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## **A transformative value co-creation framework for online services**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – Online offerings for transformative services create value for consumers, although little research examines the process through which these services deliver this value. This paper aims to develop a comprehensive framework to capture the complexity of the co-creation of transformative value experienced by consumers of online transformative services.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper uses a netnography approach to examine longitudinal data from an online weight management program. In total, this research examines 15,304 posts from 3,149 users, including eight staff users.

**Findings** – Consumers integrate a range of social support resources, from informational support to esteem support, which provide a range of benefits such as new ideas and self-efficacy that underpin the different types of value such as epistemic and personal value. The degree of co-created value differs across the consumption experience but culminates over time into transformative value.

**Research limitations/implications** – The proposed framework may be useful beyond the weight management and online contexts; however, further work is required in a range of behavioral contexts and other modes of service delivery.

**Practical implications** – By understanding the resources consumers integrate and value, co-created services can develop appropriate value propositions to assist in improving consumers' well-being.

**Originality/value** – This research provides a comprehensive framework of the transformative value co-creation process, extending on existing frameworks which examine either the process, value co-creation, or the types of value co-created.

**Keywords** Value co-creation, transformative value, social support, transformative services

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Improving consumer well-being is of growing interest in services and marketing research (Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Dodds *et al.*, 2018; Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2015). Well-being, which involves feeling good and functioning well, is associated with a 19% reduction in all-cause mortality in healthy populations (Chida and Steptoe, 2008). Services, which are almost omnipresent in our lives, have an important role to play in uplifting consumers' well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). Thus, there is a need to understand how to design and optimize services so that they can contribute to improved consumer well-being, leading to the emergence of the transformative service research (TSR) paradigm (Rosenbaum, 2015).

TSR focuses on factors that improve the human condition (Rosenbaum, 2015). A significant stream of TSR examines the intersection between service customers and service settings as a means to enhance consumer well-being (Rosenbaum, Corus *et al.*, 2011). Within this stream, there has been growing interest in transformative services delivered in online contexts (Parkinson, Schuster *et al.*, 2017). Online transformative services are similar to traditional transformative services (those primarily offered in a physical setting) in that they seek to improve the human condition; however, they offer consumers a range of additional benefits, such as ease of use, convenience, anonymity, and non-judgmental interactions (Mo and Coulson, 2010; Parkinson, Schuster *et al.*, 2017), which may improve well-being.

Non-judgmental interactions, for instance, in the form of social support have been shown to improve well-being in a range of settings such as weight management (Parkinson, Schuster *et al.*, 2017) and disease management (Yao *et al.*, 2015), and thus are of particular interest in online transformative services (van Dolen and Weinberg, 2017). However, there is limited examination of how social support facilitates improved well-being, constraining knowledge of the ways in which online transformative services can be optimized to facilitate improved well-being. One lens through which to examine the process underpinning the positive outcomes of social support is value co-creation.

Value co-creation is “*the realisation of benefit from the integration of resources through activities and interactions*” (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2012, p. 375). Indeed, value co-creation has been found to be important to transformative services, with evidence of “transformative value” (Blocker and Barrios, 2015); that is, value which specifically enhances consumers' well-being. Resource integration is a multiparty, all-encompassing process including the focal firm, public and private sources as well as customer activities (personal sources) (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2012). Resource integration is how consumers gather and use the resources they need from a variety of sources. Integration of resources such as social support are

important for consumers to realize benefit from service encounters to experience value co-creation (McCull-Kennedy *et al.*, 2012; Sorensen *et al.*, 2017), and value co-creation is important to transformative service outcomes (Blocker and Barrios, 2015; Dodds *et al.*, 2018; Zainuddin *et al.*, 2016).

Several TSR frameworks seek to understand transformative services and their influence on value co-creation and well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Hepi *et al.*, 2017; Friman *et al.*, 2019; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017; Zainuddin *et al.*, 2016). However, whilst these prior studies provide useful insights, they do not capture the entire process of value co-creation. Anderson *et al.* (2013) and Hepi *et al.* (2017), for example, provide insight into the *interactions* between service entities and consumers, and the effect on consumer well-being outcomes. However, they do not consider consumer-to-consumer interactions, which can also be beneficial for well-being (Parkinson, Schuster *et al.*, 2017). Regarding the *integration of resources*, Friman *et al.* (2019) and Rosenbaum *et al.* (2017) apply the REPLACE framework to investigate the range of resources integrated into transformative services, resulting in increased consumer loyalty. However, they do not provide insight into the types of value created by the integration of resources. Zainuddin *et al.* (2016), on the other hand, investigate the *value created* by health-care self-services but do not capture the resources integrated to create value. Furthermore, many of these prior frameworks apply cross-sectional designs, which do not address current calls for longitudinal studies (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018).

There is therefore a need to bridge the elements of value co-creation examined by previous frameworks (interactions, resource integration, and transformative value) and move beyond a static (cross-sectional) to a dynamic (longitudinal) research design to provide a more complete understanding of how value co-creation occurs across consumers' experiences of online transformative services. This more complete understanding will provide actionable insights for service organizations to optimize their online transformative services and offer value propositions to facilitate improved well-being. The following research questions guide this study:

- RQ1.* How do consumers integrate social support resources to realize benefit to co-create value in online transformative services?
- RQ2.* How does the co-creation of value across the service experience culminate into transformative value?

