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Every cloud has a silver lining — Exploring the dark side of value co-creation in B2B service networks

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the dark side of value co-creation (VCC) in B2B service networks. Whilst VCC is attracting a great deal of academic attention and a number of studies have highlighted the benefits of VCC, researchers often fail to consider the potentially negative consequences of VCC, especially in the context of business networks. This study explores the negative aspects associated with VCC in advertising service networks and identifies role conflicts and ambiguity, opportunism and power plays on the dark side of VCC. Tensions created by role conflicts during VCC interactions are highlighted. Also sharing of responsibilities during VCC can result in managers having a lack of clarity about what is expected of them, leading to role ambiguity and misunderstandings between firms. Managers engaging in VCC display weak-form opportunistic behaviors. These softer forms of opportunism are found to be tolerated and almost expected within long-term relationships. This research suggests that the exertion of power often shapes VCC activities within the advertising service network. Power plays are used as a means to mobilize appropriate resources and to influence network actors to adhere to value co-creation objectives. The presence of role conflicts, role ambiguity, opportunistic behaviors and power plays indicate that there is indeed a dark side to VCC that is currently omitted from existing VCC frameworks. A further contribution of our study is to highlight that a bright-dark dichotomy does not fully describe the complexity of VCC in B2B service networks and we show how the dark side may lead to positive outcomes.

1. Introduction

There is a burgeoning field of research that explores the concept of value co-creation (VCC) (Ford, 2011; Leroy, Cova, & Salle, 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). In B2B contexts, co-creation of value is central to the ongoing survival of the businesses concerned (Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, & Snehota, 2003; Hutt & Speh, 2012) because value is co-created by multiple actors and involves complex interactions in business networks (Lindgreen, Hingley, Grant, & Morgan, 2012; Vargo & Lusch, 2011). There is, therefore, a need to focus on how actors can achieve co-creation of value (Ford & Mouzas, 2013; Möller, 2006).

VCC has been defined as a process of resource integration activities when firms interact with various actors in their business network as a result of which benefits are realized for the business actors involved (Ford, 2011; Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Jaakkola & Hakanen, 2013; Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008). However, a perception of harmonious co-creation of value can be considered as naive and simplistic and, especially in a B2B context, does not consider the complexity of inter-firm relationships (Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota, & Waluszewski, 2009; Lindgreen et al., 2012). In a network setting, mutual benefit from VCC for all actors involved is unlikely as the various actors interact in many different ways increasing the chances of suboptimal outcomes for one or more of the parties.

In this paper we aim to explore the dark side of VCC in business service networks; the dark side of VCC refers to those aspects of VCC activities that are hidden and include potential risks during co-creation. Only a limited number of studies have touched upon the dark side of VCC (e.g. Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011; Heidenreich, Wittkowski, Handrich, & Falk, 2014), but these take a B2C perspective and do not consider the complexity of business networks. In an increasingly networked economy, one might be surprised by this apparent neglect of the role of multiple actors in determining value co-creation (Baron, Warnaby, & Hunter-Jones, 2013). Due to the lack of empirical research on the dark side of VCC in a B2B service network context, an exploratory study in the advertising industry was conducted to gain insight into what business actors perceive to be the dark side of VCC.

Our study reveals complex and nuanced interactions during VCC including role stressors, such as role conflicts and ambiguity, opportunism and power plays, reflecting a blurred interface between the dark and bright sides of VCC. It illustrates the importance of incorporating elements of relationship atmosphere into VCC frameworks in order to better understand and manage VCC in service networks. A link between

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role stressors and coopetitive tensions during VCC is identified, which leads to a lack of transparency and information asymmetry between the parties involved. In addition, how power is exerted, in terms of the communication style, determines whether there is a negative impact on VCC. We find that engaging in VCC may encourage weak-form opportunistic behaviors, which may need to be tolerated by managers in order to avoid a negative impact on their buyer/supplier relationships. Finally, our study illustrates that the dark side of VCC does not always lead to negative outcomes and can be important in achieving positive VCC outcomes. We critique the simplicity of the bright-dark dichotomy and underline how our findings offer a more nuanced view of VCC in B2B service networks.

The paper begins with a review of the literature on VCC and its dark side, with special emphasis on VCC in B2B settings. This is followed by a description of the research design, sampling, data collection and analysis techniques. The findings are then presented and discussed. Finally, the theoretical and managerial contributions and the limitations of this study are presented.

2. The bright and the dark sides of value co-creation

Ballantyne and Varey (2006) posit that VCC involves spontaneous, collaborative and dialogical interactions between parties while Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) suggest that dialog, access, understanding of risk-benefits, and transparency are the building blocks of VCC. Jaworski and Kohli (2006) assert that VCC activities result in the benefit that both buyers and suppliers end up knowing more about each other's needs and preferences. Payne, Storbacka, and Frow (2008) further comment on the benefits of VCC activities stating that VCC involves the supplier creating superior value propositions that are relevant to the supplier's target customers. This, in turn, results in further opportunities for VCC and leads to benefits or value being received by the supplier through revenues, profits and referrals (Payne et al., 2008). Jaakkola and Hakanen (2013) suggest that the primary benefit for network actors engaging in VCC is gaining access to complementary resources.

However, it is important to recognize that engaging in VCC may not always lead to desirable (Dong, Evans, & Zou, 2008; Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Plé & Cáceres, 2010) nor symmetrical value outcomes (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Grönroos, 2011). For example, it has been theorized that during VCC employees may face role conflicts which can result in burnout (Edvardsson et al., 2011) or consumers may engage in opportunistic behavior such as activism against the firm which can negatively affect firm revenues (Ertimur & Venkatesh, 2010). These studies, however, are not empirically-based and also only focus on B2C settings.

Heidenreich et al. (2014) argue that research emphasizes the positive effects of VCC and that there is a lack of research examining the dark side. They illustrate the dark side of VCC by considering the potential risks of service failure in co-created Internet-based services. Plé and Cáceres (2010) and Lindgreen et al. (2012) concur that the service-dominant logic (SDL) perspective presents an inherently optimistic and favorable view of VCC. Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) argue that value is not created through exchange, but in co-creation through interlinked actors and resources. To complement this, Plé and Cáceres (2010) propose that the concept of value co-destruction should be introduced within SDL; theorizing that value can be co-destroyed when resources are accidentally or intentionally misused. The small number of studies that discuss negative outcomes of VCC only focuses on B2C settings. This suggests that greater attention needs to be given to exploring negative aspects associated with VCC activities, especially in B2B settings. This area is neglected in the mainstream discussion of VCC and is missing from the proposed frameworks for managing VCC (Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Payne et al., 2008; Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010).

In the VCC literature focusing on B2B settings, SDL frameworks have been used by Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola (2012) to describe the dyadic problem-solving process in knowledge-intensive services while Lambert and Enz (2012) describe VCC at a strategic level (involving joint crafting of value propositions, value actualization and value determination). Cova and Salle's (2008) work in the solutions industry uses SDL to understand, from a supplier's point of view, VCC between the supplier and the supplier's network and the customer and the customer's network. Cova and Salle (2008) highlight that in many of the proposed VCC frameworks (e.g. Payne et al., 2008), there is no consideration of VCC with either the supplier's or the customer's network.

A consideration of the influence of network actors is missing from current VCC frameworks. Only a handful of studies examine VCC in a network context (cf. Baron et al., 2013; Perks & Roberts, 2014). Jaakkola and Hakanen (2013) also investigate VCC in solution networks, but unlike Cova and Salle (2008), they incorporate the perspectives of network actors beyond the dyad. However, they mainly focus on the activities and resources involved in VCC between multiple network actors rather than investigating any negative aspects associated with VCC.

