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Navigating the Marketplace of Love: Value Conflict in Online Dating Community

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INTRODUCTION

Multiple scholars in the field of marketing and service research have dedicated their time and effort to studying the concept of value (Echeverri and Skalen 2011; Gronroos 2011; Kuppelweiser and Finsterwalder 2016; Vargo and Lusch 2004), acknowledging its idiosyncratic and context-dependent nature (Vargo and Lusch 2008). In this work we adopt a social constructionist approach to markets (Penaloza & Venkatesh, 2006), incorporating multiple notions of value (Karababa & Kjeldgaard, 2014) as well as consumer meanings and consumer subjectivity in our investigation of value creation and value destruction processes on the marketplace of love, or a consumption community of users of online dating services.

Building upon theoretical insights from service-dominant logic and transformative service research and broadening our understanding of value beyond the economic perspective, we investigate what happens when multiple notions of value coexist in the same marketplace. Embracing the multiple notions of value allows us to understand how different interpretations of value by market actors contribute to the complexity of value co-creation and co-destruction processes. We complement the extant literature on interactive value creation and destruction

(Echeverri and Skalen 2011; Cabiddu, Moreno, and Sebastiano 2019) by introducing the concept of Value Conflict, showing how the conflict between social values and expected use-value in a shared marketplace can lead to ambivalent meanings in the consumption process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sociocultural context of value creation

Much of existing analysis in the field, while acknowledging the active role of consumers in value co-creation and co-destruction, concentrates on co-creation of value from service perspective (Echeverri & Skalen, 2011; Grönroos, 2011; Wieland, Polese, Vargo, & Lusch, 2012). Taking the process of value creation beyond the production-consumption dyad, Penaloza and Venkatesh (2006) forwarded a social constructionist view of the markets, arguing for extension of the view of value co-creation to include consumer meanings in exchange and use – that is, the way consumers give meaning to their lives through consumption activities.

Markets are presented as social/cultural constructions, a bundle of resources consumers can use to give meanings and values to their lives (Penaloza and Venkatesh 2006; Venkatesh and Peñaloza 2014). Markets are composed not only of resources, but also by a multiplicity of actors, such as consumers, companies, the government, the media, all of them actively operating in the marketplace to potentially create value. Karababa and Kjeldgaard (2014) highlight the complexity of value creation processes by organizing the multiplicity of conceptions of value into three abstract categories: economic value, social values and value in a semiotic sense, or meaning, arguing that bringing these notions of value into interaction can enrich our understanding of value creation in the market.

In parallel with the suggestions from the field of sociocultural consumer research, the notion of value creation in S-D logic research has moved from a linear perspective, to a network

perspective, involving a variety of actors (Vargo and Lush, 2011). Contrary to value-in-exchange, and evolving by the definition of value-in-use, the notion of value-in-context implies that value is not only always systemic and co-created, but also always contextually determined for all the actors belonging to the ecosystem (Chandler and Lusch 2015; Vargo and Lusch 2011; Wieland et al. 2012; Vargo, Maglio, and Akaka 2008; Vargo, Akaka, and Vaughan 2017).

The service ecosystems perspective further highlighted the contextual nature of value creation, where value makes sense only within the social system in which it is created (Lush and Vargo, 2014; Vargo and Lush, 2011). The social system – which comprehends the service ecosystem – is a system of actors in continuous exchange and development. Value creation in these systems are guided by rules, social norms, symbols, in other words institutions, that are continuously transformed and reshaped by both adopters or non-adopters of the service solution (Wieland, 2014). Both streams of research highlight that all actors participate in the value creation and in the market transformation, by modifying and normalizing practices that are common in use in a society. The meeting between consumers and service providers happens in a sociocultural environment; the fruit of this meeting can potentially create or destroy value for one singular actor, or for all of the actors participating in the relationship.

