector, whose purpose is to promote and enhance excellent food directly from producer to consumer, without any intermediate steps, in the logic of a short chain, concentrating in a single structure the best regional products	Food producers and other partners (among which Slow Food)

4. Findings

Actors' role and resource integration in service innovation

Service innovation is not a single-company endeavor but emerges through the collective efforts of a plurality of actors in the network, which enable the access to and use of multiple resources. Service innovation comes out of a process of multi-actor resource integration.

Our empirical cases seem to show alternative approaches to service innovation by considering the role that actors play in the process and how knowledge, competencies, and resources are integrated.

In some cases the idea of a new value proposition has been developed by a single company, which has shaped the multi-stakeholder service systems in which value co-creation occurs and where, at the same time, the service systems involved in the innovation process have influenced the development of the value proposition. The innovation process arises since the network is built around a common aim and with the specific intent to integrate a variety of resources. In this situation, actors engaged in service-for-service exchange play a crucial role in enabling and refining service innovation through the integration of their distinctive resources, as in the cases of Eat's, Eccellenze Campane, and Grom.

Crucial elements for the effectiveness of this approach to service innovation are the accurate selection of the heterogeneous actors involved in the network based on the resources and competencies they possess and the availability of those to share in the process of service-for-service exchange, as well as the development of platforms for co-creating value aimed at supporting resource integration.

In the case of Eat's unique food "boutique," the aim is to create a context where the

authenticity and quality of food products are preserved thanks to the professional rigor and passion of the great food artisans who have been involved in the project. They do not only provide authentic products, but also share and integrate their traditions, production competencies, and knowledge with professional chefs, passionate cooks, specialist and non-specialist journalists, and customers on specific occasions such as classes, meetings, and dinners, which are proposed and performed by the actors themselves. Relationship in the service system ranges from formal arrangements to miscellaneous social contacts. The media agency involved in supporting the communication of the new venture coordinates the heterogeneous actors and provides new opportunities to integrate resources among them.

“We wanted to create not just a conventional store, but a space between the shelves that represents a new agora, made of comfort, convenience, and quality where all the actors, customers, producers, food experts, and chefs may interact. Thanks to the accuracy in the store design, shopping is transformed in an appointment, which becomes a pause, a stop, a new ritual.” (Eat’s founder)

The value proposition of Eccellenze Campane acts as an umbrella conveying multiple offerings through several networks. It has its roots in the social context where actors do not only offer simple goods or services, but want to provide a new physical, cultural, and social place where consumers can enjoy their new food experiences.

It is a gastronomical center with an innovative hybrid formula for the production, delivery, and consumption of excellent agro-food products. The company has gathered together a set of heterogeneous actors, mainly producers and restaurateurs, joined by the shared traditions and food culture of the Campania region.

Differently from other initiatives, in this laboratory customers not only can taste and buy products, but there are eight production areas – bakery, brewery, pasta factory, dairy farm, roasting, confectionery, chocolate factory, and ice-cream parlor – in which every important stage of the production process is performed and explained directly by the producers.

“Our aim is to spread the worldwide traditions and culture of the Campania region on food excellence by accurately selecting local partners who believe in our values and share our philosophy. They not only are part of the innovative formula but

actively support us in continuously improving this new endeavor. If we realize that the beliefs and behavior of the partners are not truly aligned with ours, we invite them to exit the network.” (Eccellenze Campane’s manager)

In a different context, Guido Martinetti, a former winemaker, and Federico Grom, who had worked in Italy’s financial industry, started their venture with the aim of recovering the old-fashioned way to produce “gelato,” made with premium ingredients and processed by hand. Thus, they selected the finest organic ingredients and local artisanal purveyors who provided the raw materials they needed.

“We have pursued our goal since the beginning by rigorously researching and testing the best products the agricultural world has to offer: only fresh fruit from the best consortium in Italy.” (Grom’s founder)

In order to develop their formula, they also involved a number of partners who supported them in projecting the outlet and the consumer experience and in spreading the formula worldwide.