The lack of VCC studies that focus on negative aspects may be because, compared to the positive aspects of B2B relationships, the dark side of B2B relationships is relatively under-investigated (Mitręga & Zolkiewski, 2012; Villena, Revilla, & Choi, 2011). The literature on the dark side of B2B relationships has tended to investigate the relationship atmosphere (Håkansson, 1982) including conflict (e.g. Finch, Zhang, & Geiger, 2013), opportunism (e.g. Hawkins, Pohlen, & Prybutok, 2013) and power (Jain, Khalil, Johnston, & Cheng, 2014; Olsen, Prenkert, Hoholm, & Harrison, 2014). Håkansson (1982) posits that buyer–supplier interactions are shaped by an atmosphere which embodies elements such as power balance, expectations, degree of cooperation and conflict that buyers and suppliers both shape and react to. Problems concerning the atmospheric elements of power and conflict must be "handled" if the relationship between buyers and suppliers are to be maintained over the long-term (Krapfel, Salmond, & Spekman, 1991: p. 23). However, these darker atmospheric elements do not feature in any of the studies on VCC in the B2B literature and it is not clear how these atmospheric elements impact on VCC between multiple actors in a network.

It can be argued that research places too much emphasis on positive aspects of VCC. A more nuanced approach to understanding VCC is needed, which also explores potentially negative influences. Further, research has predominantly focused on emphasizing how VCC activities are organized from a provider perspective and studies that include data from more than one actor are few and far between (Yngfalk, 2013). Representation of the perspectives of the supplier, buyer and other network actors within the business network is needed in order to investigate the dark side of VCC. Hence, our research objective is to determine any negative and hidden aspects associated with VCC in business networks. Additionally, through the development of empirically-derived propositions, we aim to contribute to the refinement of existing frameworks for VCC (e.g. Payne et al., 2008), which do not take into account the complexity of B2B relationships and networks. As our literature review indicates, VCC can have both positive and negative outcomes, however, the focus of the majority of previous studies on VCC has been on positive outcomes. We view VCC as involving resource integration activities such as engaging in dialog, information sharing, joint innovation and joint problem-solving between actors that can have both positive and negative outcomes as shown in Fig. 1.

3. Research design

Due to the lack of empirical research on and limited understanding of the dark side of VCC, an exploratory, theory building approach was taken. We were primarily concerned with gaining a deeper understanding of the dark side of VCC from the point-of-view of participants and use the interaction and ARA (Actors–Resources–Activities) frameworks as a conceptual basis (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995).

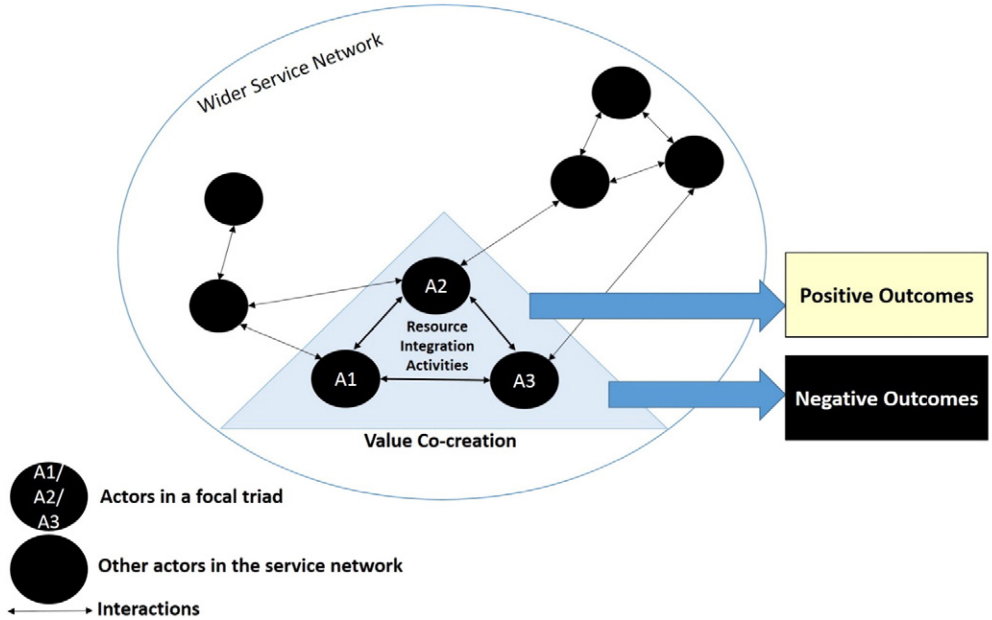

Fig. 1. The bright and dark side of value co-creation in B2B service networks.

3.1. Data collection

Data were collected by conducting multiple case studies in a professional service industry, advertising. Multiple case studies offer a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study and a better picture of 'locally grounded causality' than single case studies (Miles & Huberman, 1994: p. 26). Where the aim is to build theory, the use of a multiple-case study research design is likely to create more robust theory than single-case research (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Gummesson (2014) advocates greater utilization of case study research to address real world complexity.

The case studies focused on VCC activities in dyads and triads within advertising networks, specifically focusing on campaign development. This industry was chosen because it is a "co-creation service" requiring a high level of participation from the client and service supplier (Bolton & Saxena-Iyer, 2009: p. 92). The intangibility of advertising services and the related ambiguities mean that the management of people's expectations in agency-client relationships is crucial (Halinen, 1997).

The dyadic cases included an advertising agency and their client[1] while the triadic cases involved an advertising agency, their client and their common network partner, a media planning and buying agency/activation agency (third actor). The focus on dyads and triads allowed in-depth investigation of the perspectives of both clients and suppliers and allowed the network boundary to be drawn (Duck, 1994; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). Maintaining a triadic and dyadic focus did not mean that information about actors in the wider service network was ignored. A wider network perspective was taken during data collection by asking questions regarding how the focal actors influenced and were influenced by other actors in the network. In this way, considerable knowledge regarding the wider network was gained.

Initially, organizations in the advertising industry in Bangladesh, one of the Next-11 emerging markets, were chosen based on accessibility (Creswell, 1998). Judgment sampling was used to recruit participants, with emphasis on interviewing participants with more experience in the industry. Such sampling made more information available relatively quickly (Malhotra, Birks, & Wills, 2012). However, in the later stages of the research, mainly snowballing (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) was used to recruit participants since network partners could only be identified after the initial interview with either the client or the agency representative.

The use of a multiple case study approach enabled elicitation of rich data through a combination of research techniques including semi-structured interviews, document analysis and observation, allowing cross-validation of the data (Creswell, 1998). Four pilot interviews were conducted to assist in refining the semi-structured interview guide prior to the main data collection phase.

Within the nine dyadic cases and eight triadic cases, 61 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with managers from client firms, their advertising agencies and third actors (see Appendix A for a list of participants). Data were collected until no new concepts appeared to emerge during the interviews and data saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Documents (emails, campaign briefs and meeting minutes) were also collected. Site visits and observation of telephone conversations and meetings provided opportunities to observe client-agency interactions first hand.

During the interviews, there was no attempt to 'lead' the participants by mentioning concepts such as conflict, opportunism or power; the aim was to explore the participants' perspectives of the dark side of VCC. Broad questions were posed during the interviews, e.g.: "what activities help you to create value out of your interactions with each other?" and "do you experience any difficulties during these interactions? "This allowed participants to freely mention negative aspects related to VCC.

