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Service Agent Driven Co-Created Caring in Chat-Based Customer Service Encounters

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the elements of caring and its relationship with customer-value co-creation in the context of chat-based service encounters. For this purpose, 123 chat conversations from the Visit Helsinki chat platform were analyzed using deductive content analysis. The findings reveal that customers played an active role in the value co-creation process. The elements of caring play an important role in customer-value co-creation and produce affective and emotional benefits, including cognitive, integrative and recognition benefits for the customer. A benevolent attitude, commitment and consideration, which includes creating situations wherein the customer-service agent and the customer solve problems together, strengthen and enable value co-creation. Language and customer-service expressions also enhance customer-value co-creation, while different statements of being present and interested in the customer create positive emotions and an atmosphere of caring. This demonstrates that caring about the customer could be the key to value co-creation. Further, this study discusses theoretical and managerial implications and recommendations for future research.

Introduction

With the advent of the digital economy, the use and demand for online customer service have increased extensively in recent years, and improving the online customer experience has become a significant priority for many businesses (Berg et al., 2022). As a result, today, many companies offer online customer service as a real-time two-way communication channel for consumers (Mero, 2018), which they use to answer customers' questions (Chen et al., 2023). From the service provider's perspective, online customer-service encounters are critical to a customer's perception of service providers and, therefore, central to determining the success of their firm (Verhagen et al., 2014). Customer service contributes to the overall

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customer experience and sustainable competitive differentiation (Albrecht et al., 2021). In fact, it is considered a vital touchpoint for the success of a business (Sheth et al., 2023). A customer can expect to have a conversational, instantaneous and caring interaction with a human employee who answers their inquiries during the online customer-service encounter (Creelman, 2022; Li & Zhang, 2023). These online customer-service encounters are emotionally charged and fuel the production of value, i.e., the receipt of benefits (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996), which is, in this context, value co-creation: a process in which customers and suppliers interact through the medium of a service encounter to create reciprocal value (Vargo & Lusch, 2008) and is service agent driven (Sheth, 2019).

The existing studies on customer service and chat-based online discussions mainly focus on empathy and the need for studies that can link empathy with digitally aided customer encounters (Bove, 2019; Grondin et al., 2019); only a few studies are related to caring (Lee et al., 2019; Lv et al., 2022; Seitz & Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2021). Caring refers to an attitude or action wherein a person feels concern for others and wants to help them (Larson et al., 1993) instead of providing them with only an emotional response, such as empathy. It extends beyond empathy; the term is more appropriate from a quality perspective in customer-service studies, as it includes observing, listening and responding to a customer with engagement and emotion (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011). Empathy is not solution-oriented, and caring can better explain customer-value co-creation in online chats (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011). Thus, to differentiate online customer-service encounters beyond techniques and clinical approaches, emphasis must be placed on how customer-service agents act and how customers experience the service (Lee & Lee, 2020).

Many customers want to participate in online customer-service processes to co-create value, which results in a positive service experience (Lee, 2019). In addition, online customer-service discussions lack facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice; hence, communication becomes essential for value co-creation and for creating positive emotions and a sense of caring (Corsaro, 2019). There are a few studies on online chat-based customer encounters where the topic of caring has received attention (Brave et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2019; Lv et al., 2022; Seitz & Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2021). This includes the language perspective, which is a crucial element in online chat-based conversations (Mariani et al., 2019). Moreover, although studies have been conducted on the emotions involved in travel reviews, the topic of instant messaging between customers and customer-service agents from a caring perspective remains relatively unexplored (Appel et al., 2020).

With the aim of addressing these gaps in the literature, this study explores the elements of caring and its association with customer-value

co-creation in the context of chat-based service encounters. The following research questions guided this study: (1) How can customers be made to feel that the customer representative cares about them' here? (2) How does caring co-create value with the customer in online interactions? (3) What kind of value does caring create for the customers?

The motivation for this study stems from the fact that poor customer service can lead to a significant loss in customers and decreased revenue for businesses (e.g., Honora et al., 2023; Sheth et al., 2023). In addition, recent studies suggest that, in most cases, consumers prefer human services in online customer-service encounters because human interactions last longer (Hill et al., 2015) and humans can provide subjective aspects of information and have intuition (Chen et al., 2023). Therefore, exploring online customer-service encounters is both theoretically and managerially important for the competitiveness of businesses and for improving online customer-service encounters (Han et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2023).

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on online customer-service encounters and customer-value co-creation by focusing on the elements of caring and their relationship with customer-value co-creation. More specifically, the findings contribute to a better understanding of the elements of caring in online service encounters and their significance for customer-value co-creation. The findings highlight the importance of the emotional, affective, cognitive and pragmatic benefits for customer-value co-creation in online encounters.

