

2011 NAPLES FORUM ON SERVICE

Engagement: An important bridging concept for the emerging S-D logic lexicon

Roderick J. Brodie, Linda D. Hollebeek and Sandra D. Smith

University of Auckland Business School

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Abstract

Purpose In the last five years the S-D logic has developed a meta-language incorporating a number of concepts, including ‘co-creation’ and ‘resource integration’ to express its foundational premises. The challenge now is to expand the lexicon to include bridging concepts that link these relatively abstract concepts to marketing practice. In this paper we explore the role of ‘engagement’ as a bridging concept within this emerging lexicon.

Method Our research identified 46 academic articles using the terms ‘engage’ and/or ‘engagement’ in discussions addressing the S-D logic. A thematic analysis was undertaken to examine the use of these terms, and how they relate to specific business relationships and marketing practices.

Findings The theoretical roots of ‘engagement’ lie within a theory of transcending relationships, as consistent with the S-D logic. The thematic analysis indicates the terms ‘engage’ and/or ‘engagement’ are used in a variety of ways to elaborate on the nature and dynamics characterizing focal B2B, B2C and/or other specific types of business relationships. Engagement describes the interactive, co-creative experiences between focal actors in service relationships. It is conceptually distinct from traditional relational concepts, such as ‘participation,’ and ‘involvement.’

Implications ‘Engagement,’ is an important, nascent concept for the undertaking of empirical research in the area of the S-D logic, and understanding the nature and dynamics typifying specific marketing practices associated with the S-D logic. It provides a more concrete, actionable language aligned with business practice which applies not only to customers, but equally, to any actor within a service system.

Key words engagement, interactive co-creative experiences S-D logic, lexicon, thematic analysis, actionable language

Language is used for doing things. Language use is really a form of joint action. It is the joint action that emerges when speakers and listeners – or writers and readers – perform their individual actions in coordination, as ensembles. Clark (1996)

1. Introduction

Since its inception in Vargo and Lusch's (2004) seminal article in the *Journal of Marketing*, the "service-dominant" (S-D) logic is becoming increasingly widespread, and is evolving, within the literature (Lusch and Vargo, 2006a/b; Lusch et al., 2007). To illustrate, the authors' original set of foundational premises (FPs) governing the S-D logic was modified in Vargo and Lusch (2008a), and continues to be subject to theoretical scrutiny, debate and development amongst a growing academic community. Further, Lusch et al. (2010) posit the concepts of 'partnership,' 'value networks,' 'service provision,' and 'value (co-)creation' represent core constituents of the S-D logic perspective, which is also encapsulated within Vargo and Lusch's (2008a) revised FPs.

The totality of the authors' ten revised FPs governing the S-D logic may be viewed to provide the basis for a transcending lexicon, or meta-language, which facilitates the dissemination and further conceptual development of this evolving perspective. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term 'lexicon' as "a wordbook or dictionary," a "vocabulary of a particular language or field." As such, Vargo and Lusch's (2008a) set of revised FPs may be viewed as the high-level (i.e. meta-) lexicon reflecting the conceptual nature and dynamics typifying the S-D logic. Key concepts featured in the S-D logic lexicon include 'service,' 'value co-creation,' 'resource integration/integrator,' 'operant/operand resources' and 'value networks' (e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2008a; Lusch et al., 2010).

Lusch and Vargo (2010) recognize the critical importance of developing a transcending lexicon in advancing the S-D logic in a recent presentation. Specifically, they state:

"As a potential community of service scientists we cannot organize ourselves for greater impact and accelerated learning and knowledge development and dissemination, without a transcending lexicon."