Thus, the purpose of this study is to deepen our understanding of the resources integrated and the co-creation of value to create transformative value in online transformative services over time. This study contributes to the TSR literature in several ways. First, the study will

provide insight into how consumers integrate social support resources to co-create value in online transformative services. This study will also examine how social support resource integration evolves throughout the service experience. Thus, the study offers new insights into how service organizations can optimize their online services to facilitate value co-creation in transformative services. Third, this research employs a novel longitudinal methodology that presents an innovative qualitative research approach for use in TSR and service contexts that are dynamic and involve personal change. This approach offers valuable insights into the “lived” experience of transformative service consumers.

An overview of online transformative services first positions this paper. A review of the social support and value co-creation literature follows. The method and results of the study are presented next. The theoretical and managerial implications of the study and suggestions for future research conclude the paper.

## **2. Literature review**

### ***2.1 Online transformative services***

A review of the TSR literature (see Table 1) shows, broadly speaking, a focus on conceptual research or research examining physical or online services. Of interest is the fact that slightly more studies examine services in physical settings, whereby consumers and the service provider must be physically present. Although slight, this tendency toward examining physical services is striking given the increase in services delivered via online and digital channels. This is an important gap in TSR because of the general acceptance that “online services can potentially affect well-being, both positively and negatively” (Anderson *et al.*, 2013, p. 1204). Further, online transformative services, owing to unique characteristics, such as anonymity (Mo and Coulson, 2010), may enhance consumers’ confidence to disclose well-being issues and their willingness to engage with resources provided (Barak and Gluck-Ofri, 2007). Therefore, whilst online transformative services can create unique benefits for consumers, there is a need to gain greater insight into how service organizations can optimize these services to assist consumer well-being.

**<Insert Table 1 here>**

### ***2.2. Social support as a resource***

Resources are those objects, conditions, personal characteristics, or energies valued by an individual or that serve as a means of obtaining that which is valued by the individual

(Hobfoll *et al.*, 1990, p. 466). Zimmerman (1951, p.15) posits resources “are not, they become; they are not static but expand and contract in response to human actions.” This indicates that resources are dynamic in nature and are likely to change across time. Social support is a dynamic resource provided by other persons (Cohen and Syme, 1985). Social support is an operant resource, intangible and shaped from the knowledge capacities of those who provide it. The provision of social support has an established relationship with health and well-being (Dean and Lin, 1977). Social support has been examined as a resource in a variety of offline transformative services; for example, as an antecedent to customer voluntary performance in gyms (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007), as an influence on service quality and well-being in helpline services (van Dolan and Weinberg, 2017), and in creating “third place” attachment in commercial service establishments (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, social support has also been examined in a variety of online settings, with many studies using Cutrona and Russell’s (1990) social support typology (see Table 2). Their social support typology comprises a range of dimensions, including informational support (e.g. advice or guidance), emotional support (e.g. care and concern), esteem support (e.g. praise and commendation), tangible assistance (e.g. provision of assistance to solve problems), and network support (e.g. access to similar others) (Cutrona and Russell, 1990).

**<Insert Table 2 here>**

However, these studies have not captured social support across the entire service experience. For example, Parkinson, Schuster *et al.* (2017) focused on a two-week period of an online service. Furthermore, these studies examine social support in isolation, without inclusion or explanation of the potential transformative value of social support integration. Whilst the social support typology provides an understanding of the resources integrated in an online transformative service, it does not fully specify the cognitive and affective benefits received by the communal relationships which emerge across time (Van Oerle *et al.*, 2016; Verleye, 2015). Consistent with Zimmerman’s (1951) notion of resources as “becoming,” an approach that considers the transition from integration of resources to realized benefit in the form of co-created value by consumers is important for developing an integrated framework for the value co-creation process in online transformative services. This current study therefore builds upon prior work to gain a broader and richer understanding of the value co-creation process over time.

### **2.3. Resource integration**

People exchange resources to realize the benefit of specialized competencies, for example knowledge and skills, which are operant resources (Pels, 2012; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). In contrast to operand resources, which are tangible assets, operant resources are intangible and shaped out of knowledge capacities. Drawing on past research in online contexts, Nambisan and Baron (2009) posit that consumers who integrate resources and co-create in virtual communities expect a range of benefits, including affective, cognitive, social integrative, and personal integrative (self-efficacy and regulation) benefits. For example, network support provides opportunities to connect with like-minded people, which translate to social integrative benefits that relate to strengthening consumers' ties with relevant others (Cutrona and Russell, 1990). Esteem support assists to improve consumers' self-efficacy, resulting in personal integrative benefits that relate to strengthening their confidence (Guan and So, 2016). Emotional support contributes to consumers having pleasurable experiences, which provide affective benefits such as those that strengthen pleasurable experiences (Cutrona and Russell, 1990). Finally, "tangible assistance" provides pragmatic benefits to consumers through practical solutions (Verleye, 2015). However, due to the intangible nature of online services, the term "practical assistance" replaces tangible assistance. This research empirically examines how consumers' integration of social support resources shapes the benefits received throughout the service experience and, subsequently, how this facilitates the co-creation of value.

