

# The Influence of Context on Value Proposition Co-creation of Online Shopping Platform in China

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**Keywords:** Service-Dominant Logic, Value Proposition, Context, Online Shopping Platform.

**Abstract:** Service-Dominant (S-D) logic emphasizes contextual conceptualization of value, while relatively little attention has been paid on context within value proposition co-creation research. This paper contributes to value proposition (VP) co-creation within S-D logic by providing the empirical evidence of how context, defined as stakeholders with unique reciprocal links among them, influencing this process of the online shopping platform. Synthesizing S-D logic and social network theory, the VP co-creation is conceptualized as an operant resource integration process that is influenced by the tie strength among the consumer and three core stakeholder groups, namely core service providers, supporting service providers and other consumers, of the platform. Data collected from 380 consumers of major online shopping platforms in China provide support for the study and demonstrate the influence on VP co-creation brought by stakeholder context is mediated by quality of shared information and trust among stakeholders.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Vargo and Lusch (2004) highlighted the importance of value proposition (VP) in the work on service-dominant (S-D) logic. As mentioned in the ten foundational premises (FPs) of this paper, firm and customer should be considered in a relational context (FP8), and the significant role of VPs should be recognized (FP7). More recently, researchers extend their focus on dyad interactions between customer and supplier to consider value co-creation of stakeholders' interacting and exchanging across networks (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). VP within the domain of S-D logic is, therefore, defined as a process that enables the alignment of value within all marketing stakeholder groups (Vargo and Lusch, 2017; Frow and Payne, 2011). Context as a set of unique actors with unique reciprocal links among them (Carrington, Scott and Wasserman, 2005; Sheth and Uslay, 1997), affects stakeholders' ability to directly access and leverage resources and thus influence the whole process of value co-creation (Chandler and Vargo, 2011). S-D logic emphasizes a phenomenological and experiential conceptualization of value (Vargo, Maglio and Akaka, 2008), and hence, context acts as a critical variable both in the creation and determination of value (Vargo, Lusch and

Akaka, 2010). For this reason, the concept of value has been extended to value-in-context. According to Chandler and Vargo (2011), value propositions are created through practices among stakeholders that integrate operand/operant resources, which cannot be understood without considering context. However, the context of multiple stakeholders has, to date, received relatively little attention within VP development research (Frow and Payne, 2011).

This study thus would like to address such an issue and empirically illustrate the role context plays in co-creating VP within S-D logic domains. By considering this purpose at a network level, we call for an extension of thinking beyond customer-supplier relationships to a network of stakeholder relationships (Frow and Payne, 2011; Lusch, Vargo and O'Brien, 2007). The study is set in the online shopping platform sector, the businesses of which are dependent on stakeholder value network viewed as pertinent for the study of VP co-creation (Quero and Ventura, 2018; Ballantyne, Frow, Varey and Payne, 2011).

The paper is organized as follows: First, the author reviews the relevant concepts as the theoretical background. Second, the mechanism on how multiple stakeholder relationships of the online shopping platform influence the co-creation of VP is proposed and the hypotheses are thus raised. Third,

the research method is clarified and data statistics are analyzed. A short discussion and implication on managerial practices is given as the conclusion.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 The Concept of VP

The original conceptualization placed VP as the first step in value delivery. In contrast, S-D logic suggests that value is not delivered by one party to another, and that VP potentially plays a key coordination role between stakeholders of marketing system (Frow and Payne, 2011). Therefore, the concept moves its focus from customer-supplier relationships to a stakeholder-unifying process (Lusch and Webster, 2011), combining the willingness of stakeholders to subordinate individual goals and associated actions to collective ones.

Within S-D logic, the co-creation of VP could be considered as an operant resource integration process. The process is no longer the conventional “producing” led by the firm, but the process of “resourcing” focusing on resource creation, resource integration and resistance removal among stakeholders (Lusch, Vargo and Wessels, 2008). Ballantyne and Varey (2006) made this idea more specific and indicate that VPs in the S-D logic perspective are formed through activities of reciprocal exchange of knowledge among stakeholders. Since value is described as being “idiosyncratic, experiential and contextual” (Vargo and Lusch, 2008), stakeholders may have different views on value in accordance with the context they are embedded (Frow and Payne, 2011). As a result, context can play an important role in VP co-creation.