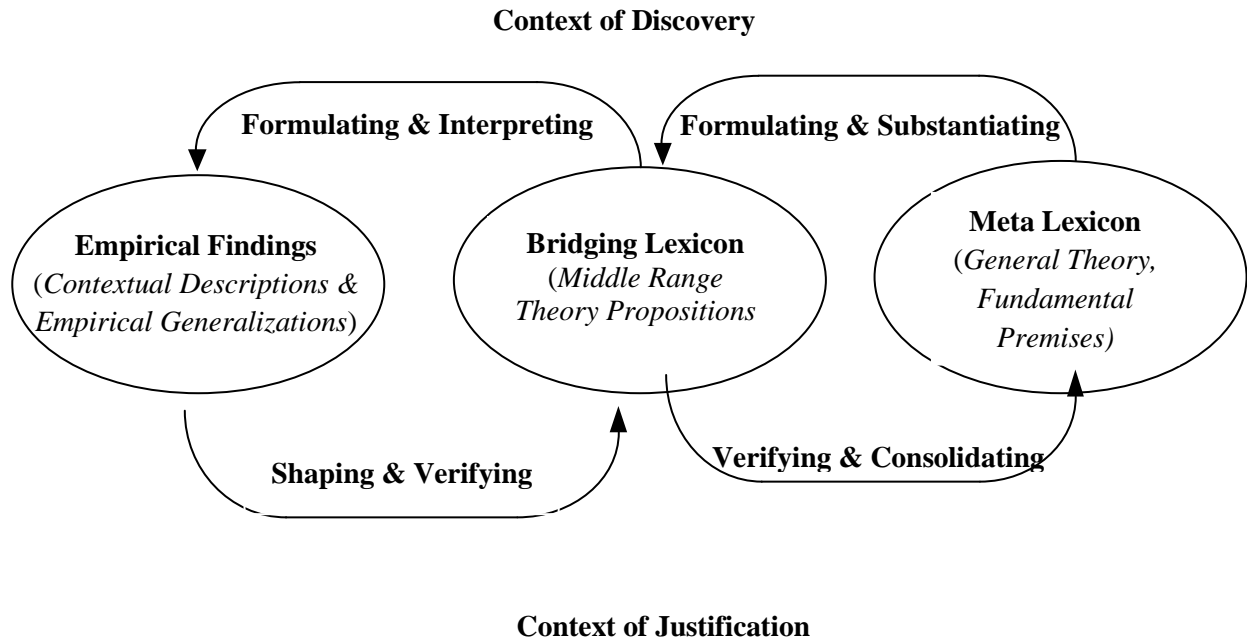
While it is important to develop a transcending lexicon that serves as the basis for developing a general theory based on the S-D logic, it is equally important to acquire a ‘bridging lexicon,’ which allows for the empirical testing of the emerging general theory. For example, Hunt (1983: p. 12) notes:

“Theorists concerned with developing general theories should be alert to the problems involved in empirically testing their theoretical constructions. When key constructs in theory become highly abstract, in the sense of being too far removed from observable reality, or in the sense that relationships among key constructs become too loosely specified, then empirical testability suffers, predictive power declines, explanatory impotence sets in.”

To overcome the inherent difficulty of suitably interfacing the conduction of empirical research with general theory development, Brodie, Saren and Pels (2011) argue for the need to consider middle range theory. Therefore, while the theoretical roots of bridging terms (such as ‘engagement,’ ‘experience,’ etc.) may reside within the broader S-D logic at the meta-level, these concepts also exist within the middle range theory lexicon, which exists at the sub-ordinate level to the S-D logic lexicon. These terms will align more closely to the more concrete, actionable language of business practice, and hence will more readily allow for empirical investigation relative to the S-D logic meta-language.

