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Co-creation as choreography

Co-creation as
choreography

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to propose a novel concept of choreography as a way of understanding co-creation of value and thus develops the spatial analytical dimensions of co-creation theorising.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual paper contemplates the meanings and possibilities of leveraging the theoretical underpinnings of value co-creation, from the viewpoint of value-in-experience.

Findings – The concept of choreography opens up a way to read knowledge as movement. It enables a way to elaborate on both the phenomenological and non-representational aspects of co-creation processes. Conceptualising co-creation through such a lens, where knowing is seen as an on-going, spatio-temporal and affective process formed in movement, posits opportunities to further understand the value co-creation practices of experiences. Choreography gives access to the kinaesthetic and affective nature of knowing gained in and through different spatio-temporal contexts and can, in turn, be mobilised in others.

Originality/value – Only a few studies have conceptualised co-creation in relation to a spatio-temporal phenomenon. Notably, this study connects co-creation with mobilities and thus constructs a novel view of knowledge and value creation.

Keywords Value co-creation, Value-in-experience, Choreography, Market spatiality, Knowing, Movement

Paper type Conceptual paper

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Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a plethora of scholarly discussion(s) on value co-creation in marketing. Exploring value and its formation is at the heart of theorising on co-creation (and co-destruction). In the process of value co-creation different parties integrate different resources to produce value. The role of knowledge, or different knowledges, in producing value has been central at the practical and conceptual levels in the development of this theoretical stream (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Value is always personal and phenomenological (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). It is an experiential, multi-dimensional process outcome experienced by the subject (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011, p. 353; McColl-Kennedy and Cheung, 2018; Zinelabidine *et al.*, 2018). Besides the individual experience, perceptions of value are also shaped by social experience (Epp and Price, 2008; Schau *et al.*, 2009; Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Pandey and Kumar, 2020; Echeverri and Skålén, 2021). Scholars have recognised that the process of value formation is very complex, resulting from a multitude of contexts over time (Zinelabidine *et al.*, 2018).

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Even though there have been numerous contributions discussing market spatiality in mainstream marketing as well as consumer culture theory (CCT) strand of literature (Coffin and Chatzidakis, 2021), there seems to be a lack of discussion on the co-creation of value. The processual nature of value and the knowledge it builds from and on have been recognised, but scholars have noted that there is a lack of accounts discussing the spatio-temporality of this knowledge and the process (Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015). The concept of choreography presents an opportunity to interpret how knowledge that is gained and mobilised to construct value, shapes and is shaped in and through different spatio-temporal contexts. How do we learn in, on, and from moving in/between spaces and places and are able to use this knowledge in value co-creation processes? This suggests a need to take a holistic yet situational epistemological stance on the knowledge present in the process.

This article is organised as follows. I start by reviewing key discussions on value co-creation. I then introduce and discuss the concept of choreography and its onto-epistemological premises and connections to spatial thinking. After that, I contemplate how conceptualising value co-creation as choreography affects our understanding of the concept and process. I move on to discuss the kind of methodological implications the concept of choreography posits for research on value co-creation. I conclude this article by discussing the possibilities for developing this conceptual development theoretically and empirically within marketing thought.

Previous research on value co-creation

Value co-creation has been a contemporary topic in marketing theory over the last few decades (Vargo and Lusch, 2018; Galvagno and Dalli, 2014). When introducing the concept, Vargo and Lusch (2004) proposed that it relates to the shift in the marketing discussion from goods to services, resulting in skills and knowledge becoming the fundamental unit of exchange through which value is built. According to the scholars, value is created in a continuous learning process with the customers, who are the primary tangible resources for the firms (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, pp. 1–11). Over the years, scholarly discussions on value co-creation have developed and taken different streams in marketing thought (Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015; McColl-Kennedy and Cheung, 2018). These understand the positions and roles of companies and consumers in the co-creation process differently and their theoretical premises rest on different backgrounds.