3.2. Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed. A flexible coding process was utilized, starting with a priori codes and adding inductive codes as analysis continued (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). An abductive analytical process with frequent moving back and forth between theory and data was followed (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). NVivo 10 was used to allow easy and efficient coding, recoding and retrieval of data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The initial list of codes applied to the interviews was based on the literature review and the pilot interviews. Using descriptive, first cycle coding (Miles et al., 2014), codes were attached to data describing

[1] In these cases the client firms worked with full-service advertising agencies so there were no third actors involved.

specific activities and interactions related to the different actors. The first cycle coding helped to initially summarize segments of data and was followed by second cycle coding, which involved developing inferential, pattern codes that identified emergent themes, relationships between individuals and explanations (Miles et al., 2014). The pattern codes emerged from these. Memos were added to codes and annotations attached to a specific word or phrase within a transcript to store reflective thoughts and reminders about a specific segment of text (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Inferences drawn from the observation notes and the documents collected were added in the memos.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. The bright side of VCC

Table 1 shows the positive outcomes of VCC or the value outcomes reported by the participants. Drawing upon Walter, Ritter, and Gemünden's (2001) study on value creation in B2B relationships, the value outcomes can be categorized as *direct value outcomes* (positive effects derived within a given relationship and which impact directly on the actor's business performance) and *indirect value outcomes* (which capture connected positive effects in the future and/or in the wider business network), see Table 1.

When managers were asked about the perceived outcomes of VCC, they mentioned positive outcomes as shown in Table 1. However, we did not delve more deeply into value outcomes because this was not the focus of our investigation. It was only when managers were questioned about difficulties during VCC that they related experiences pertaining to role stress, opportunism and exertion of power. This reveals that the more negative outcomes of VCC activities tend to be hidden from view and are more reluctantly acknowledged.

4.2. Exploring the dark side of VCC

Table 2 indicates the themes that emerged from the exploration of the dark side of VCC in B2B service networks. These are described in more detail in the section below.

4.2.1. The effect of role conflicts and ambiguity on value co-creation

Most actors were found to experience role conflicts which created tensions during VCC. Such role conflicts may be faced during managerial interactions between clients and agencies, clients and third actors and the agencies and third actors.

Managers perform several roles during VCC, e.g., they have to meet their own responsibilities and performance targets, they are required to act as colleagues to managers from other functions and they need to work as suppliers/clients. Managers reported they may have task objectives which conflict with the task objectives of the managers they interact with.

Client managers often faced role conflicts when interacting with agencies and third actors. Some managers indicated that they could not make all relevant information about their brand available (e.g., their marketing plans) because they believed that their suppliers might work with their competitors in the future. Although detailed briefing and debriefing and sharing of knowledge between interacting actors are needed to facilitate VCC, clients may be unwilling to share sensitive information. This points to a role conflict for client managers, since they are expected to work closely with suppliers to plan and execute campaigns for their brands. As a result, information asymmetry between actors engaging in VCC may occur.

In several cases, agency managers also faced role conflicts relating to meeting internal creative excellence guidelines and allowing the client to drive the choice, e.g., when clients appeared to choose less effective alternatives. This suggests that engaging in VCC with clients may lead to feelings of frustration and demotivation where suppliers face conflicts in meeting their task objectives while at the same time trying to meet the client's preferences. Additionally, managers can face conflict because they need to deliver what the client demands, but their internal creative team may not be willing to make the suggested modifications, e.g.: "*Usually, they (creative team) are very sensitive. It's hard to convince them. They sometimes say that they don't want to work anymore (on the campaign). Then I have to persuade them to do it the client's way*". (Agency_D7).

Data analysis also revealed that uncertainty regarding each party's responsibilities in VCC can lead to role ambiguity. In one case study, the client and the agency held different views about who was responsible for selecting the director for a television commercial. Such confusion regarding role responsibilities can lead to disagreements and disrupt VCC between actors: "*If you hold a gun over my shoulder, I feel like telling you, 'bugger off'!…Yes, we need to bounce off different things. But we don't appreciate you telling me that, 'Work with this director or the content should be like this.' This is not your work, it's mine*" (Agency_T6b). Here, the agency manager believed that the client should not be telling

Table 1
Direct and indirect value outcomes.

Direct value outcomes	Definition	Indirect value outcomes	Definition
Financial value	Favorable business performance and profits	Client/supplier learning	Clients gaining knowledge and experience regarding advertising campaign activities and suppliers gaining experience and knowledge transferred from client firms regarding the client's business, their products and other marketing research
Brand growth	Contribution to the growth of the client's brands in terms of market performance	Enhanced reputation	Improved company image; makes them more attractive as suppliers and clients
Creative/media/activation communications	Clients and suppliers believe that the main outcome of VCC is that it leads to creative/media/activation communications with their customers, expertise which clients do not have	Innovation	New ideas and techniques and application of these ideas during the project implementation
Leadership and goal-setting	Supervision provided by the client and the clients helping to lead the campaign towards set goals	Awareness about competitor tactics	Creating awareness about industry trends and providing marketing intelligence about competitors
Consistency in quality	Delivery of a consistent level of quality by the agency/third actor	Access to other network actors	Being put in touch with other actors in the network or gaining access to the resource of other network actors
Time efficiency	Reduction in time spent on developing advertising campaigns		
Cost efficiency	Reduction in media/activation costs		

Table 2
Themes related to the dark side of value co-creation.

Theme	Definition	Summary of Impact
Role conflicts	*Role conflicts* occur when there is incompatibility between the expected set of behaviors associated with the role (House & Rizzo, 1972; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Tubre & Collins, 2000), e.g., when managers face incongruity in their responsibilities as an employee in their own firm and as a supplier or client to another firm. Role conflicts mean that due to conflicting job demands, the individual is unable to do everything that is expected.	Creates job stress and negatively affects future interactions and buyer–supplier relationships. Additionally, creates coopetitive tensions, which lead to lack of transparency and information asymmetry among interacting employees. Coopetitive tensions are tensions arising from coopetition, the paradoxical relationship that emerges when firms cooperate in some activities and contemporaneously compete in other activities (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000, 2014).
Role ambiguity	*Role ambiguity* occurs when the set of behaviors expected for a role is unclear (House & Rizzo, 1972; Kahn et al., 1964; Tubre & Collins, 2000). Role ambiguity can be conceptualized as a lack of knowledge about the most effective job behaviors which can lead to suboptimal performance (Jackson & Schuler, 1985).	Creates job stress and misunderstandings and negatively affects future interactions and buyer–supplier relationships.
Weak-form opportunism	*Opportunism* refers to actions which involve self-interest seeking with guile (Williamson, 1985). The concept of guile distinguishes opportunism from the traditional economic assumption of self-interest seeking because this adds a fraudulent, intentional aspect (Wathne & Heide, 2000). *Weak-form opportunism* violates unwritten (but understood) relational norms while strong-form opportunism violates explicit contractual agreements (Jones, 1991; Luo, 2006).	Needs to be tolerated during VCC. Strict control of weak-form opportunism can negatively affect future interactions and buyer–supplier relationships.
Power plays	*Power* can be defined as the capacity to influence people and events (Yukl, 2006). In the context of B2B relationships, exertion of power is seen as a tool to control a relationship (Ford, 2002) or the effort of one actor to influence or control the behavior of another actor (Zolkiewski, 2011). We introduce the term "power plays" to describe the game-like nature of the exertion of power that was observed during VCC.	Mobilizes network resources during VCC. However, power plays accompanied by negative communication style negatively affect future interactions and buyer–supplier relationships.

them which director they should work with during the campaign because this leads to "sub-optimal" output, while his client held the opposite view. In fact, the client stated: "*Agency's role is to propose the alternative directors*; *client's role is to take the decision finally. If they don't get involved and agencies take the decision then agencies are basically doing your job*" (Client_T6b).This made agreeing on the choice of the director more difficult for the managers and created resentment among them, thus negatively affecting VCC.