In their recent paper Brodie et al. (2011) outline how middle range theory can be used to theorize about the S-D logic. By employing sub-ordinate concepts, which link to specific forms of marketing practice, middle range theory can be used to develop propositions and hypotheses for adoption in empirical investigations. The empirical findings, in turn, can be used to modify and verify the propositions and hypotheses developed within specific middle range theory frameworks. Further, this process may be used to consolidate the foundational premises (FPs) that underpin the S-D logic, and, as such, contribute to the further advancement of the S-D logic. This scientific cycle of enquiry is outlined in Figure 1

Figure 1: Bridging Role of Middle Range Theories



Adapted from Brodie et al (2011)

In this paper we explore the use of the ‘engagement’ concept as a sub-ordinate, or bridging, term within the emerging S-D logic lexicon. Investigation of the ‘engagement’ concept, in particular, was undertaken based on the observation that this concept is being increasingly used within scholarly discourse addressing the S-D logic in relation to marketing practice, and appears to replace the adoption of more traditional relational concepts, including ‘involvement’ and/or ‘participation.’ For example, Schau, Muñiz and Arnould’s (2009) recent research examining value creation in brand communities draws on the terms ‘engage’ and/or ‘engagement’ seventy-five times, whilst refraining from the use of the terms ‘involvement’ and/or ‘participation’ altogether. Similarly Grönroos (2011), when examining business relationships and value creation, uses the terms ‘engage’ and/or ‘engagement’ over twenty times. In a personal communication, Christian Grönroos was asked why he used these terms, rather than other emerging and/or more traditional relational terms. He stated:

“I did not know I used it 20 times! I have started to use ‘engagement’ for two reasons. First of all, I wanted to say something else than ‘relationship.’ All business engagements are not perceived by the customer as relational, although they often are referred to as relationships. Second, I soon realized that engagement says something about the very nature of business contacts that is according to the relationship marketing idea, and service logic. It connotes that there is an interest in getting close to the customer’s processes, and signaling a strive towards committing itself as a firm to the customer, and to supporting the customer’s processes (business processes or individual customer’s life paths).”

Thus, in a similar way to Schau et al (2009), he was using the term engagement intuitively because it felt a better way to express the discussion he was developing about service and relationships

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 explores how the conceptual roots of ‘engagement’ lie within the S-D logic. Section 3 addresses the recent review by Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric and Ilic (2011), which defines the conceptual domain of ‘customer engagement.’ Section 4 provides a thematic analysis of ‘engagement’ within the scholarly S-D logic discourse, and examines whether the fundamental propositions developed to designate the conceptual domain of customer engagement can be extended to define the ‘engagement’ concept more generally. Finally, section 5 concludes with a discussion of the implications arising from the research.

2. Engagement and the S-D logic

Brodie et al.’s (2011) recent research explored the conceptual roots of ‘customer engagement’ (CE). Specifically, the authors suggest CE may be explained by drawing on the S-D logic, which in contrast to a more traditional, ‘goods-dominant’ perspective offers ‘a transcending view of relationships’ (Vargo, 2009). This broader relational perspective recognizes that specific consumer behavior outcomes are generated by customers’ particular interactive, value co-creative experiences with organizations and/or other stakeholders. While Brodie et al. (2011) focused on the particular concept of CE, it is suggested the reasoning could equally well extend to other forms of ‘engagement,’ such as ‘brand engagement’ or ‘consumer engagement.’ The question then arises as to whether the reasoning could be extended to any actor type within specific service relationships.

Brodie et al. (2011) propose four of the FPs underlying the S-D logic are of particular relevance for determining the conceptual foundations underlying the emerging engagement concept. Specifically, FP6 states “*The customer is always a co-creator of value,*” which highlights the interactive, co-creative nature of value creation between customers and/or other actors within service relationships. Further, FP9 states: “*All social and economic actors are resource integrators,*” which implies the context of value creation occurs within networks.