The search of well-being for the actors in the ecosystem

Currently, there is a call for more research into both positive and negative well-being (Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016) of market actors. The marketing and service literature has focused especially on value creation and co-creation, while more attention is now asked to better explore the possible negative outcomes of a consumer – service – market relationship (Echeverri & Skålen, 2011; Jarvi, 2018). The literature in value co-destruction is still nascent, and it is presented as a failed interaction where at least the decrease of well-being is observable in one of the actors participating in the relationship (Plé and Cáceres 2010; Akaka, Vargo, and

Schau 2015; Järvi, Kähkönen, and Torvinen 2018). This definition is larger than the common definition of service failure, or value destruction, where the provider's processes fail and the customer experiences dissatisfaction because of this failure (Jarvi, 2018). Value co-destruction can be observed in B2B (Cabiddu, et al., 2019) or B2C contexts, and can have a double sense, if for example, the consumer reacts to the service failure (Plé and Cáceres 2010). Some of the reasons of value co-destruction can be mistakes, the inability to serve from the perspective of the service provider, service sabotage from the part of the employees, but also customer misbehavior and blaming the employees from a consumer perspective (Harris and Ogbonna, 2002a; Jarvi, 2018).

In our analysis of consumer online dating experiences, we focus on consumer subjectivity, analyzing the misbehavior of consumers against other consumers, in an interactive co-destruction of value that affects consumer well-being as well as that of a larger society. We focus on the online dating services environment, where a possible negative value of the exchange can be found at the core of the transaction, with the risk of treating people as products (Hirschman 1987; Bagozzi 1974; Lusch, Vargo, and Malter 2006). This risk opens up to the analysis of the ethical impact of transformative services as digital dating apps.

METHOD

In this study, we investigate the context of online dating with the purpose to gain understanding of the complex interplay of the processes of value creation (Karababa and Kjeldgaard 2014) and destruction (Kuppelweiser and Finsterwalder 2016; Echeverri and Skalen 2011; Grönroos 2011) that occur in consumer-consumer relationships online, that is, where the value creation / destruction processes do not occur through interactions between consumers and the service prodiver, but in the process of consumers interacting with each other. Unlike the case of brand communities (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009) when consumers unite around

shared loyalty to a given brand, online dating app users represent a specific instance of networked consumption community (Chalmers Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013), where individual actors engage in serial one on one encounters with each other ad infinitum until they settle with a chosen partner.

From November 2018 to June 2019 we have conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews (McCracken 1988) with 21 male and female users of online dating apps residing in Paris, falling within the 23-56 age range. Participants were recruited via online calls for participation on Tinder and Facebook. The interviews lasted on average 40-60 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analytically coded with the focus on individual consumer experience as part of a complex system of interaction between human actors, service providers and the broader society. The triangulation between researchers throughout the analytical process allowed us to ensure the adequacy of our representation and analysis of studied constructs by constantly comparing and contrasting our interpretation of the data in relation to the literature (Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

FINDINGS

Value conflict

Data analysis revealed that in their interactions with each other in the online dating marketplace, our informants experienced the conflict between multiple notions of value throughout their online dating experience. We define value conflict as the instance of contradictory overlapping notions of value, coexisting in the marketplace and inhibiting processes of value creation, leading to parallel processes of value co-creation and co-destruction as multiple actors negotiate their contesting notions of value in their interactions with each other throughout the service experience. Following the social constructionist approach to value

creation in the marketplace (Penaloza and Venkatesh 2006) and embracing complexity of multiple notions of value (Karababa and Kjeldgaard 2014), we have identified several sources of value conflict in the online dating marketplace.