### 2.2 The Concept of Context

S-D logic redirects the focal point of value creation to the value uniquely derived and determined by an individual service system that implies the context is important to the creation of value (Vargo, Lusch and Akaka, 2010). Context, as Chandler and Vargo (2011) defined, is a set of unique actors with unique reciprocal links among them. Existing researches point out that the fundamental parts of value co-creation, resource and service are critically dependent on the contexts they are embedded in (Chandler and Vargo, 2011; Uzzi, 1997; Vargo *et al.*, 2010). Especially when stakeholders' unique positions in contexts affect their ability to access and

leverage resources both directly and indirectly (Uzzi, 1997), context could no longer be considered exogenous to value creation. This has been recognized in S-D logic as “value-in-context” (Vargo, Maglio and Akaka, 2008). Focusing on value creation and drawing heavily from the social networks analysis literature makes salient the heterogeneous nature of context (Wasserman and Faust, 1994).

### 2.3 Social Network Analysis

Social relationships are studied mainly from two perspectives. One is ego network analysis, starting with an individual and studying the relationships he/she has with other people (Arnaboldi, Guazzini, and Passarella, 2013). Since an open network environment such as the online shopping platform may find it hard to get a panoramic view of the whole picture, ego network analysis could help make salient the properties between the ego and alters.

In the context of online shopping platform, we'd like to partially accept the Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne (1991) model, since it identifies a manageable group of categories (Frow and Payne, 2011). In this model, the external core stakeholders could be organized into groups of customer markets, supplier/alliance markets, influence and referral markets, each being sub-divided into more specific entities. As proposed in this framework, the main stakeholders of online shopping platform could be divided into three groups as: 1) core service providers of physical goods and knowledge-based services on the platform; 2) supporting service providers of a broader range providing assistant services like payment, detection and logistics to support transactions there; 3) other consumers with similar shopping experiences there.

Of the key properties characterizing the social relationships among stakeholders, tie strength - the importance of the social relationship between two individuals - is found to be one of the most imperative features. The existing literature has demonstrated the significant influence of tie strength on social capital, which includes resources like information (Chiu, Hsu and Wang, 2006; Granovetter, 1973) and commitment to community (Zhou, Zheng and Zhang, 2013), both theoretically and empirically. Thus, there is reason to believe that tie strength among stakeholders can possibly be a decisive antecedent for VP development.

### 3 CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

#### 3.1 Conceptual Model

As mentioned above, the set of stakeholders and the tie strength among them will partly define the consumer's access to information, which will influence the potential of resources to be drawn upon for integration and trust, which in turn will influence the extent of resource integration resistance removal, and a stakeholder perspective of VP development accordingly. As such, the author would like to propose a conceptual model for co-creating VP as follows:

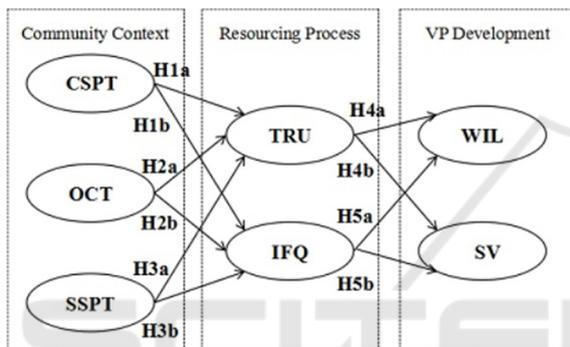


Figure 1: Conceptual model.

Note: CSPT= core service provider tie strength, OCT= other consumer tie strength, SSP = supporting service provider tie strength, IFQ= information quality, TRU= trust, WIL= willingness, SV= shared vision

#### 3.2 Hypotheses

##### 3.2.1 Context and Resourcing Process

Considered as an important antecedent of intellectual capital exchange ( Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998), trust refers to an individual' s expectation that members on the platform will follow a generally accepted set of values, norms, and principles (Chiu *et al.*, 2006) and information quality mainly focuses on the qualities of information content and information interactivity (Wei and Tang, 2016). Tsai and Ghoshal (1998) provide empirical support for the influence of social interaction ties on interknitting resource exchange and combination. Although Grannovetter (1973) has theoretically demonstrated that weak ties serve as information bridges connecting individuals with different socio-economic characteristics, which could effectively transmit information absent in their strong-tie

relationships, the research by Kowalkowski, Ridell, Røndell and Sörhammar (1992) suggests strong tie advantages in forming more trust and reducing the uncertainty faced by individuals. Empirical evidence suggests that strong tie strength is indeed positively associated with the amount of knowledge overlap between the source and the recipient (Reagans, 2005). In addition, community members with strong ties are prone to attachment and belonging to the community which encourages them to trust each other (Zhou *et al.*, 2013).