Further, FP8 states: “*A service-centered view is inherently customer-oriented and relational,*” which highlights the transcending, relational nature of service. In this context, service is viewed to generate specific customer benefits through the co-creation of value with other actors in specific service relationships by virtue of focal interactions and/or interactive experiences. Finally, FP10 states: “*Value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary,*” which emphasizes the highly experiential, inherently subjective and contextual nature of the value co-creation concept, where customers are co-creators of their individual perceived value (Schembri, 2006). The four FPs provide a conceptual foundation for the theoretical development of the CE concept, which reflects customers’ interactive, co-creative experiences with other stakeholders in focal, networked service relationships. Specifically, Lusch and Vargo (2010) suggest particular interactive, co-creative customer experiences may be interpreted as the act of “engaging.” We suggest that the “interactive co-creative experiences” could apply to all actors within the eco-systems associated with the S-D logic.

3. Defining the Conceptual Domain of Customer Engagement

The terms “consumer engagement” and “customer engagement” (CE) have started to appear in the academic marketing and service literature only in the last five years (Brodie et al., 2011). As a result, relatively few attempts at the systematic conceptualization of CE have been observed in the marketing literature to-date. The conceptualizations identified in a literature review are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Engagement Conceptualizations in the Marketing Literature

Author(s)	Concept	Definition	Dimensionality
Patterson et al. (2006)	Customer engagement	The level of a customer's physical, cognitive and emotional presence in their relationship with a service organisation.	Multidimensional: Absorption (C), dedication (E), vigor/interaction (B)
Vivek et al. (2010)	Consumer engagement	The intensity of an individual's participation & connection with the organization's offerings & activities initiated by either the customer or the organization.	Multidimensional: C, E, B
Mollen and Wilson (2010)	Online brand engagement	The customer's cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value.	Multidimensional: Sustained cognitive processing (C), instrumental value (C), experiential value (E).
Bowden (2009)	Customer engagement process	A psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which customer loyalty forms for new customers of a service brand as well as the mechanisms by which loyalty may be maintained for repeat purchase customers of a service brand.	Multidimensional: C, E, B*
Van Doorn et al. (2010)	Customer engagement behavior	Customers' behavioral manifestation towards a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers such as word-of-mouth activity, recommendations, helping other customers, blogging, writing reviews.	Unidimensional: B
Hollebeek (2011)	Customer brand engagement	The level of a customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in brand interactions.	Multidimensional: C, E, B
Pham and Avnet (2009)	Engagement behavior	Finds that engagement "seems to be inferred from a pattern of action or withdrawal with respect to a target object (p. 116)."	Multidimensional: C, B*
Higgins and Scholer (2009)	Engagement	A state of being involved, occupied, fully absorbed or engrossed in something (i.e. sustained attention), generating the consequences of a particular attraction or repulsion force. The more engaged individuals are to approach or repel a target, the more value is added to or subtracted from it.	Multidimensional: C, E, B*

Engagement dimensionality: C: Cognitive - E: Emotional - B: Behavioral [: Inferred from, rather than made explicit in, the relevant research]Source: Brodie et al. (2011)*

As observed from the majority of engagement definitions in Table 1, Brodie et al. (2011) posit the concept comprises specific cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral dimensions (cf. Patterson

et al., 2006; Hollebeek, 2010). Specifically, CE is suggested to extend beyond the ‘involvement’ concept in that it encompasses a proactive, interactive customer relationship with a specific engagement object (e.g. a brand). Accordingly, Mollen and Wilson (2010) CE transcends beyond “the mere exercise of cognition,” and “unlike involvement, requires the satisfying of experiential value, as well as instrumental value.” This argument is consistent with the view of CE within the transcending view of relationships articulated within the S-D logic, which highlights the importance of ‘interactivity’ and ‘customer experience’ (e.g. Vargo, 2009).

This rationale led Brodie et al. (2011) to derive five fundamental propositions (FPs), which define the conceptual domain of CE, and delineate the concept from other relational concepts, such as ‘participation’ or ‘involvement.’ The authors’ proposed FPs are:

FP1: CE reflects a psychological state, which occurs by virtue of *interactive customer experiences* with a *focal agent/object* within specific service relationships.

FP2: CE states occur within a *dynamic, iterative process* of service relationships that *co-create value*.