Social values vs Use-value

The first conflict occurred between the social values, or culturally embedded perceptions of desirability (Karababa&Kjeldgaard 2014) and the perceived use-value, or subjectively experienced benefit (Gronroos 2011) of the online dating experience, facilitated by elements of service design as well as users' individual motivations and expectations from their consumption experiences. As negotiation of value by multiple actors throughout the service ecosystem of online dating took place, the social values of monogamy and appropriateness conflicted with the perceived use value of dating experience and associated sexual freedom, triggering simultaneous processes of value creation (when perceptions of social value aligned with perceptions of use value) or value destruction (when social values conflicted with perceptions of use value). When asked about their expectations from an ideal relationship, the informants emphasized trust, care, friendship, loyalty and intellectual compatibility as desired relationship characteristics, however, when discussing relationships in the context of dating apps, a different picture emerged, as we can see from examples below.

> (…) all the people like my relatives, friends and stuff, like you know, you are having a relationship with a girl from Tinder, and then they ask "How did you meet?" On Tinder - I think it's quite..., I don't know, like.... (…) I have tried to find an answer, but… But I know that this is something that disturbs me. So, every time when I am on this app, I hope not to stumble upon a girl to whom I will get attached, this is interesting (Mark, 26)

I guess when you're meeting someone through Tinder there's a kind of like unspoken not rule, but there's an unspoken sort of fact that like this is probably just gonna be for like a hook up. Do you know what I mean? (Eve, 25)

In this instance the value conflict can occur as an ethical conflict experienced by a consumer, when, for instance, social values conflict with perceived use value, generating frustration and/or morally ambiguous behaviors. It can also occur between different subjects in the consumption community, when different perceptions and expectations of value are not aligned between the potential dating counterparts.

I also don't think you can really tell what somebody is like when you're talking via any kind of digital media. So I kind of think that you do need to meet them to actually know if you click or if you're even interested. I guess there is also that fear of you don't actually know who you are going to meet. And it's all drilled into us from a young age that you don't know who anyone is on the internet! (Rose, 23)

As consumers of online dating apps engaged in immaterial labor in order to maximise value for themselves as well as, occasionally, for their counterparts, (Cova and Dalli 2009), due to the networked nature of the service offering, the risk of treating people as products (Hirschman, 1987; Bagozzi, 2006; Lusch, Vargo and Malter, 2006) ran high, contributing to the conflicting nature of the experience.

Double standards and moral ambiguity

In their reflections on their service experiences, consumers would apply higher behavioral standards to others than to themselves. The conflicting nature of consumer meanings in the ethical domain manifested as the blurring of ethical boundaries, as the users rationalized their mistreatment of others by treating the digital context where they allowed themselves to behave unethically as an opposite to "real life", where they would be more likely to stick to a

more traditional code of conduct. The perception of the digital context as a surreal gamified experience gave them freedom from experiencing the negative consequences of unethical behaviors, in contrast with the hypothetical real-life situations where they would meet potential partners through common social networks of family and friends. At times, the informants rationalized their strategy of withdrawing from communications as a mutual decision to stop talking. They have acknowledged that it was easier to end communications in the online context compared to the situation when the relationship would happen in "real life".

> (…) it is easier to stop (…) because I think in five minutes, take my phone, download the app, match with one or two persons, and have a conversation with them, maybe date the day after… So in 24 hours I can date someone. So easy date, easy stuff… In real life, do you think that in 24 hours I can walk down the street and ask people about dating me the day after that? No, I can't! (Alan, 28)

The moral ambiguity also related to the uncertainty of knowing the true intentions of a person on the other side of the dating app. For a long time, Alice engaged in non-exclusive relationships with men on dating apps. However, when she found her current long-term partner on Tinder, the deciding factor was their mutual desire for exclusivity.

> You meet far more people who want to meet someone. In real life there is always a degree of uncertainty, you never know if that person looking at you wants a relationship or something else. (Alice, 54)

The theme of applying different moral standards to situations in digital versus real life was especially evident in the situations of deciding the exclusivity of the relationships or ending the communications, when the dilemma of whether to be transparent with the other person or whether to just disappear arose.