A second approach to service innovation that emerges from our research highlights the active role that actors in the service ecosystem collectively may play in projecting service innovation. Compared to the first situation, where there was a key actor orchestrating the network, in this approach the innovative value proposition emerges from the ongoing interaction and resource integration between the company and the multi-stakeholder social system, as in the cases of Eataly, Diet-to-Go, and Gambero Rosso.

“Eataly is an innovative retail formula based on a combination of food shopping, restaurants, and training areas aimed at promoting good and tasty, ‘clean’ products, because the company respects raw materials and guarantees transparent and traditional production processes, and fair, since it ensures adequate margins for producers and affordable prices for customers.” (Slow Food member)

The Slow Food movement has played a relevant role in establishing the Eataly business formula’s main features. Eataly managers and Slow Food delegates spent

more than two years working together to establish the main values and characteristics of the business model. The team promoted an assortment that was the result of their collection of suggestions from numerous Slow Food members from various local branches all over the world, called “Condotta.” Moreover, actors co-developed the codes of conduct to select the main Eataly suppliers. The collaboration continued over time in order to associate other small producers of high-quality food and wine to share the same philosophy and values that characterize the core of the project.

The co-developing role of actors in service innovation is also evident in the Diet to Go case. The company was established in 2005 and specialized in home delivery of healthy meals for people who desire to lose weight, but without renouncing a pleasant experience.

When the founder started to think about a new business idea aimed at improving dietary habits and decreasing obesity, she did not have enough money or any skills in diet and nutrition and in the food context. Thus, she decided to involve external actors in the development of the new service. The first relationship she activated was with nutritionists (doctors), who helped to study diet programs for losing weight in the correct way and without any health damage. In particular one of them, Dr. Tibaldi, specialized in the relationship between high-quality cuisine and diet, and he developed the ASI dietetic program. His role was so critical for the development of the business that he became a core partner in the company. After that, some top chefs were chosen who were committed to the innovative content of the offering and, at the same time, interested in learning from the continued experimentation with food. Kitchens, catering services, and providers of raw materials were then selected to provide the overall quality of the output. The delivery service of the Diet to Go bags was identified too; this was a very important player, especially considering that the people who deliver the bags are the only ones who have physical contact with customers, even more so at a delicate time of day like the early morning. The interaction between the main actors led to eliminating the ASI method as the core of the company’s value proposition, as it was considered to be too complicated to understand; instead, four different dietetic menus have been introduced.

The case of Diet to Go clearly shows that the social dimension appears to be crucial for service innovation by integrating key resources to co-create value through the involvement, since the very beginning, of multi-stakeholder service systems.

The heterogeneity of the actors involved in service innovation is crucial also in the

experience of Gambero Rosso. Gambero Rosso is one of the main actors in developing the culture of Italian food and wine all over the world. In this process a wide number of actors have been involved, namely producers, restaurateurs, artisans, and other partners. Gambero Rosso develops relationships, activities, and initiatives with and between the food communities formed by all those involved in the production, processing, and consumption of food and wine. The company also promotes and organizes educational activities through coordination and training, aimed at the development of a proper food culture.

Its value proposition – promoting and disseminating Italian food and wine – is conveyed through a supply network: magazines, books, guides, TV channel, web, and mobile. There is also an ever-growing community of fans and players paying attention to issues related to a high-quality and sustainable lifestyle.

The company's media network is enriched by the initiative of Città del Gusto (Taste City), a place where the training of amateurs and professionals takes place, as well as the organization of events. Città del Gusto is a city founded on knowledge and flavors, a center for food and wine to promote food culture both with experts but also to an audience of food lovers. The company's idea was to build a unique place in the world, a “theme park” where cookery is the great protagonist: a source of ideas, trends, and new talent from the wine and food world; a meeting place for enthusiasts and intellectuals, always open for tastings and debates.

“Città del Gusto is a multi-faceted reality. While at the beginning food and wine was just a hobby for a few people, now it is considered the norm of cooking and wine. A cultural assimilation that forces people to constantly see, question, and reinvent themselves.” (Gambero Rosso's founder)

Finally, we may empirically observe the existence of emergent service innovations that are the unforeseen result of a process of interaction aimed at integrating resources among actors in social contexts, as emerges in the case of Solidarity Purchasing Groups, better known in Italy as GAS (Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale), and in the cases of Bioexpress and Cortilia.