FP3: CE plays a *central role* within a nomological network of service relationships.

FP4: CE is a *multidimensional concept* subject to a context- and/or stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions.

FP5: CE occurs within a specific set of situational conditions generating differing *CE levels*.

When developing the FPs, Brodie et al. (2011) also address the conceptually distinct nature of CE. Moreover, while some of these associated, relational concepts represent *required* CE antecedents (e.g. involvement, participation), others (e.g. flow, rapport) may be more accurately depicted as *potential* CE antecedents and/or consequences. Further, the iterative nature of the service relationship process implies CE’s relational consequences, including ‘commitment,’ ‘trust,’ ‘self-brand connection,’ ‘emotional brand attachment’ and/or ‘loyalty,’ may act as antecedents to subsequent interactive, co-creative experiences between the customer and a focal engagement object, such as a brand.

The next section extends the research addressing CE to examine the concept's more generic use within the S-D logic. Based on this analysis, the question arises whether Brodie et al.'s (2011) fundamental propositions that define the conceptual domain of CE can be extended to all forms of engagement in service relationships.

4. Thematic Analysis Engagement

4.1 Identifying Themes

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, classifying and/or reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Further, thematic analysis may be also be used to interpret the various aspects of a particular research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). In contrast to content analysis, thematic analysis incorporates the entire conversation as the potential unit of analysis (Thomsen et al., 1998). As such, a range of themes may emerge from a particular data set using this analytical methodology (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For a detailed review of thematic analysis, and how it is distinct from other qualitative methods, refer to Braun and Clarke (2006).

A Google Scholar search was performed using the keywords 'service-dominant/S-D logic' and 'engage/engagement' which identified 46 articles sourced from the marketing and management literatures. Specifically, nine of these addressed B2B relationships, 31 focused on B2C relationships, whilst the remaining 4 papers addressed other forms of stakeholder (e.g. employee) and/or network relationships. A thematic analysis was conducted using these articles, which generated 8 themes related to B2B relationships, 13 themes relating to B2C relationships and 6 themes related to other relationships. A summary of the identified themes is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Key Themes

B2B Relationships	Themes
	1. Prerequisite for relationship
	2. Process encompassing promise management
	3. Interaction
	4. Interactive dialogue
	5. Customer role as co-creators
	6. Value-creating relationships generating solutions
	7. Relationship process over time
	8. Business exchange
B2C Relationships	Themes
	1. Consumer/firm interactions (e.g. dialogue)
	2. State of interactivity
	3. Multiple interactive forms (interactivity)
	4. Consumer relationships with communities, products and/or brands
	5. Consumer experiences & emotions
	6. Emotional aspect of consumer/firm interactions
	7. Key aspect of the co-creative process (e.g. in service delivery and/or recovery)
	8. A process culminating in (online) consumer experience
	9. Rules/governance systems for collaborative learning
	10. Consumer/firm relationships leading to value (co-)creation
	11. Facilitates innovative solution development (e.g. consumer creativity)
	12. Facilitates transition from value creation to relationship development
	13. Consumer/firm relationship performance metric
Other Relationships	Themes
	1. Aspect of customer-centric strategy
	2. Mechanism to instill brand values on employees
	3. Employee/customer interactions
	4. Customer/organization interface
	5. Strategy focused on mutual responsibility
	6. Relational mechanism facilitating social alignment

4.2 Relating Themes to the Fundamental Propositions

FP1: CE reflects a psychological state, which occurs by virtue of interactive customer experiences with a focal agent/object within specific service relationships.

FP1 delineates the existence of specific ‘interactive experiences’ to represent the key hallmark of CE. Hence, as distinct from consumer ‘involvement,’ which reflects an individual’s specific level of interest and/or personal relevance in relation to a given object, the emergence of CE necessitates the undertaking of focal interactions between a particular engagement subject (e.g. a customer/consumer) and a specific object (e.g. a brand) or other actors.