As the discussion has evolved, the different actors and their roles in co-creation have been debated (Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015; McColl-Kennedy and Cheung, 2018). Differing from firm-centric accounts of the phenomenon, cultural marketing, or interpretive consumer research, informed accounts have focused on consumers as mutual subjects of the markets. The studies have discussed, for example, the political aspects of co-creation, consumer communities and practices (Cova *et al.*, 2011; Echeverri and Skálén, 2011, 2021; Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011). Different experience contexts have also received ample attention (Fyrberg Yngfalk, 2013; Carù and Cova, 2015). A critical stream of thought that questions the premises and basic ideas of co-creation, for example, making consumers work with no monetary compensation, has also emerged over the years (Zwick *et al.*, 2008; Cova *et al.*, 2011; Hietanen *et al.*, 2018).

Value and its formation are at the heart of co-creation theorisation. Value as a concept originates from economics where it was originally viewed as product and firm centred, dyadic and based on the linear assessment between costs and benefits (McColl-Kennedy and Cheung, 2018, p. 67). However, in the development of co-creation discussion value has been constructed as an interactional and contextual formation in the processes and networks of customers and providers and/or other consumers (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Grönroos, 2011;

Frow *et al.*, 2016). This has also led marketing scholars, especially those with a CCT viewpoint, to investigate value and how it builds and is shaped from the consumer point of view (Carù and Cova, 2015). Yet, due to the multi-dimensional basis of the discussion, there are still many ways to construct consumer/customer-centric value formation (McColl-Kennedy and Cheung, 2018, p. 69). One of the latest developments is the idea of value-in-experience claiming that firms can only propose possibilities but the actual value builds in the lifeworld of the customer through the integration of different resources (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Helkkula *et al.*, 2012; Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015; Kuuru, 2022).

In this article, I focus on furthering value-in-experience thinking (Helkkula *et al.*, 2012; Kuuru, 2022). As proposed by Helkkula *et al.* (2012, pp. 61–62), value-in-experience is intra- and inter-subjective, both lived and imaginary, temporal in nature, and emerges from individually determined social contexts. The plethora of research on value-in-experience has only tenuously touched, the spatiality of the experience and the knowledge it mobilises. Because knowledge is considered a central resource for building value in co-creation processes, it should be more carefully scrutinised to better understand the different forms of knowledge that are being mobilised in value co-creation (Kuuru, 2022; see also García-Rosell *et al.*, 2019). Next, I discuss the concept of choreography as a possibility to further understand the relations between space, experience and knowledge in value co-creation.

Choreography as an analytical standpoint on movement in space

Choreography as a concept originates from the theory and practice of dance (Risner, 2000; Kozel, 2010; Ravn, 2017), and it has received attention in a plethora of academic realms in recent decades. It has been used as an analytical standpoint at least in the fields of geography, performance studies, political sciences, sociology and tourism studies, to name a few (Edensor, 1998; Parviainen, 2010; Puumala and Pehkonen, 2010; Campbell, 2012; Doucet, 2013; Franklin, 2012; Jóhannesson and Lund, 2017). Choreography highlights the relationship between space and place providing access to exploring temporariness and movement.

The etymology of the word choreography can be traced back to the ancient Greek language: *chorós* meaning place where dance is performed and *graphós* writing. The word combines two inconsistent actions: “movement” and “writing”, because its literal meaning is “writing the dance”. Choreography [in dance and performance] was “invented in order to structure a system of command to which bodies have to subject themselves into the system’s wills and whims” (Allsopp and Lepecki, 2008, p. 3). In present day dance, the practice of choreography encapsulates both the dance written to be performed and the performed piece (Ravn, 2017). The word “choreography” also connects with geographical thought. “Chora” was a concept used by Plato to describe place. Chora marks a place that is complex and unstable. This is in opposition to the modern understanding of place as a theoretical construct, which originates from the word *topos*, meaning something defined and known. In comparison to intelligibly definable *topos*, Plato used the concept of *chora* to explain the passage to sensible, a place in process (Kymäläinen and Lehtinen, 2010, pp. 252–253). Chora can be translated as a being in, moving to, and receiving space (Pehkonen and Puumala, 2008, p. 161). As such, it is an interactive space, and its meanings “can be constantly redefined by its inhabitants” (Wearing, 1998; see also Germann Molz, 2014). Accordingly, choreography provides access to space and temporariness (Nancy, 1996, in Pehkonen and Puumala, 2008, p. 161; Kymäläinen, 2003). Ontologically, choreography follows the idea of “co-being” or “being with” (Nancy, 1992/1996; Veijola and Falin, 2016), allowing access to the relationship between people, space, experiences, and knowledge. This ontological stance connects with processual, relational, post-human, and non-representational ontologies in