Literature review

Customer-value co-creation in customer-service encounters

Service-dominant logic (SDL) argues that values are determined through a collaborative process that involves both the customer and the service provider (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). In other words, value co-creation can be understood as a process in which customers and service providers interact through a service encounter to create shared value, i.e., the service agent and customer take turns to co-create value and emotional impact, which affect behavior. SDL emphasizes actor-to-actor interactions for co-creating value (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), and both parties are considered resource integrators and have resources that they commit to co-create value (Echeverri & Skålen, 2011). While value cannot be measured on a global level, it can be determined individually by a concerned actor (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). It is always defined and perceived by the actor within the particular social system (Lusch & Vargo, 2014). In other words, "value can only be created with and determined by the user in the 'consumption' process and through continuous use" (Lusch & Vargo, 2006, p. 284). As

such, customers must invest their resources in the process, including their thoughts and time (Ranjan & Read, 2019). Every customer will go through unique consumption experiences and have different skills, preferences and goals. This means that the determination of value is fundamentally contextual, which, in turn, implies that value is a highly subjective and phenomenological concept (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Value co-creation results in positive actions, such as electronic word of mouth, sharing creative ideas, co-designing (Tommasetti et al., 2017), tolerance (Yi & Gong, 2013), satisfaction (Gummesson, 2002), loyalty (Wu & Gao, 2019), co-operation (Noddings, 2013), belonging and engagement (Pope & Miles, 2022) and repeated purchases and revisits (Wu & Gao, 2019).

Sheth (2019) classified the value co-creation processes into four propositions depending on how active the customer or service agents are with regard to co-creation (Figure 1). These propositions have different impacts on the customer experience. The first one, according to Sheth (2019), is the proposition of customer-driven co-creation, which suggests that customers assume an active role in driving the co-creation process by contributing ideas, preferences and feedback; this, in turn, influences the final value proposition. As a result, customers gain control and influence the co-creation process, which might lead to a more personalized and tailored customer experience (ibid). The second proposition, in terms of service-agent-driven co-creation, referred to a situation wherein service agents take the lead in the co-creation process, actively engaging customers and guiding the process by leveraging their expertise, knowledge and resources. Thus, service agents' role and ability to facilitate the situation shape the co-creation experience and deliver customer value and satisfaction (ibid). The third proposition, the joint co-creation proposition, emphasizes collaboration between customers and service agents (Sheth, 2019). In such
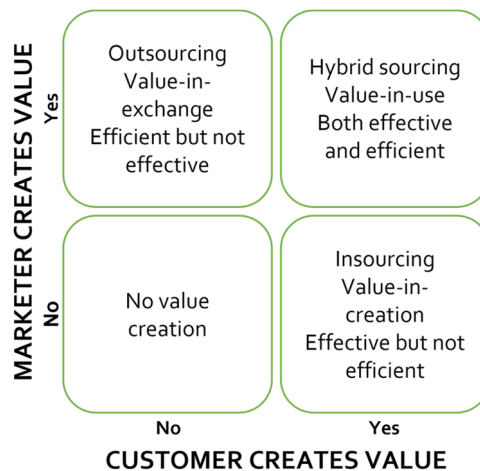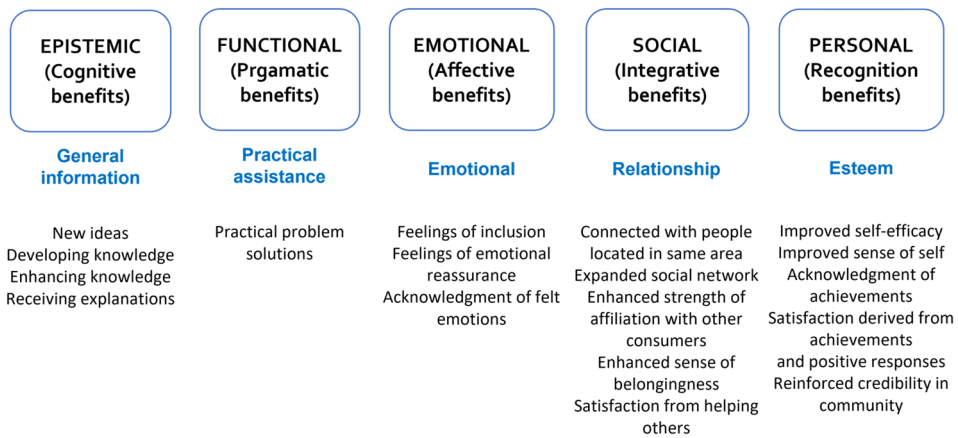

Figure 1. Co-creation propositions (Sheth, 2019).

situations, both parties actively contribute insights, skills and resources throughout the co-creation process (ibid.). According to Sheth (2019), such collaboration fosters a sense of shared ownership, cooperation and mutual learning, and the level of collaboration, communication and synergy between customers and service agents influences the customer experience. The fourth scenario in the model formulated by Sheth (2019) is the passive co-creation proposition in which the customers are less engaged, and service agents rely on predefined templates or standardized approaches. The co-creation experience is less interactive and participatory, which can potentially result in a less engaging or differentiated customer experience (ibid).

Tourism businesses offer experiences; thus, a specific emphasis should be placed on the transformative nature of co-creation (Buhalis et al., 2022). Verleye (2015) introduced a framework for understanding co-creation expectations, which can be categorized into cognitive, pragmatic, affective, integrative and recognition benefits, with each category representing the different values or benefits that individuals seek during co-creation activities. Cognitive benefits refer to customers' desire to obtain new knowledge, learn and gain new insights through co-creation (ibid), while pragmatic benefits emphasize the practical advantages and tangible outcomes for customers, such as resources or solving problems that may arise from co-creation. Next, affective benefits are those that involve the emotional and social aspects of co-creation, such as positive experiences, enjoyment and social connections, while integrative benefits are those that emphasize collaboration and integration among participants (ibid). Finally, recognition benefits are associated with the desire for acknowledgement, status and recognition from others.