The themes identified in Table 2 support the notion of interactive experiences. They include terms such as ‘*interaction,*’ ‘*interactive dialogue*’ in specific B2B relationships; ‘*consumer/firm interactions,*’ and ‘*state of interactivity*’ in specific B2C relationships. In addition for other relationships ‘*employee/customer interactions*’ and/or ‘*customer/organization interface*’ reflect the key role of ‘interactive experience’ in delineating the engagement concept.

FP2: CE states occur within a dynamic, iterative process of service relationships that co-creates value.

FP2 of CE builds on the iterative nature of the ‘engagement’ concept, i.e. with aggregated engagement states culminating in focal engagement processes. Further, based on FP2, specific engagement processes may be used to co-create value for and/or with other stakeholders (e.g. other customers, employees and/or the organization) in specific interactions which may occur within focal service relationships.

The themes identified in Table 2 support the notion of a dynamic, iterative process that co-creates value. For example, in B2B relationships engagement was stated to reflect a “*process encompassing promise management;*” in B2C relationships it was referred to as a “*key aspect of the co-creative process (e.g. in service delivery and/or recovery);*” and “*a process culminating in (online) consumer experience.*” Further, in other relationships ‘engagement’ was referred to as a “*relational mechanism,*” thus implying the existence of dynamic, iterative interactions between a focal engagement subject/object over time.

The co-creative nature of the engagement concept in B2B relationships is illustrated by “*customer role as co-creators*,” while the concept’s co-creative properties in B2C relationships are reflected by a “*key aspect of the co-creative process*,” and “*consumer/firm relationships leading to value (co-)creation*.” Furthermore, for other relationships the conceptual linkage between ‘engagement’ and ‘co-creation’ is implicit in the “*customer/organization interface*”.

FP3: CE plays a central role within a nomological network of service relationships.

Brodie et al. (2011) address the nature of specific conceptual relationships between CE and selected other concepts, including ‘participation,’ ‘involvement,’ and ‘commitment.’ Based on this analysis the authors conclude CE play a central role within a conceptual (nomological) network linking these and/or other relational concepts.

While the existence of a nomological network for the ‘engagement’ concept is somewhat implicit in Table 2, the inclusion of key concepts such as the existence of *specific ‘relationships,’ ‘exchange’* and/or *‘experiences’* implies the existence of a strong theoretical linkage between ‘engagement’ and specific concepts listed in the Table. As such, the incorporation of the ‘engagement’ concept within the emerging S-D logic lexicon implies the existence of strong conceptual links to other relational concepts, including ‘involvement,’ ‘participation’ and/or ‘commitment.’

FP4: CE is a multidimensional concept subject to a context- and/or stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions.

Brodie et al.’s (2011) extensive analysis based on literature sourced from a variety of social science disciplines and business practice discourse indicates a multidimensional (i.e. cognitive, emotional, behavioral) nature of CE. Similarly, the findings summarized in Table 2 indicate the existence of a specific cognitive facet of engagement (e.g. *(innovative) ‘solution development’* in B2B/B2C relationships; *‘strategy focused on mutual responsibility’* for other relationships.

Second, the emotional aspect of engagement is exemplified in statements including ‘*customer role as co-creators*’ (B2B relationships); ‘*consumer experiences/emotions*’ and ‘*emotional aspect of customer/firm interactions*’ (B2C relationships); and ‘*relational mechanism facilitating social alignment*’ (other relationships).

Third, the inclusion of concepts such as ‘*interaction,*’ *interactive dialogue*’ (B2B relationships); ‘*customer/firm interactions*’ and/or ‘*dialogue*’ (B2C relationships); as well as ‘*employee/customer interactions*’ and the ‘*customer/organization interface*’ (other relationships) provide illustrations of the behavioral facet typifying the engagement concept. Moreover, as Brodie et al. (2011) outline, the expression of specific cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral engagement dimensions may vary across specific engagement actors (i.e. engagement subject/object), and/or contexts.