### **2.4. Value co-creation in transformative services**

Kuppelwieser and Finsterwaler (2016) call for the use of concepts and perspectives already developed to understand the co-creation of value in transformative services. As commonly used in TSR settings, this study utilizes the dimensions from consumptions-value theory as conceptualized by Sheth *et al.* (1991): functional (functionality or utility of a product or service), social (social connectedness), emotional (affective state of the consumer), and epistemic (novelty or knowledge gained by using a new product or service) (Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). TSR frequently omits conditional value, as it only focuses on the perceived utility acquired by an alternative service or set of circumstances facing the consumer. Additionally, conditional value is often difficult to identify, transient, and not appropriate to measure in all studies (for a comprehensive review see Sánchez-Fernández and Iniest-Bonillo, 2007). Therefore, this study empirically examines the

resources integrated, and dimensions of epistemic, emotional, functional, and social value co-created as benefits from the integration of these resources is realized (see Figure 1).

<Insert Figure 1 here>

Moreover, recent TSR suggests value can be transformative (Black and Gallan, 2015; Blocker and Barrios, 2015; Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016). For example, Blocker and Barrios (2015) conceptualize transformative value similarly to transformative leadership to explain changes in the nature, condition, and perspectives of people and phenomena; namely, that it is an element of value creation, generating uplifting changes to improve well-being among individuals. Black and Gallan (2015) argue a similar point, suggesting services and service networks can co-create value to assist customer health and well-being. Thus, this research empirically examines whether the epistemic, emotional, functional, and social value co-created will cumulate over time to provide transformative value.

### **3. Method**

Communication (posts) among online transformative service participants (consumers) from a three-month paid weight management program [Name withheld to allow blind review process] was analyzed over a four-month period. The time period examined extends beyond the three-month weight management program as this service was available for one month pre-program and one week post-program. The value-consumption stages proposed by Russell-Bennett *et al.* (2009) of pre-program consumption, program consumption, and post-program consumption are used to organize the findings over time.

The online transformative service had high levels of participant interaction, providing a stable study context as recommended by Kozinets (2002). As part of the program registration, participants gave permission for their data to be used for research purposes. Data were collected from the online transformative service from August to December 2015 and were managed using Microsoft Excel. This software was chosen as a data management tool to allow the researchers to move between threads and consumption stages to examine the comments in context within conversations. During the pre-program consumption stage (four weeks) there were 3,547 consumer posts and 141 staff posts. There were 10,830 consumer posts and 544 staff posts during the consumption stage (12 weeks). In the post-consumption stage (one week), there were 201 consumer posts and 32 staff posts. Participants were 97.7% female, with a mean age of 39.01 years and an average Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30.06 (SD



= 6.54). On average, participants had lost 3.75% (SD = 3.92) of their body weight since starting the program.

Two coders initially coded and categorized all contributions. Following processes used by Brodie *et al.* (2013), after successive readings and discussions between the two coders the researchers decided to modify the interpretations and codes. This was akin to “constant comparison,” but rather than being undertaken as a lone activity, comparisons were made between the analyses. These discussions revealed high levels of agreement between analysts, and they were able to reach a consensus about the data. Careful listening, lengthy and full discussion, a joint reflection on shared codes and ideas, and an interweaving of interpretations enabled this synthesis. This iterative process is in line with what Bryman and Bell (2007) refer to as “investigator triangulation”; that is, using several different researchers to interpret the same body of data. Through discussion and debate, codes were changed, adapted, redefined, refined, integrated, and abandoned until the researchers arrived at a list of codes that, as far as possible, reflected their shared perception of participants’ discussions. As a written analysis strategy was developed, these individual analyses were conducted in a similar and systematic way. The researchers were then able to engage in a lengthy discussion that explored the similarities and differences, enabling them to move towards a consensus on the outcomes.

Coding of the data first involved open coding, followed by axial coding, and, finally, longitudinal coding. Open coding identified specific resources integrated by consumers as well as the benefits received by consumers. Axial coding using the social support dimensions linked the resource categories together. The resource categories were then further refined into more select categories within the social support resource themes. Following this, the resources were linked with the resultant benefits underpinning the different types of value. Finally, longitudinal coding, which is the attribution of selected change processes to qualitative data collected and compared across time (Saldana, 2009), was conducted. This linked all three phases together. The purpose of longitudinal coding was to categorize researcher observations into a series of matrices for comparative analysis and interpretation to generate inferences of the realization of co-created value. Coded data were categorized into matrices.

#### **4. Findings**

To provide insight into the co-creation of value over time this study examined the consumer journey through the stages of pre-program consumption, program consumption, and post-

program consumption (Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2009). The first sub-section of the findings examines resource integration, benefits, and value co-creation and where they occurred throughout the consumer journey. The second sub-section examines the dynamic process of transformative value.