Parkinson et al. (2019) extended Verleye's model by adding the concept of transformation to the framework. This refers to the potential of co-creation to enhance customers' well-being. According to Blocker and Barrios (2015), transformative value "generates uplifting change for greater well-being among individuals and collectives" (p. 265), which, in this context, allude to customers. In this study, transformation is considered an emotional impact and positive memory imprint created and delivered to the customer. Additionally, Parkinson et al. (2019) explored the antecedents that influence individuals' expectations and motivations for engaging in co-creation activities. By considering these different values and their transformative potential, the framework proposed by Verleye (2015) and modified by Parkinson et al. (2019) provides insights into the various benefits that individuals seek and the factors that drive their expectations and motivations in the co-creation process (Figure 2).

Figure 2 presents the combination of transformational value and Verleye's co-creation benefits with practical antecedents. The cognitive benefits

EPISTEMIC (Cognitive benefits)	FUNCTIONAL (Prgamatic benefits)	EMOTIONAL (Affective benefits)	SOCIAL (Integrative benefits)	PERSONAL (Recognition benefits)
General information	**Practical assistance**	**Emotional**	**Relationship**	**Esteem**
New ideas Developing knowledge Enhancing knowledge Receiving explanations	Practical problem solutions	Feelings of inclusion Feelings of emotional reassurance Acknowledgment of felt emotions	Connected with people located in same area Expanded social network Enhanced strength of affiliation with other consumers Enhanced sense of belongingness Satisfaction from helping others	Improved self-efficacy Improved sense of self Acknowledgment of achievements Satisfaction derived from achievements and positive responses Reinforced credibility in community

Figure 2. Co-creation benefits and transformational values with antecedents (adapted from Parkinson et al., 2019; Verleye, 2015).

include general information and the creation of transformational epistemic value by providing customers with new ideas and developing or enhancing their knowledge. Functional value stems from pragmatic benefits (often, practical assistance), which implies solving a problem during service encounters. Emotional value is created by affective benefits, which usually are emotions that precede the transformation, while social value is based on integrative benefits, such as relationships, togetherness and a sense of belongingness, that are essential elements in the transformative process. Further, recognition benefits create personal value, which is often interpreted as esteem, acceptance and acknowledgement. These transformational values affect customers and their preferences and purchasing habits through long-lasting cognitive memory imprints (Chhabra, 2021).

Online customer-service encounters, caring and communication

Larivière et al. (2017) define a service encounter as "any customer-company interaction that results from a service system that is comprised of inter-related technologies (either company- or customer-owned), human actors (employees and customers), physical/digital environments and company/customer processes" (p. 239). Studies on service encounters have focused on technical elements, different service platforms, marketing communication, usability, speed and interfaces, while the customer perspective has not been sufficiently examined (Ostrom et al., 2021). Ostrom et al. (2021) call for more studies on technology-mediated encounters and customer experience. In addition, a recent study by Heinonen and Pesonen (2022) indicates that in chat-based service encounters, extraordinary experiences are mainly created by the same elements as those in face-to-face encounters (i.e., solving problems, exceeding expectations, being effective, informing

of delays, personalizing messages and paying attention to customer needs and wishes, including closeness, caring and their emotions). Excellent service is essential for businesses, and they should not settle for satisfactory level (Verhoef et al., 2009).

Noddings (1984) introduced the term "caring" to describe the dynamics between a caregiver and the individual receiving care. Larson et al. (1993) define caring as "intentional actions that convey physical care and emotional concern and promote a sense of security in another" (p. 690). Collins (2015) elaborated on this definition to include activity and intent: "An action is caring if and only if it is performed under the (perhaps tacit) intention of fulfilling (or going some way to fulfilling) interest(s) that the agent perceives some perceived moral person (the recipient) to have" (pp. 67–69). Caring actions can appear in various situations and contexts (Steyl, 2020), making it challenging to describe the term congruently without additional research (Compton et al., 2019).

Caring is about more than just care (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020); good customer care can be described as the following of the guidelines and the solving of the problem, and caring affects the customer's emotional experience, creates value for them and leaves a memory imprint on them. Furthermore, caring encounters are created through emotional expressions by the personnel (Jimenez et al., 2020), relating to/empathising with the customer (Mayseless, 2015), shared knowledge, common meaning and mutual trust in the service encounters (Feeney & Collins, 2015), emotional engagement (Weiner & Auster, 2007), expressing an attitude and willingness to give (Pulcini, 2017), which includes compassion, competence, confidence, conscience, commitment, courage, culture and communication (Mayseless, 2015). Further, caring is more than acting, which is often connected to emotional labor; it involves emotional engagement that leads to customer and employee satisfaction (Weiner & Auster, 2007).

Communication is essential in all customer-service encounters because it enables information exchange, problem-solving and the building of relationships (Darics & Lockwood, 2023). Communication determines customers' perceptions of service quality and impacts their satisfaction and loyalty with respect to co-creation (Sthapit & Björk, 2021). It also aids in conflict resolution, fostering a mutual understanding and building lasting relationships (Homburg et al., 2012). In online customer encounters, listening to the customer and creating experiential, value-intensive services with a positive image that can influence customers' intention to repurchase should be prioritized during communication (Lee & Lee, 2020). In addition, language and the customer-service agent's communication style during service encounters play a crucial role in co-creating customer value and a caring atmosphere (Holmqvist et al., 2017). Choi et al. (2019) suggest that the literal conversational style creates trustworthiness and credibility.