Accordingly, hypotheses are set as follows:

H1a. The tie strength between the consumer and the core service providers has positive effects on the quality of information shared on the online shopping platform.

H1b. The tie strength between the consumer and the core service providers has positive effects on the consumer's trust to the online shopping platform.

H2a. The tie strength between the consumer and other consumers has positive effects on the quality of information shared on the online shopping platform.

H2b. The tie strength between the consumer and other consumers has positive effects on the consumer's trust to the online shopping platform.

H3a. The tie strength between the consumer and the supporting service providers has positive effects on the quality of information shared on the online shopping platform.

H3b. The tie strength between the consumer and the supporting service providers has positive effects on the consumer's trust to the online shopping platform.

##### 3.2.2 Resourcing Process and VP Development

As defined above, the VP development emphasizes on the willingness of stakeholders to subordinate individual goals and associated actions to collective goals and actions, as well as the shared vision which binds stakeholders together. Yim and Leem (2013) suggests that as the level of mutual trust accumulates, there are more exchanges of business values and goals. Buckley, Clegg and Wang's (2006) multiple case studies point out the necessity of trust to foster a shared mindset. In short, the process of VP development is fostered as a result of enhanced mutual trust. High-quality information exchanged among stakeholders is an essential operant resource helping them to seek their own and mutually shared range of benefits which forms the basis of knowledge identified in shared vision (Frow and Payne, 2011). Information quality effects cognitive

heritage of the stakeholders (Gummeson and Mele, 2010), which could generate social capital and ultimately form a sense of belonging (Zhou *et al.*, 2013), triggering off the community identification, and in turn consumer's willingness to co-create VP. Thus more hypotheses are raised:

H4a. The quality of information shared on the online shopping platform has positive effects on consumer's willingness to co-create VP.

H4b. The quality of information shared on the online shopping platform has positive effects on shared vision of the platform.

H5a. Consumer's trust in the online shopping platform has positive effects on consumer's willingness to co-create VP.

H5b. Consumer's trust in the online shopping platform has positive effects on shared vision of the platform.

## 4 REASERCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

### 4.1 Measurement Development

This conceptual model contains seven constructs, including core service provider tie strength (CSPT), other consumer tie strength (OCT), supporting service provider tie strength (SSPT), information quality (IFQ), trust (TRU), willingness (WIL) and shared vision (SV), all being adapted from existing literature (see Appendix for specific questionnaire items and references). Synthesizing researches of tie strength prediction and network density, tie strength of core stakeholders is measured with four items based on the combination of the amount of time and recency of contact (Arnaboldi *et al.*, 2013; Granovetter, 1973). Information quality is assessed with six items considering the quality and interactivity of information content (Chiu *et al.*, 2006; Wei and Tang, 2016). Trust is assessed with four items adapted to reflect the consumer's beliefs in stakeholders' credibility, promise keeping, behavior consistency, and truthfulness, following prior studies (McKnight, Choudhury and Kacmar, 2002; Ridings, Gefen and Arinze, 2002; Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998). Based on the definition developed above, the dependent variables of the model are willingness and shared vision generated for VP co-creation. Willingness is assessed through two items considering the consumer's enthusiasm to co-create value on the platform, and the shared vision is assessed with two items measuring the consumer's

perceptions on whether stakeholders share the same vision and goal for the platform's further development (Chiu *et al.*, 2006; Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998). Regarding all the measures, a six-point Likert scale is adopted with anchors ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6).

### 4.2 Survey Administration

Consumers are selected with different characteristics from major online shopping platforms in China (e.g. Taobao.com, JD.com and Xiaohongshu.com) as the target group, and Questionnaire Star, a professional online questionnaire platform, is used to collect research data. The first page of the questionnaire explain the purpose of this study and no breach of confidentiality is ensured. 380 valid questionnaires are collected through automatic deletion (setting a threshold of a response time less than 1 second per question) and manual exclusion (respondents with no required shopping experience or those who clicked through with the same option). Demographic information of the respondents is shown in Appendix table.