#### ***4.1 Resource integration and value co-creation***

The analysis and interpretation first led to the development of a more nuanced typology of social support throughout the consumption process. This research found evidence of each of Cutrona and Russell's (1990) five social support dimensions; however, the research also identified two new sub-dimensions for each of the social support dimensions. This finding is consistent with Zimmerman's (1951, p.15) argument that resources "are not, they become; they are not static but expand and contract in response to human actions." Further, this supports previous research findings that social support resources are dynamic in nature and are likely to change across time (Cohen and Syme, 1985). Identification of the sub-dimensions provides a rich understanding of how social support resources evolve over time.

Informational support (Cutrona and Russell, 1990) revealed the sub-dimensions *general* and *regulation*. Practical assistance (Cutrona and Russell, 1990) revealed the sub-dimensions *internal* (to the program) and *external* (to the program). Emotional support (Cutrona and Russell, 1990) revealed the sub-dimensions *group inclusion* and *empathy*. Network support (Cutrona and Russell, 1990) revealed the sub-dimensions *greeting* and *mingling*. Finally, esteem support (Cutrona and Russell, 1990) revealed the sub-dimensions *encouragement* and *celebration*. Social support sub-dimensions were evident in different stages of the consumption process (pre-program consumption, program consumption, and post-program consumption). Each sub-dimension of social support also had associated benefits, which facilitated the co-creation of a unique value dimension. Figure 2 provides an overview of the social support dimensions, their sub-dimensions, and the benefits that underpin the co-created value. This meant that different categories of social support resources and value were more evident in some stages than others. Further, the findings show that the value co-created by consumers through realizing the benefits from social support integration culminates to become transformative value.

**<Insert Figure 2 here>**

The social support dimensions and their sub-dimensions integrated by consumers, and the associated types of value co-created, and where each of these occurred across the consumption process are summarized in Table 3. The following sections provide a more detailed delineation of the findings organized around the dimensions of social support, which form the foundation of the value co-creation process as the integrated resources needed to realize benefits and co-create value.

**<Insert Table 3 here>**

#### *4.1.1 Informational support and epistemic value*

Informational support was evident as a resource in the pre-program consumption and consumption stages. Two sub-dimensions of information support were identified: general and regulation support. Consumers sought general support, in the form of broad or general information, provided by both service employees and other consumers, for example:

*Hi guys! Does anyone know how to easily customize the meal planner for the entire week to be gluten free? or do I need to go through them one by one?* (Consumer 1, pre-consumption, requesting)

*Hi! You just need to go into the meal planner and select the option that's right for you from the drop down options on the right hand side.* (Service provider, pre-consumption)

*Great thanks! That should make things easier.* (Consumer 1, pre-consumption)

*Are there any foods I can eat when I'm still feeling a bit hungry? Non starchy vegies? Herbal tea?* (Consumer 2, consumption)

*Hi Robin, definitely give the herbal tea a go. This is your best option as it is zero calories and will help eliminate thirst which you might think is hunger.* (Consumer 3, consumption)

Service employees who assisted participants to understand the program's guidelines and norms provided regulation support. Norms serve as accepted ways of engaging in the program, and program guidelines provide the way of doing things and a structure for success. Service employees outlined the program guidelines in the pre-program consumption stage, for instance:

*Also really work on ALL of your Pre-Season Tasks and spend some time nutting out achievable and realistic goals. :-)* (Service provider, pre-program consumption)

Integrating information support resources enabled consumers to receive the cognitive benefit of new knowledge, resulting in epistemic value as consumers internalized the lessons learned. Throughout the service experience, participants consistently demonstrated the co-creation of epistemic value as they discussed the new ideas they had gained from service employees and other participants. The lessons learned also assisted them to work towards their goals through a range of interactions, including providing hints and tips. Achieving program-related accomplishments were also attributed to the lessons learned:

*Although this round has nearly finished and I have not reached my goal weight, I'm feeling like I've achieved a lot. Thank you [program] for the lessons I have learned. (Consumer 8, post-program consumption)*

For a transformative service where new ideas and new knowledge are important for achieving desired outcomes, such as improved nutrition, epistemic value is key. In contrast to previous health behavior findings (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2011; Zainuddin *et al.*, 2013), and consistent with Vargo and Lusch's (2008) application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills; Pels, 2012), the current study found people actively sought informational support, and the provision of this support often resulted in declarations of new knowledge. Thus, the online transformative service provided participants who were seeking new information with new ideas and the opportunity to develop new skills, leading to the realization of cognitive benefit in the form of epistemic value, as illustrated in the following post:

*I feel like I just had a light bulb moment when Mary talked about exercise as being as routine as having a shower or cleaning your teeth. I would never go to work without a shower or clean teeth and I always manage to just fit that into my day. (Consumer 4, consumption)*

#### *4.1.2 Practical assistance and functional value*

As participants embarked on their health and fitness journey they actively sought practical assistance, both internal to the program and external to the program, to help them prepare for the 12-week program. In the pre-program consumption stage, service employees primarily provided consumers with internal practical assistance; that is, they directed them to program resources in the form of links on the program website:

*If you are feeling like you really need to get your mind in shape, then I think you'll find the Mindset Lessons invaluable, so please watch and re-watch any as many times as needed throughout the 12 weeks. (Service provider, pre-program consumption)*

Simultaneously, primarily provided by consumers, external practical assistance occurred in the pre-program consumption stage. External practical assistance occurred when consumers were seeking or providing tangible support outside of the program. Provision of this support came in a variety of forms, including links to other websites and Smartphone Apps, to aid participants in solving their problems, thus providing pragmatic benefit and resulting in functional value, for example:

*I use a phone app to record what I eat daily and at the end of the day add the total calories to the diary... I hope this is helpful to you. (Consumer 5, pre-program consumption)*

Practical assistance helped participants, who may have been overwhelmed with information to prioritize, to make their own plans as to how they would undertake the program, resulting in functional value. Throughout the program consumption and post-consumption stages, practical assistance also helped participants with the particular problems for which they sought assistance, for example fitting exercise into their routines (as illustrated in the post below), thus resulting in functional value:

*Thanks for all your messages ladies. Great to hear what everyone does to fit in a workout, I've found using the exercise videos to work out after the kids have gone to bed works really well. (Consumer 12, consumption)*

#### *4.1.3 Emotional support and emotional value*

Emotional support was evident in the pre-program consumption stage in the form of group inclusion and empathy. Group inclusion involves seeking or providing group support to welcome participants into the group. Group inclusion was encouraged by the service provider in the earlier stages of the pre-program consumption process by reminding participants they were important and that they had the support of their fellow participants:

*You also have all of us! Your fellow [programmers] and the Support Crew, so you certainly aren't on your own. :-) We are all here for you and believe in you 100%. (Service provider, pre-program consumption)*

Other participants also provided group inclusion support through narratives acknowledging the experience of emotions such as apprehension. Consumers also responded

to acknowledgments of apprehension and negative emotions with statements to inform others they were not alone in their journey, for example:

*You're not alone Nina, I've never done anything like this before either. (Consumer 17, pre-program consumption)*

Additionally, participants sought emotional support in the pre-program consumption stage in order to reduce negative emotions. In response to these calls for emotional support, service employees and consumers provided empathy support in this stage. Empathy support was demonstrated through seeking or providing emotional support and providing understanding of the thoughts and feelings of others:

*Like you Dana this is my first round with the program and my biggest fear is failing.... Sadie's comments above are a great help.... (Consumer 7, pre-program consumption)*

Emotional support through empathy continued across all three consumption stages of the program. The integration of group inclusion and empathy emotional support allowed participants to realize affective benefits and create emotional value. Group inclusion gave the participants a sense of belonging, thus assisting them to experience positive emotions, resulting in emotional value. Participants sought empathy support to receive the benefit of reduced negative emotions. Empathy therefore emerged as emotional support and understanding of the consumer's particular situation or concerns. Consistent with previous research, empathy was provided through discussions of anger, fear, frustration, and feelings of isolation (Mo and Coulson, 2008), and additionally through others acknowledging and validating these feelings (Coulson and Knibb, 2007), for example:

*I have really enjoyed the program, my first time, and it was perfect timing for me. It was time to face up to my fear of never being healthy and losing weight - I am so pleased I took this step. Thank you for the fantastic program, I will be doing another round. (Consumer 37, post-program consumption)*

#### *4.1.4 Network support, integrative benefits and social value*

Network support was evident in the form of greeting and mingling. Greeting support, initiated by the service employees through calls for participants to make commitments and set goals for themselves, occurred in the pre-program consumption stage:

*Welcome on board and thanks for sharing with us all in the Member Zone. :-)* (Service provider, pre-consumption)

Participants responded by outlining their specific commitments and goals for their program participation, for example:

*And I'm back to give it my all. I'm reaching out for some positivity in my life, and I know exercise makes me feel amazing! I really feel I need support, which is why I'm here. But most importantly, I am here because I believe I can achieve my goals. :-)* xx (Consumer 17, pre-program consumption)

Mingling support is providing opportunities for participants to connect with others in their local area or online. Mingling support occurred frequently throughout all three consumption stages; for example, as consumers set about making plans to allow them to follow through on their declared commitments. Mingling was demonstrated in the early stages of consumption through participants connecting with others in their local area physically, as illustrated below:

*Hi Guys, I have just moved to Gosford, Lisarow with my family and would love to get a group of likeminded programmers who live and work in the area together. So we can chat, do some training together and keep each other motivated through the next upcoming 12 weeks.* (Consumer 15, pre-program consumption)

*My work is based in Gosford and I drive past Lisarow on my way home (which I love and often stop to watch the dolphins), I would be happy to train in the afternoons say once or twice a week.* (Consumer 16, pre-program consumption)

*Wow great to know there are some [programmers] nearby. I have tried to do this challenge before without much success and I put it down partly to not have people to train with and keep each other motivated. Let's meet up.* (Consumer 15, pre-program consumption)

In the consumption stage, mingling was demonstrated through connecting with others in similar situations online; for example, mothers of small children:

*I live in WA but I know how much it helps to be connected to people in the same boat, who are facing similar struggles. I plan on finding my inner Warrior again and never letting her go!!! Xo* (Consumer 18, consumption)

*Thanks so much for your replies :-)* Your support means a lot. I've followed you both, so let's work together. I look forward to following your journey. Good luck and stay strong :-D (Consumer 17, consumption)

The integration of greeting and mingling resources provided participants with integrative benefits, for instance the ability to connect with like-minded people or people located in the same area, and resulted in social value; that is, they connected with like-minded people, enabling improved social connectedness, as illustrated in the following post:

*Thank you ALL for your lovely words! So grateful to be a part of such a supportive community. (Consumer 27, post-program consumption)*

This contrasts with prior research in online transformative services and health care, where both network support and social value were found to be less predominant and influential (Mo and Coulson, 2008; Turner-McGrievy and Tate, 2013). However, this finding is consistent with Rihova *et al.*'s (2013) conceptualization that networked customers are likely to be important for co-creation of value in service settings. Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser (2011) also found that the contribution of others was an important influence on satisfaction in groups. Interestingly, the integration of network support in the online context provided social integrative benefits offline, with participants meeting up in physical settings, resulting in social value. This demonstrates that the value co-created can go beyond the confines of the online transformative service. This finding is consistent with Hollebeek *et al.*'s (2017) engagement practice dimension of mingling, where specific online or offline interactions between community participants extended beyond the online brand.

#### *4.1.5 Esteem support and personal value*

Esteem support was evident in the pre-program and consumption stages in the form of encouragement support. Encouragement support is seeking and providing encouragement and providing positive acclamations. Participants sought encouragement support in the early stages; this was provided by both service employees and other participants in the form of praise and commendations, as highlighted by one consumer:

*"I joined couple of weeks ago I think, but I can't get my head around to do these things even though I want to. So many things seem to be getting in the way at the moment I just can't seem to get started. Any help or suggestions??" (Consumer 19, pre-program consumption)*

Encouragement was provided through increasing confidence and hope, and was often in the form of positive acclamations. This assisted participants to improve their self-efficacy and strengthen their confidence (Guan and So, 2016). Self-efficacy is a known driver of behavior



change (Bandura, 1977) and maintenance (Parkinson, David, *et al.*, 2017); therefore, it appears valuable to include an understanding of how participants in an online transformative service assist their peers to increase their self-efficacy by providing esteem support. Esteem support assists consumers to increase their self-efficacy or confidence in their ability to perform tasks (Bandura, 1977), resulting in their realizing recognition benefits and creating personal value:

*Thanks for the encouraging comments everyone - it's good to feel a part of something special. I can feel the support and encouragement coming through every comment so uplifting. Good luck to everyone x*  
(Consumer 24, consumption)

Esteem support provided to participants through celebration of achievements occurred later in the consumption process (consumption and post-consumption). Celebration support is the seeking of validation and the celebration of achievements. Celebration occurred as consumers shared their program achievements and received validation from others, for example:

*Yahoo congratulations Kerry!! I'm so happy for you to crack the 60's.* (Consumer 21, consumption)

Celebration manifested through participants acknowledging a sense of accomplishment when successfully completing a task (Füller, 2010) and when receiving recognition benefits (Verleye, 2015) from other participants. This is consistent with Hollebeek *et al.*'s (2017) engagement sub-process of achievement-based engagement, which includes celebrating as one of its dimensions as illustrated in the following post:

*I'm still a bit stunned by the results. I've reached my revised goal for this round, more than doubled my fitness score and lost 46cms. I've lost weight before and promptly regained. However, I've never been on a program that comprehensively factors mindset and fitness into its weight loss. Previously I would have based my success solely on the weight loss. Now while I'm proud of my weight loss I'm more focused on my improved fitness and changed attitude.* (Consumer 48, post-program consumption)

However, previous integration of social support and value frameworks has not considered self-efficacy (Verleye, 2015) as a recognition benefit that results in personal value. The impact on self-efficacy can be seen in the following post:

*I'm still not there weight, fitness or mindset wise but I'm so much stronger physically and mentally. I think that's the biggest benefit of this program.* (Consumer 49, post-program consumption)

Thus, this research has revealed another dimension of value: personal value. Extensions of consumptions-value theory are common in the service literature (Williams *et al.*, 2017)—as to be expected, given value is a contextual and situation-specific concept (Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). The inclusion of personal value (Verleye, 2015) provides a more holistic understanding of the value experienced in online transformative services. Consumer experiences of improved self-perception, resulting from the integration of esteem support resources, deliver personal value (Cutrona and Russell, 1990). Thus, personal value driven by improved self-efficacy and other recognition benefits is an important inclusion for understanding value co-creation in transformative services.