In another study, Li et al. (2019) state that using emoticons creates intimacy but does not reflect competence. Furthermore, figurative language containing adjectives, metaphors and descriptive expressions has a more significant emotional impact and is more persuasive (Chang & Yen, 2013). These aspects have not been studied from the caring point of view in the existing literature.

Methodology

Data collection and analysis

This study used the case study method of data collection, in which in-depth descriptive information about specific entities, or cases, is collected, organized, interpreted and presented in a narrative format (Rashid et al., 2019). The justification for using case study method is because it allows to generate an in depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context. It is an established research design that is used extensively in a wide variety of disciplines, particularly in the social sciences (Crowe et al., 2011). The data for this case study consist of all the chat conversations from June 2020 from the Visit Helsinki chat platform. Visit Helsinki is a prominent destination management organization in Finland. The chat users consisted of Finnish (domestic) and foreign customers seeking information about the services and attractions available in Helsinki, Finland. Two service agents from Visit Helsinki were responsible for responding to all queries. The dataset comprised 123 conversations, with an average duration of 18 min and 1,623 lines (which included the service agents' and customers' responses).

This study aimed to comprehensively understand the practices related to chat-based interactions, specifically caring and co-creation. Given the objective of comprehending caring and co-creative chat-based encounters, this study adopted a pragmatic approach using the abductive qualitative approach, as this emphasizes the connection between theory and practice by analyzing chat-based service encounters and the customer perceptions associated with them (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In other words, abductive process goes back and forth between empirical material, in this case, chat conversation and literature (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This qualitative approach, which is demonstrated through deductive content analysis, facilitated a comprehensive examination of the material (Schutt, 2006). This study placed a particular emphasis on the caring and co-creation dimensions related to the co-creation propositions proposed by Sheth (2019), the value benefits suggested by Parkinson et al. (2019) and Verleye (2015) from the perspective of good customer service (Heinonen and Pesonen (2022) as well as the caring perspective (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim,

2020; Mayseless, 2015; Weiner & Auster, 2007), thereby expanding the scope of existing studies.

We conducted a deductive content analysis based on the template approach used by Crabtree and Miller (1992). This method built on the theory-based criteria used for iterative evaluation of the data, and each step aimed to answer one of the research questions. Each of the 123 conversations was analyzed separately and manually in Excel from the co-creation perspective and based on the value propositions of Sheth (2019) before the elements of good customer service and caring were added to the model of co-creation values proposed by Parkinson et al. (2019) and Verleye (2015).

First, to obtain an understanding of the chat conversations, the data were analyzed using the elements of good customer-service encounters based on the work of Heinonen and Pesonen (2022), i.e., solving problems, exceeding expectations, being effective, personalizing messages and paying attention to customer needs and closeness. Each conversation was read closely, and elements associated with solving problems, exceeding expectations, being effective, personalizing messages and paying attention to customer needs and closeness were identified from the interactions. Normal conversations were separated from excellent encounters based on customer responses and reactions. If the customer praised the service, it was considered great, while if the customer just thanked the service agent or settled with the first piece of information they were given, it was considered normal. Further, the service was considered bad if the customer did not respond, left the discussion or criticized it.

Second, the value propositions formulated by Sheth (2019) were used to identify the sequences and compositions of the interactions from a value co-creation perspective. This included analyzing the conversations from the communication perspective and focusing on how actively the customer-service agents and customers participated and contributed to the discussions. This enhanced the understanding of how strongly the co-creation elements were present in the discussions in general.

Third, the elements of good customer service and caring were analyzed and grouped using the co-creation values proposed by Parkinson et al. (2019) and Verleye (2015). This step aimed to separate and sort the different customer encounter elements into transformative values and co-creation benefits. It mainly concentrated on the counters and elements that were considered great, creating that experience based on the first and second steps.

Last, the linguistic expressions that the customer-service agents used in the co-creation service encounters were added to the analysis. This enabled a deeper understanding of the linguistic elements that created a caring atmosphere and, thus, enhanced the co-creation and transformative communication.

With regard to the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, i.e., the demonstration of rigor in the analysis of qualitative data (Guba, 1981), the authors manually analyzed the data individually. The identified elements were cross-examined by all the authors to verify their accuracy, and any discrepancies were then discussed and refined until consensus was reached. Following this, an audit was carried out by another researcher who was not involved in the data collection and analysis phases of this study, wherein the data analysis process and the ensuing results were scrutinized to ascertain their trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). According to Cohen et al. (2011), this type of peer debriefing and triangulation contributes to the dependability and confirmability of a study's findings (trustworthiness).