FP5: CE occurs within a specific set of situational conditions generating differing CE levels.

FP1 (i.e. *CE reflects a psychological state, which occurs by virtue of interactive customer experiences with a focal agent/object within specific service relationships*), and FP2 (i.e. *CE states occur within a dynamic, iterative process of service relationships that co-creates value*), CE represents a process comprised of focal aggregated CE states. FP5 extends this rationale by stating differing CE levels may be observed at different points in time (i.e. specific states) within the CE.

The themes in Table 2 provide limited explicit insights regarding the potentially fluctuating nature of specific CE levels over time, designations such as ‘*value-creating relationships*’ and ‘*relationship process over time*’ (B2B relationships); ‘*consumer relationships with communities, products and/or brands*’ (B2C relationships); as well as ‘*relational mechanism facilitating social alignment*’ (other relationships). This implies such variability may be observed in the evolution of engagement over time.

5. Discussion

This paper has provided a rationale for the inclusion of the engagement as a bridging concept into the emerging S-D logic lexicon. We show the theoretical roots of ‘engagement’ lie within a theory of transcending relationships, as consistent with the S-D logic. The thematic analysis indicates the terms ‘engage’ and/or ‘engagement’ are used in a variety of ways to elaborate on the nature and dynamics characterizing focal B2B, B2C and/or other specific types of business relationships. The findings indicate a diversity of interpretations of the concept across the different stakeholder groups, including customers, consumers, employees, and/or organizations, thus generating a need for further research into this emerging area. Specifically, the analysis suggests CE, as a key relational, interactivity-based and/or co-creative concept, should be included into the evolving S-D logic lexicon.

Engagement is shown to represent an important concept within the emerging S-D logic lexicon, which describes the interactive, co-creative experiences between focal actors in service relationships. Further, the concept is shown to be conceptually distinct from traditional relational concepts, such as ‘participation,’ and ‘involvement.’ Thus the paper contributes to furthering scholarly understanding of ‘engagement’ for undertaking of empirical research in the area of the S-D logic, and understanding the nature and dynamics typifying specific marketing practices associated with the S-D logic. We suggest that ‘engagement’ is part of a more concrete, actionable language aligned with business practice which applies not only to customers, but equally, to any actor within a service system.

This study focuses on the bridging concept of ‘engagement’. Further research is now required to identify comprehensive set of bridging concepts to underpin the transcending S-D logic lexicon. A first attempt to do this was undertaken in a recent presentation by Lusch and Vargo (2010). They proposed a set of sub-ordinate concepts to do with thinking, meaning and action. For example for the meta-concept of ‘service’ they suggested the subordinate terms ‘benefitting another’ and ‘specializing’. For the meta-concept of co-creation of value they suggested the subordinate terms ‘togetherness’ and ‘collaborating’ and the meta-concept of ‘dialogue’ they suggested the subordinate terms ‘learning together’ and ‘relating’.

This study used a content-analytic method of inquiry, i.e. thematic analysis, to analyse published research identified through Google Scholar. This method has resulted in a past research-focused approach. Future research could focus on more specific contextual conditions, which may serve to modify and/or verify the current findings. As well as other contexts, other methodological approaches, such as discourse analysis, could be employed to uncover the way ‘engagement’ is socially constructed within multiple communities and sites. Moreover, subsequent large-scale, quantitative methods of inquiry may be adopted for empirical testing.

This research provides not only academic, but also a set of managerial implications. First, it may contribute to enhanced managerial understanding of the emerging S-D logic and CE concept alike, as well as their interface, which may assist managerial decision-making and/or strategy development. Second, by providing an overview of the key meanings ascribed to the CE concept from an S-D logic perspective, the research may contribute to advances in managerial and/or strategic thinking within specific organizations.

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