During VCC, the lines between the role of the client and the role of the agency may become blurred, create confusion among the managers involved and result in disagreements. This suggests that it is important to have clarity regarding each actor's role during VCC. It also provides further evidence about why different actors may perceive different value outcomes from VCC, the agency manager believed that the campaign would be more effective if the client had not been dictatorial about director selection.

Managers in third actor firms faced role conflicts when working both with agency and client managers. In several case studies, third actors were direct competitors of the agencies (they specialized in similar services, e.g., media planning services or creative material). However, often third actors and agencies were contractually obliged to collaborate with 'their competitors' during specific campaigns. As a result, the third actor would often be unwilling to share detailed information regarding the brand with the agency and vice versa. Intellectual property rights (IPR) are also a reason why such information asymmetry may exist during VCC. The agency has IPR over any creative designs and brand identity materials and therefore such information can only be shared with third actors in a limited manner (unless IPR is waived). There was also disagreement among agencies and clients about the type of tasks third actors should be allocated. Actors may often need to share a role during VCC, e.g., both the agency and third actor playing a role in designing creative materials for the client. However, they may not be comfortable sharing this role due to tensions generated by their different roles and this can create resentment between them.

Third actors may find themselves serving two masters when they engage in VCC with multiple actors and face conflicts in their dual supplier role (to both the client and the agency). This leads to difficulties in carrying out campaign activities smoothly if the third actor reports to the client only without keeping the agency in the loop.

4.2.2. The effect of opportunism on value co-creation

Role conflicts may appear to lead to opportunistic behavior. However, the actors may only be attempting to conform to their different VCC roles. For example, when the agency and the third actor each try to achieve their own task objectives during a campaign, although these objectives may conflict, their actions do not appear to be purposively cunning. On the other hand, in several case studies, there was clear evidence of managerial 'guile', indicating opportunistic behavior. It was interesting that weak-form opportunistic behavior by suppliers was sometimes taken for granted by clients and that clients also often appeared to overlook such behavior because of long-term relationships with the suppliers (indicating of existence of relational norms). Similarly, suppliers also appeared to overlook certain opportunistic behaviors by clients.

Not all of the participants' revealed experiences related to weak-form opportunism. Some clients appear to act opportunistically when it comes to payment issues. These clients mention that they would often place requests with their suppliers and try to persuade them to do additional tasks without being billed for that task. For example, Client_T5 states: "*If we have a good relationship we can say please don't make it into a quotation or don't consider this as a task*, *just make the banner design like leaflet or things like that*". It seems that being in close relationships with the suppliers, allowed clients to persuade agencies to agree to do add-on campaign tasks without payment. From the point of view of the agency, this may seem opportunistic, but from the client's perspective, such behavior may be considered to be the "fringe benefits" of having a long-standing relationship with the agency.

In a similar way, agencies may take advantage of the fact that they have a long-standing relationship with the client and attempt to opportunistically propose changes in plans. For example, Client_T3b described a situation where the agency suddenly complained in the middle of the year about rising media costs and that "*there has been severe media inflation for other clients* (*of TV stations*), *so they* (*the agency*) *are not being able to handle these TV stations*, *they* (*agency*) *wants to raise the prices*". This was done when media costs had been already been agreed with the client for the entire year. In a different case, a client pointed out how an agency persuaded the client's top management to help them out by increasing the client's investment in TV advertising in order to use up the agency's prebooked TV slots. The client in question was in no need of increased above-the-line advertising as their product called for more targeted, below-the-line advertising. Sometimes, agencies appear to expect clients to bail them out of certain situations, but such actions may not be in the client's best interests.

More interestingly, clients often take this behavior for granted and frequently tolerated such behaviors because of the long-standing relationship. Surprisingly, the findings indicate that long-term relationships may even foster the urge to be opportunistic rather than reduce opportunistic behaviors. In the same case, the client noted how having a favorable long-standing relationship could create problems: the agency would not always deliver on time, becoming more relaxed by virtue of their relationship. At the same time, the client felt they could not place much pressure on them: "*If you do not have a friendly relationship with them, they will delay your work... If you have a friendly relationship you cannot impose that you have to do it. They'll say*, '*Why man*? *I am so busy. You know me.*' (Client_T5). The findings suggest that having good rapport with the agency may even weaken the client's control over campaign progress and their ability to hold the agency to account for delays. On the other hand, absence of rapport between the agency and the client may lead to lack of motivation and cause the agency to deprioritize the client's work.

Another client also mentioned that the agency would sometimes quote high prices for their work so that even when negotiations with the client led to lower prices, a lofty profit margin would remain for the agency. This highlights a paradoxical relationship, where the agency and client appear to be engaging in VCC activities over the long-term (briefing, discussing alternative campaign strategies, carrying out the campaign) but the relationship is clouded by weak-form opportunistic behaviors.

Other opportunistic behavior was evident. For example, where an agency manager deliberately delayed the modifications of creative designs, so that the client was compelled to use the existing creative materials to meet the campaign deadline. To ensure campaign progress, the client needed to focus on getting the job done and during VCC with suppliers, such weak-form opportunistic behaviors may need to be overlooked.

A third actor admitted that they would take advantage of the client's dependence on them, by getting the client to approve campaigns they may not need. The third actor displayed weak-form opportunistic behavior because they took it for granted that the client would overlook this behavior and indeed the client approved their plan due to their relationship. The third actor claimed that "*Sometimes it irritates them* (*the client*) *and creates problems. But these problems don't stay long and get dissolved…because then the marketing manager* (*top management*) *comes into view and sees that the designs are really good and deserve to be approved*" (Third Actor_T5). If the agency manager's words regarding good designs and the eventual implementation of the designs are taken at face value, then this opportunistic act appears to lead to positive value outcomes.

4.2.3. The effect of exertion of power on value co-creation

Power imbalances were common in relationships between all the actors. This was acknowledged by several managers and was not necessarily seen as something negative. Negative connotations regarding exertion of power appear to be attached to situations where clients' power exertion resulted in suppliers experiencing dissatisfaction or demotivation or where due consideration to their recommendations was not perceived to be given. In other words, the communication style accompanying exertion of power determines whether there is a negative impact on VCC.

Several clients acknowledged that power imbalances often exist in customer-supplier relationships and that the client is, of course, in a position to exert more power during campaign work since they are paying for the campaign. Even so, participants believed that power should not be exerted in a way that negatively affects VCC. One client indicated that use of power was made evident when they communicated in a manner that reminded the agency that they 'pay the money'. This relates to communication style, where the client may become too dictatorial or domineering during campaign decision-making. The client indicated that inappropriate communication, e.g., trying to boss the agency around, would lead to negative value outcomes where the agency would limit their activities to only carrying out client instructions and would not attempt to 'think out of the box'. The client pointed out that a display of the client's power might demotivate the agency and create an unwillingness to engage in VCC, e.g.: "*what is important is not to make that* (*client's power*) *very evident. Because*, *if you make that very evident what happens is they will wait and not act accordingly and not act unless they are specifically instructed to do something*" (Client_D1).

This observation was reiterated by other clients. For example, another client pointed out that even if he exerted power and made the agency comply with his decision, the agency could be offended and thus it would become difficult to work with them, especially if the agency was really passionate about the campaign. The client states: "*See*, *they eventually do* (*comply*) *because they* (*agency*) *don't have an option of not complying but what happens is as they take everything personally in this regard*, *so it becomes very difficult to work at times*" (Client_T6a). Another client presented a more cynical view about the power imbalances which occur when clients work with their suppliers, mentioning that there were underlying tensions that remained even when they attempted to collaborate as partners during campaigns.

Several agency managers also acknowledged that the client has the power to dictate decisions during campaigns; however, what matters is how the client dealt with their suggestions or the communication style the client used. For example, one agency manager notes: "*How are your points are taken*?…*If you think it is going to be properly reviewed and everything then obviously they* (*client*) *have a good amount of respect towards agency opinion*"(Agency_D5b).