GAS emerged in the last decades as consumer groups whose aim is to experiment with new forms of socialization and personal involvement in procuring mainly agricultural products.

“When a group of people decides to meet in order to think about their purchasing choices and to buy products, using as guiding principles justice and solidarity, it creates a GAS.” (Documento Base, 1999)

Participation in a GAS meets several requirements: the opportunity to obtain organic and local products and the willingness to gather and discuss ethical concerns not only with the selected producers, but also among the GAS’s members and other actors in the service ecosystem, such as agricultural associations, logistics partners, local institutions, and other social movements. The result of these interactions has been a new set of practices and schemas related to food selection and purchase that establish alternative patterns to traditional retailing.

Bioexpress is the outcome of an ongoing relationship among a group of local farmers of organic fruits and vegetables who experienced difficulties in addressing traditional market access such as mass retailing. They came up with the solution of delivering their tasty and organic products directly to consumers’ homes in pre-selected boxes, available in three sizes, small (3–4 kilos), medium (6–8 kilos), and large (9–12 kilos). The mix of fruits and vegetables delivered is defined by the producers on a seasonal basis; consumers are thus enabled to try products that they would have never bought and are provided with recipes for cooking them. The website is the platform through which the producers organize the operations and gather and provide information to the actors in the service system. This new venture has gradually involved a heterogeneous mix of farmers, all aimed at transforming the mainstream market.

“On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Bioexpress, we have launched the new My Bioexpress: thanks to this handy innovation the consumer can create his personalized basket by choosing online which types of seasonal fruit and vegetables to receive every week. With My Bioexpress now it is possible also to add various types of organic products from our associates, such as bread, chocolate, muesli, honey, jam, various fruit juices etc.” (Bioexpress manager)

Cortilia represents a sort of hybrid solution with regard to those presented above, since it emerged from the continuous interaction in local markets among producers and consumers. Cortilia is the first agricultural market online where consumers can

buy handmade products directly from local farmers. It works as a buying group: by taking advantage of the short food supply chain, the user has the opportunity to buy directly from individual farmers, selected on a geographical basis. As a matter of fact, Cortilia results in an internet platform directly available to farmers and users, to bring together supply and demand in a unique collective farmers' online shop. The farmers associated in Cortilia offer tasty products, handmade and achieved through sustainable farming techniques. This is a new and innovative model that enhances the local food chain, aggregates actors according to proximity, highlights the variety of products offered, and optimizes logistics.

What this new venture aims at enhancing is not only the geographical proximity in terms of physical distance between producers and consumers, but especially the social proximity in terms of trusting relationships among the actors in the service system, solidarity between producers and consumers, civic engagement in the local food system, and (re)connection with local food traditions and identities.

Service innovation as a process of sense-making

In the cases investigated, service innovation is not simply a business and economic process, but is a social and cultural one that is affected by and affects the norms, rules, and values of food production and consumption. Actors perform practices that share the values of food, namely pleasure, quality, authenticity, responsibility, and sustainability.

These examples are based on new service provision in terms of benefits for the customers as well as for other network actors. These propositions have roots in the social context, as actors do not simply offer goods or services, but they are built around a shared understanding to promote food culture through different multi-actor practices.

The process of sense-making is embedded in the social and cultural context and it affects the types of resources actors use and integrate and how they do that. The cases discussed provide evidence of actors participating in and sharing new value-creation logics as a critical factor in service innovation.

Along these lines, the aim of Gambero Rosso is to disseminate a food and wine culture through its community.

“It is a social and cultural process of building quality, authenticity, legitimacy, and

value, by widening the roles and the meanings of food in everyday practices.”
(*Gambero Rosso associate*)

Within the Città del Gusto there are Gambero Rosso schools where different actors – from professionals to amateurs – learn to cook, taste, know about wine, and work in the food and wine industry. There are many spaces dedicated to training, to cooking workshops, bakery, and pizzeria, each with fully equipped workstations, where lessons are held with the chefs and a collective process of learning and developing knowledge takes place.