### 4.3 Questionnaire Data Analysis

Data analysis utilizes a two-step approach as recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). Firstly, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is applied to verify the relationships between observed variables and latent variables in the hypotheses, and then the structural relationships among latent variables are tested. Both analyses are conducted with AMOS 24.

### 4.4 Results

#### 4.4.1 Reliability and Validity Tests

Reliability tests include internal consistency reliability test and combination reliability test. The result shows a high reliability of the model: Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for seven constructs all exceed 0.80 and composite reliabilities are all above 0.60. Validity tests contain convergent validity test and discriminant validity test. The CFA analysis for convergent validity test shows that all variable loadings are significant and exceed 0.60, and fitness indexes meet the requirements. For detailed results please see Appendix table: Reliability and Validity Test Results.

#### 4.4.2 SEM Analysis of Conceptual Model

The model fit indices are within accepted thresholds, and seven out of ten paths of it exhibit a p-value less than 0.05 (see Table 1 and Figure 2), thus all hypotheses are supported empirically, except hypotheses 2a, 3a and 3b. As the model reflects, ties among the consumer and core service providers exhibit strong positive effect on resourcing process, while effects of ties with other consumers and supporting service providers are relatively weaker, especially for the generation of the sense of trust. Both information quality and the sense of trust have a significant influence on the willingness and shared vision to co-create an integrated VP, which proves the importance of resourcing process for the development of a stakeholder perspective of VP.

Table 1: SEM analysis of the conceptual model.

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
CSPT→TRU	.269	.050	5.419	***
SSPT→TRU	.059	.039	1.501	.133
CSPT→IFQ	.456	.067	6.790	***
SSPT→IFQ	.098	.053	1.848	.065
OCT→TRU	.073	.045	1.620	.105
OCT→IFQ	.145	.061	2.376	.018
TRU→WIL	.117	.017	6.862	***
TRU→SV	.113	.049	2.306	.021
IFQ→WIL	.073	.012	6.222	***
IFQ→SV	.253	.036	7.025	***

$\chi^2/df=1.413$ , GFI=0.998 ,  
 RMSEA=0.033  
 NNFI=0.994, CFI=0.999

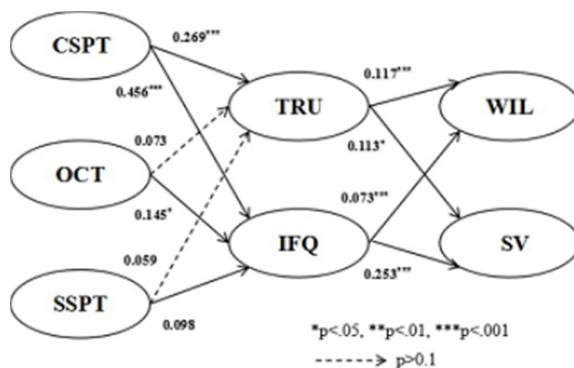


Figure 2: SEM analysis of the conceptual model.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

### 5.1 Summary of Results

This study provides empirical evidence to illustrate the mechanism of how VP co-creation process is affected by network context. Tie strengths of different stakeholder groups exhibit different influence extents. When it comes to the online shopping platform, influence of direct contact (e.g. consumer with core service provider) tie strength is the most significant, both for information and trust acquiring. Whereas the influence brought by indirect contacts (e.g. consumer with other consumers and supporting service provider) is relatively weak. Though partially demonstrating the advantage of weak tie on information exchange (Granovetter, 1973), the drawbacks of weak tie strength in trust acquisition also emerge at the same time. Trust among stakeholders tends to have significant positive effect on removal of resistance, which contributes to consumer's willingness to co-create VP shared vision development. Information exchanged from core stakeholders facilitates the resource creation process, which helps consumers recognize the components of stakeholders' VPs depending on the in-use situation and take the available value co-creation opportunities accordingly.

### 5.2 Implications for Managerial Practices

The result indicates that the context of the platform will significantly affect the development process of VP co-creation. Therefore, managers should develop strategies such as expanding communication channels and designing communication encouragement mechanism to enhance the strength of the relationships among stakeholders. Additionally, the quality of shared information on the platform forms the basis of VP co-creation. Managers could design an auto-filtering mechanism to help consumers get valuable information more easily. The online shopping platform like Taobao.com could add tags for comments from other consumers, which helps facilitate information collecting to meet their needs.