social sciences and humanities (Blackman and Venn, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; Vannini, 2015; see also Parviainen and Coeckelbergh, 2021).

However, choreography draws heavily from the phenomenological research tradition and embodiment (Parviainen, 2011). It asserts that the constitutive way of experiencing the world is through embodiment and in relation to others (Nancy, 1992/1996; Heikkilä, 2008, pp. 135–137; Watkin, 2009, p. 179). Embodiment is intentional and non-representational by nature; through it, the body connects to the world and enacts its intentions (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, as cited by Parviainen and Coeckelbergh, 2021, p. 719). As Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. xvii) suggested “the world is not what I think, but what I live through”. Accordingly, knowledge is constructed as kinaesthetic, corporeal intelligence, in which thinking is done with/through the entire body (Parviainen, 2011; Slutskaya and De Cock, 2008, p. 856). Kinaesthesia, again, refers to sensing and understanding movement. We sense our own body movements through different senses, but kinaesthesia means a holistic understanding of patterns of movement in wider cultural contexts (Foster, 2011, pp. 6–9).

Since kinaesthesia connects the body to places and spaces through movement, it merges the phenomenological with the non-representational, grounding on the relations between body(-ies) and materialities and sensations and affectivity in action (Lefebvre, 2004; Thrift, 2008). The motion of a certain place forms in spatial, temporal, social, cultural, material, and technological arrangements (Parviainen, 2012, p. 14; see also Lefebvre, 2004). Edmund Husserl proposed the concept of kinaesthetic field as movement that is habitual to certain places or surroundings (Husserl, 1973, in Parviainen, 2011, p. 119). Kinaesthetic field consists of human and non-human agents, and a person can affect it through the personal ways and abilities to feel, react, and respond to the movement of others (Parviainen, 2011, p. 118, see also Edensor, 2015, p. 83). The co-created experiences of different markets can be more or less pre-choreographed (Parviainen, 2010, 2011). Pre-choreography defines how we are expected to move: what is allowed or denied. This includes the material and the built environment, but it is not limited to them. Social expectations also possess pre-choreographic power. In choreography, knowledge is constructed as active doing performed by the body-knowing. The body knows and learns (or does not learn) “how to perform” in different spaces (Biehl and Volkmann, 2019). Knowing is an intra- and interpersonal phenomenon, being an active doing and a memory of other spaces encountered at the same time, and it builds from moving in and within these spaces. This constitutes choreography’s analytical lens as a multi-sited one: it happens across spaces and through the connections and actions of different human and non-human agents (Parviainen and Coeckelbergh, 2021, pp. 719–720).

Conceptualising value co-creation as choreography

In this section, I consider the implications conceptualising value co-creation as choreography presents for understanding value-in-experience. Drawing from the ideas of Parviainen and Coeckelbergh (2021, pp. 719–720), I propose that the concept holds analytic power in relation to value co-creation at least from the following viewpoints. It connects the idea of knowledge with embodiment and views the co-creation of value as performative (see also Haanpää, 2017; Kuuru, 2022). Thus, it also taps into processual onto-epistemologies in which moving bodies navigate the spaces of value co-creation with/in materialities and other human and non-human agents. This means that value is created not only in social contexts, including humans, but also in spatio-temporal, contexts including other agents, such as animals or technological agents (Markuksela and Valtonen, 2019; Airoidi and Rokka, 2022). This also means that in these contexts, even though we learn to navigate them, we cannot be assured that we are fully in control of the meanings, experiences, and actions taking place (Haanpää *et al.*, 2022; Parviainen and Coeckelbergh, 2021, p. 719).