Agencies and third actors were also found to use their expertise and power to influence campaign decisions. For example, if the agency or the third actor does not agree with the client's view on a campaign activity, they can refuse to carry out that specific activity or they can involve both their and the client's top management to ensure that their voices are heard. According to suppliers, use of power in such cases, has a positive effect on campaign outcomes, although their client counterpart may not agree.

This indicates that, during VCC, suppliers may be more aware of which activities will benefit the client than the client themselves, since the suppliers hold the expertise in that specific area. Use of power by suppliers in such cases may well lead to a more effective campaign, from which all focal actors benefit. For example, in one case the agency manager described how they would attempt to prevent the client from carrying out a certain campaign activity because it would be detrimental for the brand. They would first attempt to persuade the client through giving examples from their work experience (providing justifications) and then, if this failed, by asking the top management of their firm to prevent the client's top management from approving that particular activity.

Another third actor manager pointed out how they would even involve their parent media firm in order to prevent a client from compelling the third actor to carry out a certain campaign activity which they believed would not benefit the brand in any way. This case revealed that other actors in the network (the parent agency firm and parent client firm) could exert power over the client in a way that prevented the client from engaging in an activity which was thought to be detrimental for the campaign. The agency, its parent firm and the client's parent firm were all engaged in resolving this disagreement, using power to influence the client firm to remain aligned with campaign objectives. Exertion of power often has a negative connotation and emphasizes the aspect of control. Here, the term "power plays" is used to describe the game-like nature of exertion of power during VCC, where actors make sophisticated attempts to influence other actors without damaging their relationship. Our findings indicate that dark or hidden forces such as power plays are often at work behind the scenes during VCC and that VCC is not achieved merely through dialog, sharing of information and collaboration as suggested in previous research (e.g. Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012; Payne et al., 2008; Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010).

Alternatively, exertion of supplier power can affect VCC negatively, for instance in cases where the supplier attempts to use its power to prevent appropriate performance measurement of supplier managers. A number of clients also mentioned that agencies are averse to attempts by the client to carry out appropriate evaluation of campaign activities, e.g., a client cynically stated: "*They* (*agency*) *have an allergy about it* (*evaluation measures*)… *So, they don't want to change. Changing or using the right methodological process*, *they do not perceive it to be in their right interest*" (Client_D2).

4.3. Development of propositions

The dark side of VCC in service networks observed in this research has led to the development of a number of propositions:

4.3.1. The prevalence of role conflicts and role ambiguity during value co-creation

Only a handful of studies touch upon such issues in VCC (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Plé & Cáceres, 2010); however, these do not explore role conflicts in depth and do not address role ambiguity at all. This study shows that managers experience role stress (due to role conflicts and role ambiguity) when engaging in VCC with their counterparts from other firms and suggests that role stress negatively affects the buyer–supplier relationship by creating tensions.

Managers engaging in VCC were found to face an inconsistency between the expectations of their company management and those of the other firms they work with. At the same time, there were sources of role conflict within their organizations, due to differing role expectations from colleagues and supervisors. Evidence of role ambiguity and role conflicts at a network level were found, e.g., when suppliers need to take directions from another supplier and also report to the client who was paying them.

Researchers have consistently found that role ambiguity is negatively related to job performance (Tubre & Collins, 2000) and have urged organizations to implement preventive measures for it (e.g. Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008; Kauppila, 2014). In the case of role conflict, meaningful links between role conflict and job performance itself have not been found (Tubre & Collins, 2000), although, role conflict has been found to result in stress and anxiety on the part of employees (Kahn et al., 1964), job dissatisfaction (Chung & Schneider, 2002), turnover (Lysonski & Johnson, 1983) and burnout (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002). However, Ellis and Ybema (2010), suggest that boundary-spanning managers can often remain attuned to the nuances of being both an insider and an outsider at the same time. They manage role conflicts by continually stretching and constricting their self-identities in order to meet various situational interests and institutional demands (Ellis & Ybema, 2010). Even so, they do not delve into the effects of such continual stretching and constriction of identities on the well-being of the managers. Recently, role stressors, role conflict and role ambiguity, have been found to have a moderate but significant positive relationship with employee depression (Schmidt, Roesler, Kusserow, & Rau, 2014).

In line with the literature on frontline employee role stress, our findings indicate that the managers feel demotivated and dissatisfied when facing role conflicts such as when they need to carry out a task asked for by their client, which prevents them from effectively meeting their own task objectives. The findings suggest that managers interacting with employees from other firms face psychological pressure, experience frustration and need to make trade-offs to resolve tensions arising from role conflict and ambiguity. This can negatively influence employee's behavior towards counterparts. The following propositions are based on the analysis of the role conflict and role ambiguity issues highlighted in the research:

Proposition 1. *During inter-firm value co-creation, employees can experience role conflicts, which can lead to them making trade-offs concerning their own task objectives within the firm and inter-firm value co-creation objectives. This can then cause job stress and negatively affect future interactions and buyer–supplier relationships.*

Proposition 2. *During inter-firm value co-creation, employees can experience role ambiguity, which can lead to disagreements between parties. This can then cause job stress and negatively affect future interactions and buyer–supplier relationships.*

A further tension arose based on the roles of managers as both competitors and collaborators. For example, in the case of agencies and third actors who are direct competitors but who must collaborate on a specific campaign because they share the same client. This relates to the phenomenon of coopetition (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000, 2014). The findings show that managers engaging in VCC with their counterparts in the network may end up facing coopetitive tensions. Tensions between the contradictory logics of cooperating and collaborating lead to information asymmetry between actors and a lack of transparency around activities or unwillingness to exchange detailed information about their products, e.g., when managers in third actor firms are unwilling to share detailed brand information with their counterparts in the agency and vice versa.

The issue of information property rights also prevents agencies and clients from sharing information freely and exacerbates role conflicts. When proponents of SDL (Lusch, Vargo, & O'Brien, 2007; Vargo, Lusch, & Akaka, 2010) and VCC with stakeholders (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010) advocate being transparent with business partners and establishing information symmetry, they do not point out that employees need to manage these tensions. In reality, it is difficult to resolve such tensions and managers need to be prepared to deal with them.

The SDL point of view on VCC advocates the symmetrical treatment of trading partners so that information symmetry can be achieved (Vargo et al., 2010). However, our findings show that it is not clear how this can happen in practice in a network where the firms have diverse strategic business goals. A more realistic approach to engaging in VCC might be to acknowledge that firms will inevitably encounter tensions during VCC and to advocate deliberate management of tensions (Tidström, 2014). This discussion leads to the third proposition:

Proposition 3. *During inter-firm value co-creation, employees can experience role conflicts arising from coopetitive tensions between firms. This can then lead to lack of transparency and information asymmetry among interacting employees and can negatively affect future interactions and buyer–supplier relationships.*

Issues of role stress among boundary-spanning service employees on the supplier side have been acknowledged (e.g. Crosno, Rinaldo, Black, & Kelley, 2009) but have not been considered in a network context. However, our research goes further by showing how the issue of role stress among both customer and supplier frontline service employees is exacerbated during VCC in a network context. In addition, unlike previous research on role stressors and on VCC itself, this study highlights that role conflicts can arise from coopetitive tensions between firms and can lead to lack of transparency and information asymmetry between firms.

4.3.2. Tolerance of weak-form opportunism during value co-creation

Evidence of various weak-form opportunistic behaviors by managers engaging in VCC was found. For example, when clients ask their advertising agency to carry out additional tasks without payment or when suppliers coax clients to agree to sponsor certain events or media programs, which are not in the clients' best interests.