The food is thus the medium that talks about itself and makes sense in a wide social context, through a multiplicity of symbols of excellence: the three glasses for the wine, three forks for the restaurants, three grains and three cups for the bar mean a recognition (and a mark) for the operators, a reference for the customers, and an acknowledgment for the media. These symbols have become not only a hallmark of a goal and a coveted brand, but also carriers of shared meanings related to the authenticity and quality of processes and products.

As far as Eataly and Eat's are concerned, although different in emphasis, they have concentrated all their efforts in terms of service innovation towards the store, seen as the platform that constantly supports the sharing of meanings on authentic and good food among different actors. The store is the new physical, cultural, and social place where actors can enjoy their food experience. A shared meaning of excellent food and wine within different perspectives enables the process of social construction.

In Niko Romito Formazione, a key role in sense-making is played by the recipes that are used in several contexts: the Reale restaurant, the school, training courses, the Unforkettable project. They are the same, but they can be adapted according the chef, the context, or the customers. In a school classroom or in the restaurant kitchen a recipe is the reference for people to interact, dialogue, and match resources. It allows the improvement of skills and is what people need beyond hands, techniques, and raw material.

Very often the process of sense-making is driven also by conventional artifacts. As an example, the boxes in which fruit and vegetables are delivered to customers by Bioexpress represent at the same time the logistical means and the meaning drivers for all the actors in the service system; in particular, since the items are selected by producers on a seasonal basis, when the customers receive the box they have the

opportunity to discover new authentic and sustainable products. Since they do not always know how to use some of them, Bioexpress provides on its website a set of recipes to support customers' cooking processes.

Sense-making, as a process of shaping actors' representations of reality, can be understood in terms of its effects on changing the resources available to the actors in service systems, as in the case of Diet to Go. The proposal behind the Diet to Go offering is very simple: diets are often punitive and sad. In contrast, food is a pleasure, especially in the Italian culture. So a diet should become an enjoyable experience. In general the key elements that allowed for this innovative service to be successful and spread rapidly consist in the sharing of a common idea: Diet to Go does not only provide healthy food to lose weight, but all the actors involved in the service systems continuously dialogue and confront how food can be used to improve health and pleasure. To support the creation of this new meaning, it has created a book where the company philosophy is presented, the Diet to Go method described and how such a method can help to change customers' mindsets about food habits explained, along with brochures containing some suggested recipes. In addition to that, an intranet platform for information sharing has been created, to check for new menus, download photos and catalogues, and find tags to be printed on the meal boxes.

In the Diet to Go case, the kitchen represents an object shared among many players and around which, more or less consciously, they coordinate their activities and their thoughts. At the same time, however, this object is seen differently by the different actors in the service system: it is a space to experiment with new recipes for chefs, a site to train franchisees, a place where new knowledge is developed for nutritionists, a context to transfer information from customers for people engaged in service delivery, a place where entrepreneurs can get new ideas, and also the repository of customer feedback on the quality of the service, and so on. These different ideas on the kitchen and what it represents have led to an emerging common sense of diet, no longer as the intangible content of the offering, but rather as a learning process for all the actors involved in the system. This allows for the final service to be provided effectively and for the Diet to Go philosophy and values to be communicated in a coherent and integrated way through all the different touch points in the network.

“The purpose of our kitchen is actually to make products that represent the best possible compromise between health and taste.” (Diet to Go partner)

A process of sense-making arises alongside this service innovation provision. Actors do not offer only new outputs but participate in new meanings through a sense-making process supported by social structures and practices in the service system. In the cases analyzed, sense-making is fundamentally a conversational and narrative process involving a variety of communication forms, both spoken and written, formal and informal. As highlighted by the experience of Cortilia, it involves conversational and social practices. A key feature of this innovative online farmers' market is in fact the story-telling about each producer, its method of cultivation, and its relationship with the land through texts and videos.

“Cortilia is not just a retailer, intended as a place of exchange and encounter, but it is also a place where stories are narrated and shared by farmers, a place where resource integration occurs among producers, consumers, and other stakeholders around the meaning of sustainable and authentic food.” (Cortilia’s manager)

Sometimes this process of sense-making is supported by an overarching meaning maker that contributes to produce social structures and practices. In the cases of Eataly, Grom, and Eccellenze Campane, this role is played by Slow Food.