Findings

To address the first research question, "How can customers feel that the customer representative cares about them?", the chat conversations were analyzed using the elements of good customer-service encounters (e.g., Heinonen & Pesonen, 2022; Ostrom et al., 2021). Since no customer evaluations were available for the data, it was assumed that when customers praised the service, it was excellent (Figure 3); when they thanked normally, the situation was normal; and if the customer left the discussion, criticized it or otherwise expressed dissatisfaction, it was considered poor. This thinking that great customer service should be more than satisfactory is based on the work of Verhoef et al. (2009). According to this categorization, all elements of good customer-service encounters were found to be present in 19 of the 123 discussions, which were considered great encounters.

These service encounters included elements that support the creation of caring. These elements include emotional expressions, such as emoticons (Li et al., 2019), adjectives, such as great and wonderful (Chang & Yen, 2013), and the use of personal pronouns, such as "you" and "I", instead of a passive tone of voice, which are reported by Holmqvist et al. (2017) to be features of caring communication.

> *"Service Agent (SA): I hope you can find something suitable among these. A really great continuation of the summer to you and wonderful birthdays in the fall ☺…"*

Figure 3. Example of praising.

Other features include togetherness, which is reflected through the use of terms such as "we" and through investing in the customer, according to Mayseless (2015).

> "SA: Hello! We can send you a free map of Helsinki and one brochure by mail if you wish. In that case, could we have your address?

Another feature is emphasizing esteem in the form of greeting, thanking and apologizing to the customer (Pulcini, 2017).

> "… SA: Hi, thank you for your message! Just give me a moment, and I will check:)…"

Service encounters were interpreted as normal actions when the requested information was provided and, thus, the problem was solved; while these elements promote the creation of caring, they were inadequate from a competitiveness perspective (Verhoef et al., 2009).

To answer the second research question, "How does caring co-create value with the customer in online interactions?", the value proposition perspective put forward by Sheth (2019) was used to analyze the conversations. This was carried out by calculating how many turns each customer and service agent took during the chat interaction and considering the information that was provided. On average, the conversations consisted of 13 turns, five of which were taken by the customers and eight were taken by the customer-service agent. However, in the normal encounters, the customers participated more actively than the customer-service agents. The latter assumed a problem-solving role (Figure 4) on these occasions but did not personalize their communication, which did not enhance co-creation (Sheth, 2019) or caring interactions (Lee & Lee, 2020). In practice, this implies that the customer asked questions or sought advice, and the customer-service agent provided answers (usually, internet links) without asking any further questions (on average,
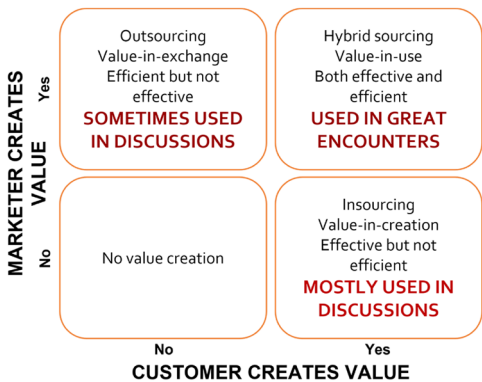

Figure 4. Chat discussions according to the value propositions proposed by Sheth (2019).

seven lines per discussion), as illustrated by the example shown below.

> *"Visitor: Hi, we are planning to go to heitaranta beach, does the place have free parking?*
> *SA: Hello! Thank you for your question! Just a moment, I will look for the answer.*
> *Visitor: Thanks.*
> *SA: Starting from this year, it seems that there will no longer be any free parking spots in the Hietaniemi area.*
> *SA: Unfortunately, I couldn't find information on the exact parking fees on the location.*
> *Visitor: It's ok, thanks.*
> *SA: Have a good day!*
> *Visitor: You too."*

Customer-driven co-creation is expected to lead to more personalized service, but this was not the case here. In the encounters that were considered great, the amount of customer activity was the same, but the responses provided by the service agent consisted of 16 lines on average. However, customers' contribution in the form of giving information or feedback was more significant, as the service agent asked further questions. Hence, this can be considered to be both joint co-creation (Sheth, 2019) and interactive caring (Lee and Lee (2020).

Last, the response to the third research question, "What kind of value does caring create for the customers?", was based on value co-creation benefits and transformational values. Excellent service encounters included all the elements suggested by Parkinson et al. (2019) and Verleye (2015). In contrast, normal encounters included primarily cognitive (giving information) and pragmatic (solving problems) benefits. Below are examples of normal conversations in which customer problems are solved through a simple and short discussion.

> *"Visitor: How do you get to Lonna?*
> *SA: Hello, and thanks for your question. Just a moment, so I'll send you more information.*
> *SA: JT-Line transports regularly to Lonna with the following timetable:* https://www.jt-line.fi/suomenlinna-vallisaari-lonna/aikataulu-kauppatori-lonna/
> *Visitor: Thank you.*
> *SA: You are welcome."*
> *"Visitor: I wanted information on whether I can work as a doctor in Finland (I currently work in the UK).*
> *SA: Hi!*
> *SA: Just give me a moment while I look for the required information.*
> *SA: Here, you can find information on working as a doctor in Finland, depending on if you're qualified in an EU/EEA member state or outside this area.*
> *SA:* https://www.valvira.fi/web/en/healthcare/professional_practice_rights/qualified_outside_the_eu_eea_member_state/doctor

SA: https://www.valvira.fi/web/en/healthcare/professional_practice_rights/qualified_in_eu_eea_member_state
SA: Hopefully this information helps you!"