Interestingly, weak forms of opportunism co-exist alongside rapport and favorable long-term client-supplier relationships. Rapport here refers to a quality of relationship characterized by satisfactory communication and mutual understanding (Carey, 1986). For example, good rapport with the agency weakened the client's control over campaign progress, allowing agencies to take a relaxed attitude towards meeting campaign deadlines. However, evidence of a darker type of VCC has also been found where collusion may occur between suppliers who opportunistically extend deadlines, even when the suppliers have close partnerships with clients.

It is argued that there are greater risks of opportunistic behavior at the beginning of a new relationship, when the client has less information about supplier characteristics, intentions and effort levels and these risks are reduced as the relationship develops (Steinle, Schiele, & Ernst, 2014). However, in this study, even in the context of VCC in long-term relationships, weak-form opportunism may exist and information about each other's activities can even be used against the supplier or the client, as noted above.

What is also remarkable about the display of such weak-form opportunistic behaviors is that managers tend to overlook them due to existing long-standing relationships. Therefore, VCC may require tolerance of weak-forms of opportunism because harsh reactions could undermine the rapport existing between parties and negatively affect VCC.

The finding that long-term business partners may actually engage in weak-form opportunism corroborates recent research which concludes that relational norms do not reduce the likelihood of a partner's opportunistic behavior (Hawkins et al., 2013; Jap, Robertson, Rindfleisch, & Hamilton, 2013). A good explanation for this apparent contradiction of the belief that strong relational ties reduce opportunism (e.g. Mysen, Svensson, & Payan, 2011; Wang, Li, Ross, & Craighead, 2013), is provided by Jap et al. (2013: p. 218): "morally malleable reasoning in a high-rapport setting could lead a person to reason that an opportunistic act is not so bad, that the person being taken advantage of would not mind, or that the transaction partner likely already knows and tacitly approves of this activity". Therefore, managers may perceive latitude to use weak-form opportunistic tactics by virtue of their close relationships with their counterparts and the low threat of retaliation. In addition, such opportunistic behaviors seem to be taken for granted by their counterparts and somewhat surprisingly tolerated. This seems to be done in the interest of sustaining rapport in the long-term and consequently VCC among network partners.

Only a few conceptual studies in the literature on VCC, across both the services and B2B marketing fields, touch upon the issue of opportunistic behaviors during VCC. For example, Ertimur and Venkatesh (2010) who believe that opportunistic consumer behavior will affect VCC and Edvardsson et al. (2011) who identify the need to explore how opportunism affects VCC. The identification of weak-form opportunism taking place during inter-firm VCC leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 4. *Tolerance of weak-form opportunism is conducive to value co-creation between firms.*

4.3.3. The complexity of power plays during value co-creation

Power imbalances and power plays are readily acknowledged by firms when they engage in VCC with each other. However, the actors involved do not always seem to attach negative connotations to this phenomenon (cf. Zolkiewski, Burton, & Stratoudaki, 2008). Clients and suppliers believe clients to be more powerful by virtue of their being the financer of campaigns and readily accept that they can exercise power to influence decision-making during campaigns. Rather than objecting to power plays per se, suppliers object to the use of power in a way that shows disrespect towards their work and views. It seems that communication style is important here (Mohr & Nevin, 1990) and the findings show that power plays by the client coupled with poor interpersonal communication can negatively affect VCC by leading to supplier demotivation and lower creativity. However, the findings reveal that it is not only clients who have the power to influence campaign activities and that suppliers can also use power plays to block certain activities. They show that power plays by the supplier can affect performance of campaign activities negatively, e.g., when top management in supplier firms lobby to change performance evaluation ratings.

Clients believe that it may become necessary in the interest of time and smooth execution of the campaign, to use power plays in situations where suppliers do not carry out campaign activities as agreed or backtrack on their decisions. Similarly, suppliers can utilize power plays to influence campaign decisions and react in turn to the use of power by clients. Suppliers may marshal the assistance of other powerful firms in the network to achieve this, for example, asking parent firms to prevent a client from enforcing a campaign activity on them which conflicts with the campaign objectives, illustrating that power is not simply a dyadic phenomenon but is even more complex and multi-faceted when put to play in a network context (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 1998; Olsen et al., 2014).

It is evident that multiple parties can and do exercise power in the service network and power plays can have both beneficial (e.g., parent company exerting power to enforce local subsidiary to meet campaign objectives) and detrimental effects on VCC between network actors (e.g., the supplier blocking performance evaluation measures). The findings illustrate that much depends on how power is executed in order to influence network partners during VCC and what communication style accompanies power plays. Our findings are supported by Mohr and Nevin's (1990) arguments that communication is the tool by which power is exercised in channel relationships and moderates the impact of the power on channel outcomes such as satisfaction, coordination, commitment and performance.

It is also clear that power is not always equated with coercion and forced compliance and can be used in flexible ways when engaging in VCC. This corroborates the views of researchers who have rejected the view of power (e.g. Hopkinson & Blois, 2013) being defined only in terms of one person or group getting another to do something they otherwise would not (Dahl, 1957; French & Raven, 1959). Power is not incompatible with long-term cooperation (Hopkinson & Blois, 2013) and, importantly, this study reveals that power is a means of engaging in VCC in service networks. In this context, it is more appropriate to see power as an actor's attempt "to utilize their current position to allocate and decouple actors, resources and activities according to its own benefit" (Olsen et al., 2014: p. 2580). Power should not merely be seen as a source of conflict but as a means for influencing, leveraging and strategic maneuvering in the network (Olsen et al., 2014). Indeed, it is argued that power plays can be seen as the search for value by firms (Zolkiewski, 2011). Analysis of the findings regarding the role of power in VCC leads to the following propositions:

Proposition 5. *Power plays during inter-firm value co-creation assist in accessing and leveraging resources of other firms and leads to positive VCC outcomes.*

Proposition 6. *Power plays when engaging in value co-creation with counterparts is perceived favorably if accompanied by a positive communication style.*

Proposition 7. *Power plays when engaging in value co-creation with counterparts is perceived negatively when the counterpart's views are dismissed without due consideration and provision of rationale.*

Discussion of power plays is virtually absent from the literature on VCC, where resource integration activities are placed at the center of VCC but the "hows" of resource integration in service networks (e.g. Jaakkola & Hakanen, 2013) are not explored. Our findings highlight power plays as a means of gaining access to and integrating resources during VCC in service networks. We show that, in service networks, in addition to utilizing dialog, transparency and information symmetry in VCC, knowing how to exercise and mobilize power is also important.

Our findings reveal that although the dark side of VCC carries risks and can lead to negative outcomes (see Table 2), it can also lead to positive outcomes such as when power plays lead to more effective campaigns. Therefore, it can be argued that the dark side of VCC can play an important role in in achieving value outcomes (cf. De Clercq, Thongpapanl, & Dimov, 2009). Our study reveals the complexity and nuances of VCC activities, which are missing from current VCC frameworks that focus only on harmonizing activities such as increasing dialog, transparency and access between actors.

5. Theoretical implications

A major contribution of this study lies in exploring the dark or hidden side of VCC within service networks and providing insights into the presence of role conflicts, role ambiguity, weak-form opportunism and power plays in VCC, which have previously not been captured empirically in VCC research. Seven empirically-derived propositions are presented which can guide future research on VCC in a network context.