Reluctant belonging to consumption community

The third source of conflict was the disparity between the factual belonging to consumption community by online dating app users, and their simultaneous rejection of collective identity, related to the stigmatized nature of using dating apps. Alice, a 54-year old woman who started using dating apps in order to date non-exclusively after the dissolution of her long-term relationship, referred to Tinder as "the bargain basement of dating apps where all creeps are spending their time", while Sofia, a 33-year old student, said that she hated Tinder, calling it "the jungle". Nevertheless, just like other informants did, after trying several other apps, they adopted Tinder as the main app that they used for encounters with potential dating partners. While the informants themselves were meeting their potential partners online, at the same time they felt conflicted about the use of the dating apps in general.

> I wouldn't want the person I'm seeing in the relationship to be using Tinder, do you know what I mean? Or be intrigued about using it (Eve, 25)

> I guess yes, I do look for someone to be in a relationship with because I have enough friends, I'm not really there to make friends (…) Sometimes it does get exhausting because you're always meeting different people (Vero, 29)

Unlike in case of brand communities, subcultures of consumption or other collaborative consumption communities where consumers thrive on sense of unity and belonging when they unite around shared practice or their common preference for a certain brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), the online dating context represents an instance of non-collaborative consumption community, where consumers willingly or unwillingly engage in immaterial labor (Cova and Dalli 2009), primarily acting in own self-interest, eventually creating or diminishing value through their interactions with each other. Much commentary focused on the risks of using dating apps, the potential harm and a sense of vulnerability, the concerns for safely motivated users to develop a range of

strategies, such as keeping conversations on the app for as long as possible, not giving their phone number to new acquaintances or not adding people they met on the app on social networks.

DISCUSSION AND CONSLUSION

In this work we draw upon social constructionist view of markets (Penaloza and Venkatesh 2006; Karababa and Kjeldgaard 2014), embracing multiple notions of value in service consumption context. Our findings contribute to extant literature on value co-creation and co-destruction (Echeverri & Skalen, 2011; Grönroos, 2011; Wieland, Polese, Vargo, & Lusch, 2012) by introducing the concept of Value Conflict and by illustrating how multiple notions of value coexisting in marketplace can inhibit the processes of value creation as multiple actors negotiate their contesting notions of value in their interactions with each other throughout the service experience. We show how the conflict between social values and expected use-value can lead to ambivalent meanings in the consumption process and document how perceived use value can be simultaneously co-created and co-destroyed without direct participation of service providers in the process of social interaction between consuming subjects.

While the context of online dating represents a very specific context where value co-creation and co-destruction processes occur simultaneously in the process of social interaction, our theoretical insights can be potentially transferred to other contexts where value is created by users interacting with each other, without direct participation of service providers. Our data shows that value destruction processes can be triggered by the incompatibility of notions of value between users or within the value system of a single user, therefore, managers who want to avoid value conflict and subsequent triggering of the processes of value destruction need to pay attention to alignment of values, either through providing community guidelines and

educational content, or by introducing control mechanisms allowing users to report undesirable behaviors that cross the line of appropriateness.

One possible limitation of our study is that our insights about individual users and their service practices are based on the verbal accounts of our informants. Thus, our results will inevitably reflect what the study participants believe they do, rather than their actions on the dating app. Due to a sensitive issue of the topic that is embedded in cultural rules and norms, there is also a possibility of a social desirability effect in our interviews - that is, the informants adjusting their answers to what they believed the interviewer wanted to hear. We encourage future research using observational methods and prolonged engagement with mobile app users that would allow following their consumption habits in real time.

The second potential limitation of this study is that we have only conducted interviews with the users of dating apps, therefore our accounts of the service design elements, such as the applications' interface, promotional communications and functions are based on the experiences of our informants as well as on observations of one of the authors who has created accounts on multiple dating apps in order to explore their functionality. Investigating the service providers could enhance our understanding of what is driving the moral ambiguities users are experiencing and the anguish that it generates.

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