When analyzing the elements of caring, it was found that epistemic value (Parkinson et al., 2019) was created by asking the customer for further information and suggesting extra information, which demonstrated a willingness to give and commit (Mayseless, 2015). This also reflected the giving attitude mentioned by Pulcini (2017) as one of the elements of caring that can lead to transformative thinking, actions of purchase (Wu & Gao, 2019) and recommendation and praise (Tommasetti et al., 2017). This is highlighted by the two examples presented below.

"… SA: If you want to, I can look for more ideas and recommendations for you…."
"… SA: You can ask as many as you need!:) For example, Allas Sea Pool is open the whole weekend …"

The customer-service agents expressed the functional value defined by Parkinson et al. (2019) by being genuinely interested in solving the problem in the great encounters. According to Feeney and Collins (2015), this is a core element of caring. This can be seen in the example presented below.

"… SA: I also recommend warmly to have a look at our online event calendar for different type of events taking place during Midsummer: https://www.myhelsinki.fi/en/see-and-do/events. *We will also publish next week a list about Midsummer events in Helsinki, and we would be happy to send it to you, for instance, via email as soon as it is ready. The same list will be though also available on our MyHelsinki website as well on the following week…."*

Informing customers about delays was an essential component of functional value in the model formulated by Parkinson et al. (2019). This can be seen as a part of the creation of caring through shared knowledge, common meaning and mutual trust in the service encounters according to Feeney and Collins (2015), as mentioned in one of the conversations:

"… SA: I will look for the information, just a moment!"

Emotional value—and, thus, caring—was created in the great encounters through emotional expressions and elements of politeness, as mentioned by Jimenez et al. (2020). This is visible in the two examples shown below.

"…SA: Sounds great! Would you like more options? I would be happy to come up with more ideas."
"Visitor: If you can.
SA: Well, it's only going to take a while:)…"

Showing emotions is essential for caring (Weiner & Auster, 2007) and increases the emotional value in conversations. This has an impact on customers' future actions and mindsets. This is highlighted by the two examples presented below.

"… SA: Excellent, if I could be of assistance! This is the most rewarding thing in my job!"
"… SA: It's really nice to hear that there are now several options to choose from!:)"

In addition, emojis express emotional value and qualify as caring communications according to Chang and Yen (2013). This is illustrated by the example below.

"… SA: Just shoot, I am happy to help ☺ …"

Social and personal values were reflected through caring expressions by praising the customer and using certain adjectives (e.g., Jimenez et al., 2020). This creates togetherness (Mayseless, 2015), engagement (Pope & Miles, 2022) and loyalty (Wu & Gao, 2019). This can be seen in the two examples that follow:

"… SA: Wau, what an excellent question! Nobody has ever before asked this. I will put myself into this and try to find out as soon as possible; just a moment, please…."
"…SA: Okay, what a nice idea! Just a moment, I will look for options for you…"

Confessing a lack of knowledge creates social and personal values as well as trust among customers (Feeney & Collins, 2015). It also brings customers closer to the service agent and induces emotional engagement for both parties, leading to mutual satisfaction (Weiner & Auster, 2007). This is demonstrated by the two examples presented below.

"… SA: Hi! I cannot answer your question immediately; but please, wait a moment, so I'll find out…."
"… SA: Hello, and thank you for your message. I do not remember if public toilets are in the area, but I will find out and return to you. Just a moment! …"

Making the customer feel like an essential part of the discussion is also an element of caring and social and personal values. Appreciating the customer (Pulcini, 2017) encourages them to participate in joint co-creation (Sheth, 2019). This is reflected by the example that follows.

"SA: I am happy to help with all the questions. I will send the links in a moment."

This interaction created engagement and caring through mutual knowledge sharing and the display of clear emotions and compassion (Figure 5).

In addition, certain linguistic expressions created a caring atmosphere and customer value, as identified in the dataset; examples of these are presented in Table 1. The ordinary service encounters contained relatively neutral customer-service expressions, while "I" or "we" created togetherness

(Mayseless, 2015), and terms such as "please" and "thank you" were used in the great encounters. Moreover, emoticons, which indicate caring according to Li et al. (2019), appeared in the great encounters. The giving attitude (Pulcini, 2017) was emphasized by adding phrases such as "I am happy to help" or giving recognition to the customer by thanking them for an excellent question.

Discussion and conclusions

This study explored the elements of caring and their relationship with customer-value co-creation in chat-based service encounters. First, when analyzing the quality-of-service encounters, it was clear that most encounters were normal, which is inadequate from a competitiveness point of view. As Verhoef et al. (2009) state, enhancing the customer experience represents a key strategy for attaining successful marketing results and enhancing a company's prospects for success. In these encounters, while the customer's problem was solved, and the service agent was professional, deeper engagement—and, thus, co-creation or caring—was not obvious despite the presence of empathetic expressions.