By highlighting the role conflicts and role ambiguity faced by actors during VCC, this research shows that VCC between multiple actors in business networks is much more complex than depicted in extant literature. The role stress experienced by actors also sheds light on the actor dimension in the ARA framework which is still under-researched (Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; Huemer, 2013). The findings regarding role conflicts and role ambiguity have important implications for the future development of VCC theory as advocated by Grönroos and Voima (2013) and Sheth and Uslay (2007). In particular, given that current VCC frameworks (e.g. Payne et al., 2008; Vargo, 2008) expect employees from different firms to engage in frequent dialog and active sharing of information, it is reasonable to assume that experiencing role conflicts and role ambiguity would have a negative effect on VCC between firms as indicated by the propositions. Added to this is the increased role stress resulting from VCC activities that can adversely impact upon employee performance and well-being. It is surprising that both the SDL (Vargo et al., 2010) and the strategic management perspectives (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) on VCC discuss achieving VCC through dialog, collaboration, transparency and information symmetry between business partners but do not discuss how negative phenomena such as role conflicts, role ambiguity and coopetitive tensions can pose a barrier to achieving such transparency and information symmetry.

Further counterintuitive findings were that weak-form opportunism was found to exist in close, long-term relationships. The findings reveal that VCC between close business partners calls for a tolerance of such softer forms of opportunistic behaviors. The findings support the view that more research needs to be conducted on how to manage weak-form opportunism, which has begun to receive some limited research attention (e.g. Seggie, Griffith, & Jap, 2013).

This research shows that the power plays often shape VCC activities within the service network and power can be used as a means to mobilize appropriate resources and to influence actors to adhere to VCC objectives. The link between power plays and communication style is further highlighted as important in the context of VCC and such micro-level issues are less discussed in the power literature (Olsen et al., 2014). Moreover, the term "power plays" is introduced to emphasize the game-like nature of exertion of power to achieve positive outcomes during VCC rather than emphasizing the aspect of control. These findings also address Edvardsson et al.'s (2011) call for research into how opportunism and power can influence VCC.

The findings of this study identify the need to incorporate relationship atmosphere (Håkansson, 1982) into current VCC frameworks. This study also sheds light on negative factors which come into play when actors in a service network engage in VCC. SDL claims to be "grounded in a commitment to collaborative processes with customers, partners, and employees; a logic that challenges management at all levels to be of service to all the stakeholders… It is about understanding, internalizing, and acting on this logic better rather than the competition" (Lusch et al., 2007: p. 6). However, one cannot expect firms to successfully internalize and act on such a perspective without acknowledging and accommodating the micro-level managerial struggles faced in doing so.

The usual building blocks of VCC such as dialog, information access and transparency (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006; Jaworski & Kohli, 2006; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo et al., 2010) are not the only elements that need to be considered when engaging in VCC with network partners. As, when commenting on the implicit assumption among B2B researchers that major conflicts or crises between firms in long-term relationship do not occur, Hadjikhani and LaPlaca (2013: p. 300) argue: "the shortcomings in this line of thought lie in the lack of explicit considerations of varieties in business realities". Research on VCC must reflect that co-creation of value is as much about cooperation, communication, transparency and information sharing between parties as it is about coopetition, balancing conflicting roles, power plays, tolerance of weak-form opportunistic behaviors and accepting asymmetrical value outcomes. We need to bring these elements more explicitly into the ongoing conversation about VCC and SDL. By highlighting the role of such atmospheric elements in VCC with business partners this study can help further advance the emerging frameworks for VCC.

Fig. 2 below illustrates how our research findings have resulted in the refinement of Fig. 1. Role stressors consisting of role conflict and ambiguity, weak-form opportunism and power plays can be argued to be some of the constituents of the atmosphere surrounding VCC. Håkansson and Snehota (1995) highlight that the interactions between actors do not take place in an attitudinally neutral setting and the atmosphere surrounding relationships influences and is influenced by how actors act in their relationships with other actors. For instance, an atmosphere of deceit may be created due to opportunistic behaviors of actors, or an atmosphere of brutal exercise of power may be developed by actions of managers, or an atmosphere of trust may be created due to the development of rapport between actors. The atmospheric elements demonstrated here can be argued to be social forces which shape VCC activities and which are part of the social context of business interactions (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Relationship atmosphere needs to be included, in particular factors relating to the dark or hidden side of the process of VCC need to also be considered and the overlapping circles with blurred lines in Fig. 2 around the positive and negative outcomes of VCC indicate that elements such as power plays and weak-form opportunism on the dark side of VCC can have both positive and negative outcomes.

We initially aimed to explore the dark side of VCC because previous research predominately focused on the bright side. However, our findings reveal that the bright-dark dichotomy is rather simplistic since what is considered to be "dark" in VCC can have positive aspects and overlaps with the "bright". Therefore the bright and dark sides of VCC should not be seen as two opposite ends of a continuum. As Duck (1994) points out in the context of relationships in general, darkness should not be separated from a relationship but considered to be an intrinsic part of it, at the same level as the bright part of a relationship and this is represented by the overlapping circles with blurred lines in Fig. 2.

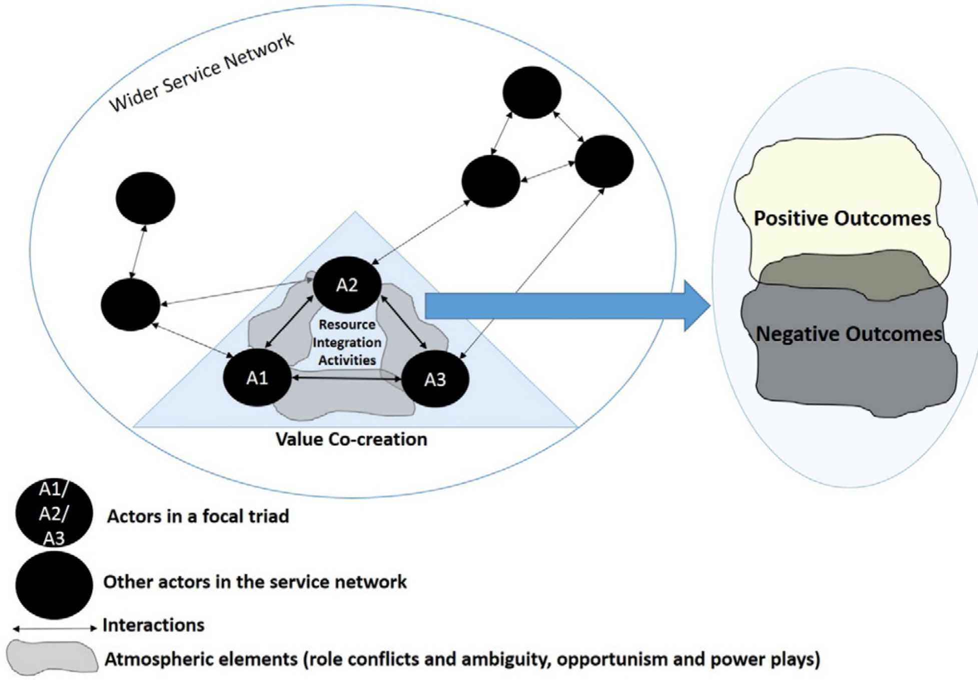

Fig. 2. Value co-creation in B2B service networks.

6. Managerial implications

This study illustrates that, in addition to cooperative activities, engaging in VCC with network partners may often require the management of role conflicts, role ambiguity, weak-form opportunistic behaviors and power plays. Role conflicts can be reduced during inter-firm VCC by aligning objectives and the interacting managers' task objectives within the firm. Additionally, role ambiguity can be reduced by specifying managers' responsibilities and clearly communicating these responsibilities to each manager at the beginning of projects. In order to help employees manage role conflicts and role ambiguity experienced during VCC activities, top management also need to ensure that VCC objectives do not conflict with the employee's own task objectives. Employee performance evaluation criteria also need to take into account these objectives to facilitate VCC. Here again, the role of top management becomes important in redesigning employee task objectives and performance evaluation criteria to align them with VCC objectives.