Across all of the value dimensions, consistent with previous research that argues value is cumulative in nature (Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Sheth *et al.*, 1991), this study finds that value is accumulated over time. For example, epistemic value accumulated over time, as demonstrated by participants who discussed the lessons learned and maintained over time because of the program, and from the information support provided by other participants:

*Many of these things are very new and I never thought I could/would maintain them.... Green is good – if there's no salad it's not on my plate (eating out is easy now – small steak and a salad with no dressing is always on any menu). Stick with it – persistence is the key, positive talk to yourself really does work (I can do it). (Consumer 56, post-program consumption)*

#### *4.1.6 Dynamic process of transformative value*

This study shows that value co-creation is multidirectional, with consumer actions and interactions being relational, reciprocal, and contextual. While the individual dimensions of value were identifiable, value co-created across the consumption process culminated in transformative value. This means that value transitions from individual dimensions into transformative value; that is, participants experience the dimensions simultaneously. Many participants in the post-program consumption stage discussed multiple positive changes and improved well-being in a single post. The positive changes included changes in weight, happiness, and outlook. Improved well-being included an improved sense of self, feelings of gratitude, and increased fitness levels. These simultaneous changes demonstrated the co-creation of transformative value, as illustrated by the following examples:

*This is a great program that assists holistically. You have empowered me to continue on my journey to be the best version of myself that I can. Thanks to the team and other members. (Consumer 55, post-program consumption)*

*12 weeks ago I was so unhappy with how I looked and felt and struggling to keep up with my busy four year old while still breastfeeding my 9 month old. Now I'm a totally different person who for the first time in a long time can say I'm so proud of what I have achieved.... I have lost 60cm all up and lost a grand total of 9.5kg. This is the best thing I have ever done for myself and my family as I have some much more energy and am so much happier in myself. Thanks so much to everyone this has been an awesome journey. (Consumer 45, post-program consumption)*

*I still have a long way to go but already my body feels better, I can see and feel a difference and I am so excited to be able to wear so many more clothes in my wardrobe. I have enjoyed cooking and eating new foods, I sleep better and walk faster throughout the day - with a spring in my step. I exercise at home and in the park and I'm really enjoying walking around my neighborhood, I feel so good afterwards. I realize by thinking about my mindset every day that I am actually happy most of the time and I have much to be grateful for... My fitness has improved throughout the round, and I've lost 8kg and an amazing 25cms and I am so happy. (Consumer 44, post-program consumption)*

In summary, the results of this research reveal the progression of resource integration to realized benefits in the form of co-created value. The results showed multiple, interrelated resource integration, resulting in the concurrent co-creation of different dimensions of value (see Figure 2). Therefore, the support resources integrated and benefits realized to co-create value were not always mutually exclusive or discrete and frequently occurred simultaneously. Each value dimension was interrelated with other dimensions, with the interplay between epistemic, functional, emotional, social, and personal aspects of value co-creation generating different levels of value across the consumption process. Consistent with previous research, the transformative value of an online service experience is an amalgamation of different co-created value dimensions (Blocker and Barrios, 2015) experienced through benefits realized from integration of a range of social support resources. Thus, this research provides further evidence that to deliver a complete understanding of the transformative value provided by an online transformative service, simultaneous consideration of the support dimensions, benefits, and value dimensions is required. Finally, the analysis suggests the occurrence of improved well-being resulting from the co-creation process throughout the service experience. This finding provides evidence to support transformative services' potential to improve consumer well-being (Ostrom *et al.*, 2015).

## **5. Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to deepen our understanding of the resources integrated, benefits realized, and value co-created in online transformative services over time. At a time when service researchers and the broader community are increasingly emphasizing the importance of enhancing consumer well-being, this study contributes to the TSR literature and provides important managerial implications.

### ***5.1 Theoretical implications***

The framework extends existing TSR frameworks which consider different aspects of value co-creation, such as *interactions* (Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Hepi *et al.*, 2017), *resource integration* (Friman *et al.*, 2019; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017), and *value creation* (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2016), in isolation—despite research showing the bi-directional interactions that can occur between these constructs (Yao *et al.*, 2015). The current study integrates the foci of prior frameworks and social support (Cutrona and Russell, 1990; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007), as suggested by Kuppelwieser and Finsterwaler (2016), to present a new hybrid framework (as shown in Figure 2). The framework captures all aspects of value co-creation (interactions, integration of resources (social support), and value co-created) as per McColl-Kennedy *et al.*'s (2012) definition. Furthermore, the framework broadens the consumption-value perspective to include a focus on transformative value, as per Blocker and Barrios (2015). This is an important contribution as transformative services become more prevalent in both practice and research.

This study also contributes to TSR and the co-creation of value in services literature in several important ways. First, the study extends the social support dimensions identified in prior studies (e.g. emotional, esteem, social, practical, informational). This study thus refines and deepens Cutrona and Russell's (1990) five dimensions of social support into 10 sub-dimensions. The refined dimensions of social support provide insights into how social support resources evolve throughout the service-consumption process. These findings highlight how consumers integrate social support resources at different stages of the consumption process to realize different types of benefits. This study therefore provides a framework to advance theoretical understanding, by moving beyond describing and categorizing social support provided at one point in time in the service experience to detailing the process of social support provision and how it evolves throughout the service experience.