The elements of the co-creation propositions proposed by Sheth (2019) were mostly limited to insourcing. The hybrid sourcing was clearly visible in the great encounters, where the customer and service agent actively contributed to the discussion and showed respect to and interest in each other through their communication. This also implies that the

Service elements Caring elements

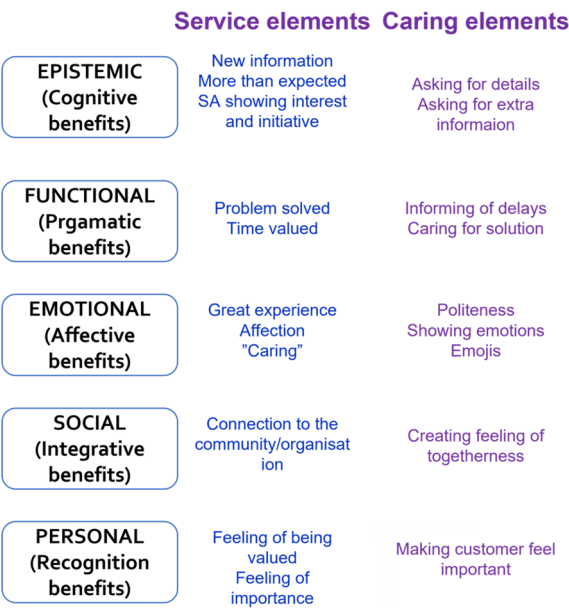|	Service elements	Caring elements
EPISTEMIC (Cognitive benefits)	New information More than expected SA showing interest and initiative	Asking for details Asking for extra informaion
FUNCTIONAL (Prgamatic benefits)	Problem solved Time valued	Informing of delays Caring for solution
EMOTIONAL (Affective benefits)	Great experience Affection "Caring"	Politeness Showing emotions Emojis
SOCIAL (Integrative benefits)	Connection to the community/organisation	Creating feeling of togetherness
PERSONAL (Recognition benefits)	Feeling of being valued Feeling of importance	Making customer feel important

Figure 5. Great service and caring elements classified based on benefits and values.

Table 1. Expressions and language from the caring and co-creation perspective.

NORMAL	GREAT	CARING	CO-CREATION
How can I help?	I am **happy** to help	Emotional engagement Personalization	Affective benefits Recognition benefits Integrative benefits
Have an nice day	Have a nice day**!:)**	Emotional engagement	Affective benefits
Bye	Bye, have a **nice** day!	Emotional engagement	Affective benefits
	Can I help you with something else?	Commitment Personalization	Cognitive benefits integrative benefits
Thanks for feedback!	We are always **happy** to get feedback!	Emotional engagement	Affective benefits Recognition benefits Integrative benefits
I will check	Just a moment, I will check.	Competence Personalization	Cognitive benefits
	Thank you for your **nice** question!	Giving attitude	Affective benefits Recognition benefits
Just a moment	It will take a moment for **me** to check!	Personalization	Cognitive benefits
Cannot find the information	I am **sorry**, I have to **admit** I can't **either** find this information.	Giving attitude Shared knowledge Personalization Trust	Cognitive benefits Integrative benefits
You are welcome	No problem, **happy** to help **<3** Have a **nice** day **:)**	Emotional engagement Giving attitude	Affective benefits Recognition benefits

conversations with hybrid sourcing enabled the creation of a caring atmosphere due to the equal investment in the interaction by both parties. Further, when considered from a caring perspective, the hybrid sourcing led both parties to actively share information and participate in the conversation, which facilitated the creation of emotional impacts and positive memory imprints (e.g., Parkinson et al., 2019).

Caring was considered vital when analyzing the co-creation benefits and customer value based on the themes suggested by Verleye (2015) and Parkinson et al. (2019). Using the elements of caring, such as a giving attitude, concern, politeness, emoticons and questions, service agents made customers feel safe and encouraged them to participate and co-create during the encounters. Thus, the findings indicate that the elements of caring played an essential role in customer-value co-creation, as the conversations in which co-creation was present were the ones where customers praised the experience.

The presence of caring creates affective and emotional benefits, including cognitive, integrative and recognition benefits, for the customer. As aforementioned, when caring elements were present, customers felt safe to ask more questions and even seek recommendations from the service agent. The service agent was then able to take the time to search for the required information. The conversation between the service agent and customer drove itself, leaving the customer feeling not only satisfied but also happy and making a lasting impression. The research of Pope and Miles (2022) supports this view, indicating that belonging and engagement are essential for value co-creation. While pragmatic and cognitive benefits occurred in

most of the online customer-service encounters, other values also impacted the customers (emotional, social and personal values). Since all these values and benefits affect transformational value, which leaves a cognitive memory imprint on customers, they can be considered essential elements for customer loyalty creation (Chhabra, 2021).

Second, caring language and enhanced customer-service expressions contributed to value co-creation with the customer in online interactions. More specifically, an increased number of polite expressions, which emphasized the customer's importance, and personalized reactions to customer requests as well as emojis, personal pronouns, emotional engagement, competence, commitment and a giving attitude were found to be vital elements of caring expressions. Interestingly, this finding contradicts previous studies on the use of figurative vs literal language (Choi et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019), which state that a literal language style has a substantial negative impact on the creation of trustworthiness and the display of competence. In addition, the findings indicate that emoticons, expressive and figurative, and informal language created closeness, togetherness, intimacy and a caring atmosphere. However, it was clear that most conversations followed a prewritten script instead of having a personal touch and customized wording, which, according to McLean et al. (2019), were essential for good customer experience and for increasing their intention to purchase. This is also one of the challenges in creating a caring atmosphere. Furthermore, it can be seen as an indication of data saturation in chat-based customer service in this company.