Choreography as a conceptual apparatus recognises the multitudeness of simultaneous, lived, and virtual spaces we navigate in and to (Parviainen and Coeckelbergh, 2021, pp. 719–720). This relates back to the idea of chora as a complex and unstable place in motion. In the contemporary ubiquitous world, the value co-creation of experience happens simultaneously in and between these different spaces. The knowing subject is always emergent in and between these contexts (Nancy, 1991, p. 35, in Simpson, 2015, p. 72). Knowing embodied from the contexts is then carried in and performed through the body in others (Haanpää, 2017). Value is built by learning from these different contexts, be they the contexts of production or those of consumption. We learn how to move in and between them and how to move them, even though fully controlling them is not possible.

Conceptualising co-creation through such a lens, where knowing is seen as an ongoing, spatio-temporal as well as affective process formed in movement, presents opportunities to further understand the value co-creation practices of experiences. This knowing then accumulates from the contexts, and through it, the experience value is interpreted and co-created by the subjects. Besides drawing from the social and discursive, it also reads on being in the contexts “as a body”, which then through the spaces and time learns the movements and how to use them across the contexts (Veijola and Jokinen, 1994). This movement-based approach indeed connects to how we as subjects learn to integrate resources to co-create value for ourselves but also in other contexts for others. Because value is based on knowing, there should be more discussion of learning within the co-creation literature.

Interpreted through the concept of choreography, how knowing builds on value-in-experience can be understood as a three levelled subjective and embodied phenomenon (Haanpää, 2017). At the macro-level, *meta-choreographic* knowing refers to embodied knowing built in and through time in relation to different spaces. This knowing is constructed in movement between past, present, and future spaces, not only physically but also mentally, through memories and future imaginaries. It resides in the body and is actualised in the capabilities to interpret and act in these spaces. Previous experiences and knowing are present through the body (Risner, 2000; Parviainen and Aromaa, 2017; Markuksela and Valtonen, 2019). Meta-choreographic knowing is an ongoing process that is always in becoming in different relations (Nancy, 1991, p. 35, in Simpson, 2015, p. 72).

At the meso-level, knowing is tied to a specific space and its *pre-choreographies*. Pre-choreographies are the spatial, temporal, social, cultural, and technological arrangements of a place that affect the characteristics of motion within the place (Parviainen, 2010, 2011). They allow or restrict stimulation of certain knowing. They can also posit political qualities. By reading the pre-choreographies, we can analyse how and what kind of experience value engaging in the space creates for the subject. And what are the opportunities to alter and shape them. At the micro-level, knowing takes place in the *doing-of-choreography*, that is in action. The focus is on how knowing is used, gained, and built as kinaesthetic and affective practice in and between different agents in space. Knowing in action happens through the notions of kinaesthesia (Parviainen and Aromaa, 2017) and affect (Ahmed, 2004). Thus, this is where choreography conceptually taps into theoretisations of affect. Different animate and inanimate agents possess affective qualities. These affective qualities and states experienced move through the bodies and “move them to move”, as Sheets-Johnstone (2018, pp. 13–14) argues.

Understanding value that builds through spatio-temporal, movement-based processes as kinaesthetic-affective experience calls for methodological creativity.

Methodological implications for researching choreographies

Choreography, as a concept, is two-directional: It grasps the phenomenological experience but also pays specific attention to the non-representational sensitivities of the spaces and places in which the body enacts. This calls for methodologies that either cast light on or are based on movement (see also [Biehl and Volkmann, 2019](#)). Further, the methodological choices should appreciate the different scales of movement, from intra-personal, micro-movements of the body to structural, macro-movements of the societal level. To understand movement, we need to accept and engage with sensual ways of knowing as academic knowledge-making ([Valtonen et al., 2010](#); [Biehl and Volkmann, 2019](#)). Investigating movement calls for methodological approaches that can evoke the non-representational aspects of knowing and experience. Many qualitative enquiries are based solely on interviews or other discursive accounts. Understanding choreographies calls for enquiries that “catch” or incite movement that understand the research participants and their knowledge as embodied ([Biehl and Volkmann, 2019](#), p. 296). Researching movement and affect turns the focus of attention to different bodies relating to each other ([Henriques, 2010](#)). Corporeality and the senses then become central points of observation.