Slow Food is a global, grassroots organization, founded to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions, counteract the increasing speed of life, and combat people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, and how the food choices of people affect the world around them. Slow Food envisions a world in which all people can access and enjoy food that is good for them, for those who grow it, and for the planet. Its approach is based on a concept of food that is defined by three interconnected principles: good (the food we eat should taste good), clean (the food we eat should be produced in a clean way that does not harm the environment, animal welfare, or our health), and fair (food producers should receive fair compensation for their work).

Slow Food believes that food is tied to many other aspects of life, including culture, politics, agriculture, and the environment. Through their food choices people can collectively influence the way their food is cultivated, produced, and distributed, and as a result bring about great change.

Slow Food involves millions of people who are passionate about good, clean, and fair

food. Its heterogeneous network is made up of chefs, young people, activists, farmers, fishermen, experts, and academics in over 150 countries. The overall network is made up of a series of subnetworks: a network of around 100,000 Slow Food members; the Terra Madre network of 2,000 food communities that practice small-scale and sustainable production of quality food around the world; the Slow Food Youth Network (SFYN), Slow Food's youth arm; and the University of Gastronomic Sciences (UNISG).

Slow Food allows schemas (resources, norms, and values) to be matched. These schemas guide actors' behaviors, their interaction and conversation, thus shaping new meanings as a basis for new collective value propositions.

In the case of Eccellenze Campane, the aim was to develop a laboratory of tastes, traditions, and flavors of Campania based on Slow Food's core values.

“Starting from my experience, I progressively realized that in society the capability to distinguish good and authentic food was decreasing as well as the pleasure of taste. Also thanks to the increasingly widespread diffusion of the Slow Food philosophy, I decided to create a new retail formula where people could appreciate quality food in a holistic experience that they actively contribute to generate. Eccellenze Campane is culture, is meanings, is tasting, is experiencing a new and more conscious way to buy authentic food products.” (Eccellenze Campane’s founder)

Consistent with the sustainability issues in food consumption, Grom's formula has been developed with the aim of recovering the authenticity and sustainability of the products and production processes, many of which are under the protection of the Slow Food label, such as Bronte pistachios, Tonda Gentile delle Langhe hazelnuts, Leonforte peaches, Ribera strawberries, and Amalfi lemons.

“During my lunch break I was eating a sandwich while reading the newspaper, and my eye caught Carlin Petrini's (Slow Food founder) article. It said that no one in Italy makes 'gelato like it used to be made.' He was talking about high-quality gelato, with fresh seasonal fruit, without artificial aromas, without thickening agents, without colorings.” (Grom's founder)

The attention to authenticity and sustainability is not only the distinctive feature of the

venture, but also the glue that holds together actors in different service systems.

“The collaboration with Grom is a further demonstration that thanks to the choices innovators make it is possible to put in place systems geared towards economic and environmental sustainability and the reduction of waste, spreading information and culture to the citizens. Thanks to this collaboration, we were able to develop an innovative type of cap made of an innovative bioplastic obtained by starch, cellulose, vegetable oils, and their combinations, whose properties and characteristics of use are very similar to those of traditional plastics, but at the same time they are biodegradable and compostable.” (Partner’s General Manager)

The sense-making related to sustainability issues is also a distinctive feature of GAS (Solidarity Purchasing Groups) members that activate local economies by promoting stable business relationships with small and medium-sized producers in the area. These relationships guarantee members of the service systems that the products bought respect several principles: they ensure food safety (health) achieved through sustainable and compatible agricultural practices; producers respect the rights of workers involved in the production processes and have difficulty in entering the usual channels of commerce since they are marginal holdings, nonprofit cooperatives, social farming, etc.; costs are reduced by bypassing intermediaries in the relationships with suppliers and adopting a short food supply chain that allows a reduction in transport costs. The meanings related to this form of consumer “resistance” to modernization of the food system are increasingly spreading through the mainstream market, thus determining the emergence of further innovative value propositions.

5. Discussion

The objective of this article was to apply a social construction approach to study how service innovation shapes value co-creation in multi-stakeholder systems. We decided to apply this specific lens due to the diffusion of a value-creation logic that goes beyond the service content to include the collective nature of many innovations, and the increasing role assigned to actors and the context in affecting the service innovation process.