The marketing literature is replete with recommendations about how service suppliers should be customer/consumer centric, however, orienting boundary-spanning employees towards the customer only does not seem to be the answer here. Training for boundary-spanning personnel who engage in inter-firm VCC needs to focus on showing managers how to balance external orientation towards clients and internal orientation towards the firm, for example, by teaching them negotiation skills or diplomatic communication skills or simply asking for advice from an assigned mentor who has had similar experiences. Such training, of course, needs to become part of the induction of personnel who are likely to engage in VCC with external organizations.

In conjunction with this, managers need to understand that close partners may often display weak-form opportunistic behaviors and this is something that they need to manage with care in order to engage in VCC. Accepting some tolerance of opportunistic behavior may be more productive than striving for its complete elimination through stringent and more costly monitoring of partners (Barnes, Leonidou, Siu, & Leonidou, 2010). Finally, managers also need to maintain a carefully orchestrated balance regarding the use of power. They should remember that how power plays out, holds much importance. For example, while clients may often be in a more powerful position to sway project decisions in their favor, they should at first give due consideration to their suppliers' recommendations and explain why they would prefer to adopt a different strategy in order to avoid negatively affecting VCC outcomes.

In addition, both formal training and informal coaching should be provided to managers about how to communicate with counterparts, especially in situations where disagreements and debates arise during projects. Both clients and suppliers should be aware of what words to use and the extent to which they can express themselves forcefully during such conversations. In situations where power imbalances are often manifest, clients and service suppliers engaging in VCC should be provided communications skills training.

7. Limitations and future research directions

Although this research has significant implications for the advertising sector, it is not fully clear to what extent these findings are generalizable across other industries. Extracting transferable concepts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) from the case studies in this research can allow the research findings to be relevant to a larger audience. There are similarities between advertising services and other creative industries such as architectural and interior design services and software development services (Leung & Hui, 2014) and with other B2B professional services such as management consultancy services (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Therefore, it is conceivable that findings gleaned from this research will be useful in understanding VCC in such services. Collecting data from other sectors will provide the opportunity to investigate whether role conflict and ambiguity, opportunism and power plays are manifested in similar ways.

In addition, further research involving longitudinal studies is needed to understand the "tipping point" or threshold at which weak-form opportunistic behaviors or power plays are no longer tolerated by actors or whether these elements can lead to relationship ending. This tipping point can be seen as the point at which a series of small changes becomes significant enough to cause a larger, more important change.

This study has focused on VCC between firms in long-term relationships. This can be considered a limitation since VCC activities in new relationships have not been explored. Future studies examining VCC should look more deeply into how VCC occurs in new relationships. In addition, this study was conducted in an emerging market context. The business culture and managerial practices in emerging markets can differ in several ways from that in developed markets (Biggemann & Fam, 2011). This needs to be kept in mind when interpreting the findings, even though the case studies consisted of a mix of multinational and local firms.

Finally, due to the exploratory nature of the study, participants were not specifically asked about role stressors, opportunism or power in this study. As a consequence, some case studies provided richer information on one concept while others highlighted other concepts. Future research could attempt to delve more deeply into these specific dark side elements and their linkage to VCC. Due to the focus on negative aspects of VCC and as a result of the questions asked during the interviews, not much information was gained about positive atmospheric elements, apart from rapport. Further research needs to explore other positive atmospheric elements that can exist and have an impact on inter-firm VCC in B2B service networks.

Appendix A

Table A.1
List of managers interviewed within dyadic cases.

Dyadic cases (D1 to D9)	Participants	Gender	Position	Marketing experience (years)
D1	Client_D1	Male	Category Head and Senior Brand Manager	6–7
	Agency_D1a	Male	Head of Client Servicing	6–7
	Agency_D1b	Male	Creative Director	15–16
D2	Client_D2	Male	Head of Marketing	10–11
	Agency_D2	Male	Client Service Executive and Media Planner	1–2
D3	Client_D3	Male	Senior Brand Manager	6–7
	Agency_D3a	Female	Client Service Executive	8–9
	Agency_D3b	Male	Creative Director	10–11
D4	Client_D4	Male	Head of Marketing Communications	10–11
	Agency_D4	Male	Head of Strategic Planning	10–11
D5	Client_D5	Male	Deputy General Manager	10–11
	Agency_D5a	Male	Client Service Executive	5–6
	Agency_D5b	Male	Account Director - Strategic Planning	10–11
D6	Client_D6a	Male	Marketing Manager	10–11
	Client_D6b	Female	Brand Manager	1–2
	Agency_D6	Male	Client Service Executive	5–6
D7	Client_D7a	Male	Brand Manager	3–4
	Client_D7b	Male	Head of Marketing	10–11
	Client_D7c	Male	Chief Executive Officer	10–11
	Agency_D7	Female	Account Director	8–9
D8	Client_D8a	Male	Marketing Manager	10–11
	Client_D8b	Male	Chief Executive Officer	20–21
	Agency_D8a	Male	Client Service Executive	3–4
	Agency_D8b	Male	Senior Manager-Media	6–7

Table A.1 (*continued*)

Dyadic cases (D1 to D9)	Participants	Gender	Position	Marketing experience (years)
			Planning	
D9	Client_D9	Male	Brand Manager	5–6
	Agency_D9	Male	Client Service Executive	6–7
	Agency_D9	Male	Creative Head	10–11

Table A.2
List of managers interviewed within triadic cases.

Triadic cases (T1 to T8)	Participants	Gender	Position	Marketing experience (years)
T1	Client_T1	Male	Category Head and Senior Brand Manager	6–7
	Agency_T1a	Female	Client Service Executive	3–4
	Agency_T1b	Female	Account Director and Relationship Manager	5–6
	Third Actor_T1	Female	Media Planner	3–4
T2	Client_T2	Female	Category Head and Senior Brand Manager	6–7
	Agency_T2	Female	Client Service Executive	3–4
	Third Actor_T2	Female	Media Manager	5–6
T3	Client_T3a	Male	Product Category Head and Media Manager	8–9
	Client_T3b	Male	Head of Marketing	10–11
	Client_T3c	Female	Senior Brand Manager	3–4
	Agency_T3	Female	Assistant Director - Media	6–7
	Third Actor_T3	Male	Assistant Manager - Services Marketing Business Unit	5–6
T4	Client_T4a	Female	Marketing Manager	6–7
	Client_T4b	Male	Head of Marketing	20–21
	Agency_T4	Male	Client Service Executive	6–7
	Third Actor_T4	Male	Media Planner	3–4
T5	Client_T5	Male	Brand Manager	5–6
	Agency_T5a	Male	Client Service Executive	1–2
	Agency_T5b	Male	Creative Manager	6–7
	Agency_T5c	Male	Chief Executive Officer	25–26
	Third Actor_T5	Male	Client Service Manager	6–7
T6	Client_T6a	Male	Category Head and Senior Brand Manager	8–9
	Client_T6b	Male	Brands Director	10–11
	Agency_T6a	Female	Group Manager: Brand Communication	10–11
	Agency_T6b	Female	Account Director	10–11
	Third Actor_T6	Male	Chief Executive Officer	10–11
T7	Client_T7	Female	Category Head and Senior Brand Manager	6–7
	Agency_T7	Female	Client Service Executive	3–4
	Third Actor_T7	Male	Deputy Manager, Client Servicing	6–7
T8	Client_T8a	Male	Brand Manager	3–4

(continued on next page)

Table A.2 (*continued*)

Triadic cases (T1 to T8)	Participants	Gender	Position	Marketing experience (years)
	Client_T8b	Male	Head of Marketing	15–16
	Agency_T8a	Female	Client Service Executive	5–6
	Agency_T8b	Male	Creative Director	10–11
	Third Actor_T8	Male	Head of Activation Planning	10–11

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