Choreographic viewpoint also moves the traditional qualitative methodologies slightly. For example, in ethnographic research practice, attention is directed towards non-representational and affective knowledge ([Vannini, 2015](#)). Cultural geographer Philip [Vannini \(2015\)](#) advocates for more vitalist ethnographic practice. Such ethnographies are constantly on the move, changing, and the outcomes differ from what was originally planned. The accounts are performative; thus, the focus is on action: what is done and what is not. This means:

[...] tuning-in to the event-ness of the world, taking a witness stance to the unfolding of situated action and being open to the unsettling co-presence of bodies affecting each other in time-space ([Vannini, 2015](#), p. 321).

This turns the focus of such accounts to “events, affective states, the unsaid, and the incompleteness and openness of everyday performances”. Such a way of doing ethnography also embraces the failures of knowledge and aims to animate the lived world. In writing non-representationalist ethnographic accounts, performativity and creativity should be embodied instead of traditional, timid accounts of “telling the world as-it-is” ([Vannini, 2015](#), pp. 318–319; see also [Ellis and Bochner, 2006](#)).

Autoethnographic accounts may help to understand the longitudinal nature of how knowledge constructing value-in-experience builds through different market spaces. The autoethnographic method is based on a deep reflection of personal experience ([Ellis, 2013](#), p. 10). In evocative autoethnography, the focus is directed towards the personal, affective and embodied experiences of the researcher to better understand a cultural phenomenon at hand ([Ellis, 2013](#)). Grasping affect as a bodily sensation and body memory is grounded in nuanced body reflexivity ([Valtonen and Haanpää, 2018](#); [Kuuru, 2022](#)). This makes the researcher’s body a key instrument in creating such account. Body reflexivity in producing and writing the autoethnographic account means:

[...] drawing a more detailed and focused attention to a range of various, perhaps seemingly insignificant, physical, and social bodily issues that the auto-ethnographer encounters, or indeed, feels and experiences during the research process. ([Valtonen and Haanpää, 2018](#), p. 138)

To conclude, exploring choreographic knowledge does not call for completely new methodologies but it shifts the epistemological focus of methods used towards non-representational and affective qualities of experiences.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, I have suggested a novel concept, choreography, to understand the co-creation of value and, more precisely, value-in-experience. Choreography as a concept constructs knowing, and thus the co-creation of value, in/as movement. Its explaining powers are ever more timely in a world arranged on global mobilities (Hannam *et al.*, 2006; Franklin, 2012), and their present-day halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As performance researchers Allsopp and Lepecki (2008, p. 1) have argued, “geo-political and bio-political questions become essentially choreographic ones: to decide who is able or allowed to move and [. . .] where one is allowed to move to”. Besides the grand changes in movement at the global level, choreographic knowing in the context of markets has become visible and tangible in recent years. The pandemic markets have also shown how we are no longer able to co-create value based on the knowing we have accumulated from non-pandemic contexts. However, there have also been new creative approaches.

Reading knowing as movement expands the perspective on learning and how it takes place in co-creation processes. Besides the actual co-creational context present, understanding value builds through various spaces and life experiences from which the participants of the co-creation process draw. These can be both contexts of production and consumption. Choreography gives access to analysing how value builds phenomenologically but also gives access to its spatio-temporal nuances and affectivities. As a conceptual standpoint, it provides a nuanced understanding of the capabilities and possibilities of participation of different bodies in the different co-creational processes. This does not relate only to the experiences of individuals but also to acknowledging inclusivity towards multiple ways of movement. This has implications for the planning and co-creation of places, spaces and experiences in markets. As the concept of choreography taps into the non-representational aspects of experiences and spaces, it paves way to understand and analyse co-creation of value as a process that also includes other than human subjects.

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