We have shown that in a multi-stakeholder system service innovation takes place through networked resource integration, where the resources to be integrated can be cultural, social, collective, and linked to live contextual experiences. As a matter of fact, in the cases investigated innovation is seen as a new value proposition about food provision that allows a different way of integrating resources for actors: the process of serving food changes, as well as the practices involved.

This study also extends the customer view of previous studies (Evdvardsson et al., 2011) by empirically showing that different actors, and not only customers, have the capability to attract and link other actors around a shared process of sense-making through value propositions. These actors can be producers, who present products, discuss the production processes, and interact in the network; managers, who have the opportunity to spread their food philosophy through accurate product selection, an original store layout, and appealing in-store communication; store staff members, thanks to whom the “sociable” store design may provide additional information on food origins and production processes, as well as advising about product specifics; customers, who can increase their knowledge of authentic food by tasting it, learning how to distinguish and cook it, and buying it in a unique space, indirectly providing information about their food habits and agreeing to do so to improve their shopping experience; experts, chefs and sommeliers, but also journalists, amateurs, and bloggers who meet in the store, during both formal and informal meetings, to share suggestions, ideas, and meanings on food production and consumption. In other words, the actors are active in creating meanings. They have the opportunity to focus on service innovation as a process of co-construction and sense-making that involves the company itself, the customers, and the other partners as intersubjective actors in a social, economic, and cultural context, thus influencing the value co-creation processes with new meanings and behavior.

The role of actors in service innovation is thus highly relevant: service innovation emerges as a socially constructed story of sense-making, where actors actively participate in the production of meanings about what matters to them. As in the case of Eataly and GAS, creating collective meanings implies enacting new opportunities together. Service innovation cannot be considered individually, and nor can it be imposed by producers or customers – it evolves from complex interactions that occur at a system level.

This point is particularly evident with respect to the change in the meaning of food,

which no longer includes only nutritional benefits, but increasingly social and cultural values. Food values of authenticity, sustainability, and quality are shaping business practice. From this perspective, food serves functions other than nutrition, which puts its role in a broader and more complex context: “Food becomes a social vehicle, allowing people to make social distinctions and to establish social linkages, for example, by sharing food” (Rozin, 2005, p. 108). As in the Slow food case, actors spur on a social and cultural process that develops quality, authenticity, legitimacy, and value, expanding the roles and meanings of food and wine in daily practices.

More specifically, the analysis of our cases has illustrated that there are alternative approaches to service innovation by considering the role that actors play in the process and how knowledge, competencies, and resources are integrated. The first can be labeled orchestrated service innovation, where there is the leading role of one central actor that orchestrates the resource integration and thus the whole process of innovation. This is the case for instance for Eat’s and Grom, in which the companies started with the definition of the new value proposition and then involved the other actors in the service system, focusing on the resources they possessed in order to enable its implementation. In this case the actor’s role is basically reactive towards the new value proposition and mainly related to contributing to fulfilling innovation and purposefully integrating their resources in order to make it happen. In the second situation, innovation is still intentional, but it constitutes more of a collective phenomenon where different actors on the one hand have higher autonomy and responsibility for resource integration, and on the other often act simultaneously by generating systems of coordination according to the different types of resources integrated, as in Eataly and Gambero Rosso. Here the actor’s role is more proactive: they take part in service innovation processes from the very beginning and collaborate in actively selecting other actors to be involved on the basis of the resources they possess and in organizing resource integration. In the third setting, in contrast, service innovation is almost totally unplanned and emerges from interactions between actors, where the evolution of intermediate outcomes based on the previous ones will determine what the final innovation will be, shaping a process that is strongly dynamic, ongoing, and interactive. In the cases of GAS and Cortilia this process is particularly evident: by intensively interacting on a social basis, actors offered fertile ground for the emergence of innovation. In this situation the role that actors may play is determined by the emergent innovation and may vary over time on the basis of the

subsequent outcomes of the innovation process.