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**APPENDIX**

Demographic Information of Survey Respondents.

Measure	Items	Percentage
Gender	Male	38.2%
	Female	61.8%
Usage History	Less than 1 year	32.6%
	1-3 years	17.9%
	More than 3 years	49.5%
Age	19-25	48.2%
	26-30	18.7%
	31-40	24.5%
	41 or above	8.7%
Job Title	Student	36.6%
	Manager	8.7%
	Administration staff	10.3%
	Engineer	6.6%
	Sales	5%
	Others	32.9%
Education	High school or below	6.1%
	University	60.9%
	Graduate school or above	16.1%
After-tax Income (per month)	3000 RMB or below	38.7%
	3001-5000 RMB	19.5%
	5001-8000 RBM	24.7%
	8001 RMB or above	17.1%
Location	First-tier cities	24.5%
	Second-tier cities	55.3%
	Prefecture-level cities	14.5%
	Counties	3.7%
	Small towns or villages	2.1%

Reliability and Validity Tests Results.

Construct	Loading	Cronbach's alpha value	Composite reliability	AVE
Core Service Provider Tie Strength		0.855	0.764	0.588
CSP1	0.632			
CSP2	0.727			
CSP3	0.891			
CSP4	0.860			
Other Consumer Tie Strength		0.873	0.798	0.607
OC1	0.777			
OC2	0.793			
OC3	0.753			
OC4	0.786			
Supporting Service Provider Tie Strength		0.88	0.874	0.635
SSP1	0.788			
SSP2	0.764			
SSP3	0.771			
SSP4	0.725			
Information Quality		0.897	0.790	0.601
IFQ1	0.777			
IFQ2	0.834			
IFQ3	0.779			
IFQ4	0.828			
IFQ5	0.771			
IFQ6	0.647			
Trust		0.865	0.792	0.602
TRU1	0.735			
TRU2	0.767			
TRU3	0.806			
TRU4	0.794			
Willingness		0.834	0.694	0.751
WIL1	0.764			
WIL2	0.693			
Shared vision		0.823	0.751	0.798
SV1	0.813			
SV2	0.737			

Questionnaire Items and References.

Construct		Item	Reference
Context	Core service provider (CSP) tie strength;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● For the services I am interested in, I will spend a great deal of time interacting with CSP/OC/SSPs.</li> </ul>	Arnaboldi <i>et al.</i> (2013 );
	Other consumers (OC) tie strength;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I have frequent communication with CSP/OC/SSPs when I am shopping on the platform.</li> </ul>	Lin and Lu (2011);
	Supporting service provider (SSP) tie strength.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I often exchange views with CSP/OC/SSPs on brands and services.</li> <li>● In the whole process of shopping (including pre-sale consultation, shopping process and post-sale service), I maintain a strong connection with CSP/OC/SSPs.</li> </ul>	Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998).
Resourcing Process	Information quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The information shared by platform members is relevant to my interests.</li> </ul>	Chiu <i>et al.</i> (2006);
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The information shared by platform members is complete.</li> </ul>	Wei and Tang (2016);
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The information shared by platform members is timely.</li> </ul>	DeLone and McLean (2003).
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I have some control over the content of the platform that I wanted to see.</li> </ul>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I could communicate with the service provider directly for further questions if I want to.</li> </ul>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I could communicate in real time with other members who share my interest in this platform.</li> </ul>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I believe that members on the platform have more knowledge on services than I do.</li> </ul>	McKnight (2002);
Trust		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Members on the platform will always keep promises they make to one another.</li> </ul>	Pavlou and Gefen (2004);
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I believe that the cooperation among platform members will produce beneficial results for everyone.</li> </ul>	Ridings <i>et al</i> (2002);
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Members on the platform are truthful in dealing with one another.</li> </ul>	Tsai and Ghoshal (1998).
VP Development	Willingness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I would like to commit myself more to the platform, so it will provide better products/services for me in the future.</li> <li>● I think the members, including myself, are enthusiastic about this development.</li> </ul>	Anderson, Narus and Van (2006); Chiu <i>et al</i> (2006); Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998).
	Shared vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The member of the platform shared the responsibility for getting things done.</li> </ul>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I agree with the platform' s positioning and value commitment.</li> </ul>	