Another contribution of this study arises by employing a novel longitudinal methodology, as called for by Heinonen and Medberg (2018). The longitudinal results and subsequent insights help advance the current understanding of value co-creation by identifying which social support resources are integrated at different stages in the consumption process. Furthermore, it enables a fuller specification of the benefits realized to co-create value by the shared relationships emerging across time from this integration (Van Oerle *et al.*, 2016; Verleye, 2015). While previous research has examined social support resource integration at a single point in time, this research, through its longitudinal

examination, advances the notion of resources as “becoming” (Zimmerman, 1951). Rather than viewing a direct exchange of social support between consumers, the framework enables identification of the integration of social support resources; that is, how consumers draw social support resources together from a range of sources, and the benefits realized to co-create value. Thus, the longitudinal nature of the framework has enabled a better understanding of how value accumulates (Grönroos and Voima, 2013) across the consumption process into transformative value.

Finally, this study also extends previous value typologies by including personal value. The inclusion of personal value (Verleye, 2015) provides a more holistic understanding of the value co-created in online transformative services. Self-efficacy consistently predicts a range of health behavior (Parkinson, David, *et al.*, 2017; Sheeran *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, social support resources that can assist in increasing self-efficacy and facilitate the co-creation of personal value are important, particularly for services aiming to improve well-being. Thus, personal value co-created through esteem support integration and realization of the recognition benefits of improved self-perception and self-efficacy is an important inclusion for understanding value co-creation in transformative services.

## ***5.2 Managerial implications***

The framework presented by the research provides service managers with a tool to strategically resource and optimize their online transformative service, and develop value propositions for consumers. The framework enhances understanding of consumers’ integration of social support resources to realize benefits to co-create value. The findings also highlight the need for a multi-dimensional approach; that is, service managers should provide a range of timely opportunities for integration of different types of social support resources to facilitate the co-creation of different types of value and, subsequently, transformative value in the form of improved well-being.

The framework, for example, suggests that service providers should offer assistance to find solutions to better suit consumers’ needs from within the program, such as using tools to modify meal planners based on personal needs and preferences (e.g. vegetarian or family meals). This provides the pragmatic benefit of access to practical problem solutions on the program website and facilitates the co-creation of functional value. As another example, offering a value proposition around providing encouragement using video clips enables the service provider to facilitate the co-creation of personal value. Encouraging consumers to

access a range of value propositions across the consumption process will facilitate the co-creation of value, and so assist consumers to receive transformative value.

By developing clearly defined value propositions, service providers can articulate the benefits a consumer should expect to receive. By doing so they can anticipate leverage points in the customer journey where a consumer may experience difficulties when engaging with the service or similar service types, for example feeling like they are the only one experiencing difficulties or not being able to find appropriate information. Further, understanding when consumers have cause for celebration presents the service organization with opportunities to develop and offer an array of value propositions to facilitate a range of value co-creation. Thus, service providers can position themselves to facilitate simultaneous dimensions of value co-creation, which ultimately enables the consumer to experience transformative value.

Finally, these findings can assist service organizations to understand the temporal importance of engaging and interacting with consumers in online support programs. Findings revealed that it was important for service employees to interact frequently with consumers in the early stages of the consumption process to provide resources for integration and ensure consumers continued to interact with the program, and then again at the later stages to encourage them to return for another round of the program. For example, in the early stages of the consumption process, service managers should focus on welcoming and engaging participants, and providing encouragement to foster the creation of a safe, “third place” online (Rosenbaum, 2006; Parkinson, Schuster, *et al.*, 2017). In the later stages of the consumption process, ensuring participants receive appropriate support resources, for example offering esteem support through validation of achievements and internal (within program) practical assistance, to co-create value culminating in transformative value is important for improving participants’ well-being. The findings from this study also reveal how consumers add value to the service experience of other consumers through their engagement in the online support group, including sharing similar experiences, reassurance, and encouragement that service personnel may be unable to provide (Harris and Baron, 2004). Service providers should therefore provide opportunities for consumer interactions to foster and encourage greater consumer resource integration across the consumption process.

### ***5.3 Limitations and future research directions***

While this study provides insight into how service organizations and consumers can support value co-creation over time, further research is required to provide an understanding of factors that may undermine value co-creation. Understanding the potential points where deconstruction of value may occur is also useful for transformative service organizations, as this can assist in developing strategies aimed at helping consumers co-create value rather than deconstruct value. Further research should include emerging communities and quantitative studies to validate these results. Whilst this paper argues that the transformative value co-creation framework has wider applicability beyond the online weight management context, it also recognizes that further work in more diverse behavioral contexts is required. A further limitation of this research is that not everyone will use an online transformative service for support, with some consumers preferring either one-on-one support or group support in a face-to-face setting. Future research should apply this transformative value co-creation framework to offline service settings to understand whether the findings from this study extend to such settings. While this study has used a netnographic approach, future research should also include self-report questionnaires to capture psychographic and behavioral data to provide a more holistic understanding of the different value dimensions experienced by consumers, for example conditional value. Given the consistent omission of conditional value from transformative-related research, alternative offerings or circumstances are difficult to determine; thus, this is an important inclusion in future studies.

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