In all three approaches, however, a new idea became a successful innovation through the sharing of a higher sense and meanings among the actors that form the network. Actors' abilities to acquire, integrate, and use resources depend on the rules, norms, and values within the social context. On the other hand, by offering a new value proposition to the market, companies contribute to improving the social structure for a memorable customer experience and value creation. The empirical evidence highlights that this sense-making process of meaning-building arises also thanks to boundary objects in service innovation, as they assume a central role in representing and constructing common knowledge, becoming social mediators to service innovation.

In other words, service innovation through social construction occurs in different ways with different boundary objects acting as mediators. Some of these are more physical, such as the kitchen in the case of Diet to Go, the store in the cases of Eat's and Eatily, and the box in the case of Bioexpress. Other are more symbolic, as in the case of Gambero Rosso, or textual, such as the recipes in Niko Romito Formazione or the rules in the Grom case. Narratives in the Cortilia and GAS cases are instead a good example of how discourse can become boundary objects.

In any event, such boundary objects seem to assume different functions with respect to the type of service innovation considered.

In the case of orchestrated service innovation, boundary objects are clearly identified and strategically used from the beginning by the network orchestrator of the process, and their functions are mainly related to coordinating operations rather than abstract ideas. In this situation, a platform for resource integration is generally created so that each actor knows what to do and what the goal of the project is (see Eat's case). Boundary objects here are quite static, as happens with Grom's rules about raw materials that actors in the network have to follow strictly.

As for collective service innovation, the role of boundary objects is more to find at least partially overlapping meanings that allow for the coordination of the multi-stakeholder system. Boundary objects become media to better drive further resource integration. For instance, in the Diet to Go case, the kitchen represents a physical boundary object around which the new idea of diet emerged; this boundary object becomes progressively shared by an increasing number of actors and this leads to

change in the main dietetic program developed at the beginning by the founder and the nutritionist.

Finally, in emergent service innovation, boundary objects represent at the same time the outcome of the process of service innovation, and an input that shows opportunities for further research integration and thus value co-creation. Given that the goals of the service innovation are not clear from the beginning, boundary objects assume mainly the form of discourses and story-telling. In the case of Bioexpress, for instance, the impact of ongoing interactions has been so strong that it gradually involved a heterogeneous mix of farmers, leading to transformation of the mainstream market.

6. Managerial implications

This study has important implications for managerial practice. First, as stated by Lang (1999), we confirm that there is great potential in applying the concept of boundary objects to the food industry, where boundary objects could link not only the worlds of scientists and nonscientists, but those of (expert) producers and (lay) consumers – worlds that are highly diverse because of the complexity of modern food systems. In this view, we further stress that boundary objects are useful in emphasizing heterogeneous and flexible interpretations of food, thus contributing to the innovation and development of the whole industry. In such a way, boundary objects should not be seen only as emergent and thus uncontrollable, but also as strategic tools on which managers can act in order to favor service innovation and thus value co-creation. To grant a strategic use of boundary objects, a figure in the organization should be identified as responsible for that. It could be the Communication Manager, but also a Network Manager.

In addition, since boundary objects do not create and communicate knowledge themselves, but it is the interaction around them that does so, companies should try to influence these interactions in such a way that new knowledge is created and modified across the different sites, although without missing the superordinate value-creation logic that guides the entire process.

Managers need to interpret the newness in service innovation by using models and shared languages, so as to give meaning and direction to new spaces for innovation

within multi-stakeholder systems.

7. . Implications for scholars

Scholars are struggling to grasp innovation nowadays as previous frameworks are losing their validity. In this study, service innovation is framed as a collective phenomenon based on the creation and sharing of new meanings within multi-stakeholder systems.

Further research could deepen the role of the social context to understand resource integration and sense-making as key processes in shaping value creation.

It would be interesting to understand how actors participate in a process of innovation that can arise in a surprising way around a new idea. Specific questions relate to (i) how the construction of meaning allows an innovation process in which the sharing of experience between the different actors – whether customers or suppliers – activates a process of exchange of knowledge, languages, and meanings and shapes the process of new value creation; (ii) how actors find new roles in networks to facilitate a collective sense of innovation; (iii) how symbols and representations can support the innovation process; and (iv) how the combination of pluralism (i.e., multiple actors, meanings, and values) and complexity (from the technology and consumer demand sides) allows the propagation of multiple opportunities for innovation.

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