Third, the findings suggest that the role of caring is significant but rather non-existent in practice. More specifically, the basics of caring, i.e., a helpful and giving attitude, commitment and consideration, which include creating situations where the customer-service agent and customer can solve problems together, strengthen and enable value co-creation. This required hybrid sourcing (Sheth, 2019), which was present in a few conversations. Further, the versatile use of caring elements enhances the value co-creation benefits and transformational values in customer-service encounters, leaving a memory imprint on the customer. Caring is usually expressed through language that includes the use of emojis and emoticons as well as small phrases that reflect politeness and appreciation, and it portrays the customer-service agent as an individual to the play using the personal pronoun "I". Although merely solving customers' problems and providing one or two polite responses (as seen in the normal encounters in this study) can be considered as empathetic behavior, putting oneself in the customers' shoes and trying to find the best possible solution for them counts as caring and is something chat-based customer service should strive for.

Theoretical implications

This study offers two key contributions to the existing literature. First, it focuses on the elements of caring and their relationship with customer-value co-creation, which is an aspect that has not been explored in more detail in customer-care studies. Given the versatile functions of caring in different contexts (Steyl, 2020), this study provides rich insights related to the elements of caring and its relationship with customer-value co-creation in the context of chat-based service encounters. The findings of this study also suggest that caring elements, such as politeness (Pulcini, 2017), emotional expressions (Jimenez et al., 2020), personalization and a giving attitude (Pulcini, 2017), contribute to creating emotional value and enhancing the overall customer experience. Specifically, the findings enable a better understanding of the significance of caring in the context of customer-value co-creation in chat-based customer-service encounters. The results highlight the importance of the emotional, affective, cognitive and pragmatic benefits for customer-value co-creation suggested by Parkinson et al. (2019) and Verleye (2015) and how they are represented by the customer and customer-service agent as well as the role of caring expressions during their interactions.

Second, this research offers new insights into the limited studies on the significance of language in customer-service encounters, especially from a caring perspective (Holmqvist et al., 2017). It demonstrates that caring can be created not only with literal language but also with informal, figurative, and personal expression, suggesting that using emotive and expressive language can play a crucial role in establishing a caring relationship with customers and, thus, challenging the existing literature. As mentioned earlier, this contradicts the earlier studies conducted by Choi et al. (2019) and Li et al. (2019), which state that the use of emoticons and figurative language leads to unprofessional and untrustworthy encounters online. Therefore, this study offers new insights into online communication and business studies by deepening the understanding of caring.

Managerial implications

The main implication of this study from a managerial perspective is the suggestion to shift from providing a service to providing care. With this reconsideration, and using the concept of care, it is possible to co-create value with the customer in a completely different way than what is achieved by just providing customer service. In addition, this study has important managerial implications for customer-service personnel who respond to customers' queries online. These professionals should prioritize caring to

create a positive emotional connection with customers. This leads to enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty and, thereby, enhanced company competitiveness. This can be realized through the following steps: companies should emphasize value co-creation in their strategies and provide their customer-service personnel with the necessary resources and skills for the same. Further, customers should not be considered passive recipients of value but, rather, active producers of their own experiences. The focus should be on valuing customers' expertise and knowledge and allowing them to share their needs, wishes and prior actions instead of simply providing the easiest solution to their inquiries.

Moreover, the language and communication style used in the company should be reevaluated, and the management should provide clear guidelines to customer-service agents to enable them to be more efficient. In addition, customer-service agents should use clear and concise language and avoid jargon or technical terms that customers may need help understanding. They should express their feelings and be authentic and polite. From a customer experience perspective, it would be appropriate for the customer-service agent to inform the customer if they do not know something or if a situation will take a relatively long time to resolve. The communication style should also be adapted to match the preferences and needs of individual customers.

Furthermore, it should be considered essential to measure and monitor customer satisfaction during online service encounters; this includes a caring organizational culture. This fosters a work environment and corporate culture that promotes employee collaboration and a customer-centric mindset.

Limitations and future research

This study was limited because data were only collected from Visit Helsinki chat platform users. In addition, the dataset comprised only 123 discussions, which is sufficient for this qualitative case study but does not allow for generalization. Hence, future studies should incorporate multiple data sources and include a more extensive and diverse sample of participants to improve the generalizability of the findings and expand on the current study's results. Another limitation is the use of manual coding for data analysis. Future studies should use sentiment analysis or text mining for data analysis to augment the findings of this study.

One of the other limitations of this study is that it concentrated on only one company briefly. Conducting longitudinal studies that track the changes and developments in online customer-service interactions over time and repeating the studies regularly would increase the quality and reliability of the results. Moreover, this study focused mainly on the actions

and behaviors of customer-service agents. While it examined the impact of these actions on customer-value co-creation, future research could focus on the customer's perspective and experiences in online customer-service encounters and adopt a value-in-use approach.

Further, this study excluded external factors, such as cultural differences and demographics, from its analysis. In the future, exploring the influence of external factors and conducting studies in a more current timeframe could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of caring in customer-value co-creation.

Additionally, future studies should examine the role of language and its impact in different contexts, as the findings of this study contradict previous studies.

Finally, examining the impact of different technologies, such as AI-powered chatbots, on customer-service interactions and the role of caring could further augment the current study's findings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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