

Exploring Value Co-creation Behavior in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of University Students in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: This study explores how undergraduate students perceive and experience value co-creation behavior within the university service ecosystem through a qualitative research approach. Data were collected through two focus group discussions involving 16 undergraduate students from one public university and one private university in Vietnam and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that students perceive value co-creation as a continuous and collaborative process that extends across the entire university experience rather than being confined to classroom learning. Participants described themselves as active contributors who co-create value through interactions with multiple stakeholders, including lecturers, peers, administrative staff, student organizations, alumni, employers, and community partners. Six interrelated themes emerged from the analysis. First, students perceive value co-creation as active participation in academic, social, and institutional activities throughout their university journey. Second, value is created through reciprocal interactions and resource integration among multiple actors within the university ecosystem. Third, collaboration, mutual trust, and shared responsibility are considered essential conditions for successful value co-creation. Fourth, students perceive that value co-creation generates diverse outcomes, including personal development, meaningful learning experiences, stronger relationships, and enhanced institutional value. Fifth, organizational culture, institutional support, and opportunities for participation shape students' willingness and ability to engage in value co-creation. Finally, differences between public and private universities indicate that institutional context influences how students experience and enact value co-creation. By adopting a service ecosystem perspective, this study extends current understanding of student value co-creation beyond classroom engagement. It highlights the central role of collaborative interactions in creating sustainable educational value within higher education.

KEYWORDS: Student value co-creation; Service ecosystem; Higher education; Qualitative research; Focus group discussions; Vietnam.

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Introduction

Higher education is increasingly transitioning from a traditional knowledge transmission model toward a collaborative service ecosystem in which students are recognized as active contributors to educational value rather than passive recipients of knowledge. This transformation reflects the evolution of Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), which conceptualizes value as being co-created through resource integration and reciprocal interactions among multiple actors rather than produced solely by service providers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016). Within this perspective, universities are no longer viewed simply as providers of education but as facilitators of a service ecosystem that enables students, lecturers, administrative staff, alumni, employers, and community partners to jointly create meaningful educational experiences.

In higher education, value co-creation extends beyond students' participation in classroom learning. Students actively contribute to educational value through a wide range of academic, social, professional, and institutional activities, including seeking and sharing information, collaborating with lecturers and peers, participating in student organizations, engaging in research and community projects, providing constructive feedback, supporting university initiatives, and interacting with external stakeholders. Through these activities, students integrate their knowledge, skills, experiences, and social relationships with the resources provided by universities, thereby contributing to value creation for themselves, other students, the institution, and society.

Growing recognition of students as active partners has stimulated increasing scholarly interest in student value co-creation. Previous studies have demonstrated that students who actively participate in educational processes are more likely to experience greater educational value, stronger engagement, higher satisfaction, and stronger intentions to support their universities through voluntary behaviors. Nevertheless, most existing research has approached student value co-creation from a quantitative perspective, operationalizing the concept through predefined behavioral dimensions and examining its relationships with various educational outcomes. While these studies have substantially advanced empirical understanding, they provide limited insight into how students themselves perceive, interpret, and experience value co-creation within the broader context of university life.

Moreover, existing conceptualizations of student value co-creation remain largely grounded in service encounter perspectives, emphasizing interactions between students and lecturers or specific learning activities. Comparatively less attention has been given to understanding value co-creation as a process embedded within the broader university service ecosystem, where educational value emerges through interactions among multiple stakeholders operating across academic, administrative, professional, and community settings. Consequently, there remains limited qualitative evidence explaining how students understand their own role in co-creating value throughout their entire university journey.

This gap is particularly evident in emerging higher education systems such as Vietnam. Over the past decade, Vietnamese universities have experienced substantial transformation through institutional autonomy, digital transformation, international collaboration, stronger university-industry partnerships, and increasing emphasis on student-centered education. These developments have expanded opportunities for students to participate in decision-making, extracurricular activities, community engagement, entrepreneurship, internships, and research. At the same time, significant differences continue to exist between public and private universities regarding organizational structures, institutional culture, student support mechanisms, and stakeholder

engagement practices. Such differences provide an important context for exploring how students perceive and enact value co-creation within different university ecosystems.

From a service ecosystem perspective, these institutional contexts are likely to influence not only students' opportunities for participation but also how they integrate resources, collaborate with different actors, and construct educational value. However, little is currently known about how Vietnamese students experience these processes or how they understand their own contributions within the broader university ecosystem. Addressing this knowledge gap requires an exploratory approach that captures students' lived experiences rather than relying solely on predefined measurement scales. More recently, Nejari (2026) conceptualized student value creation as a multi-stage and multi-stakeholder process by integrating the perspectives of students, faculty members, and higher education managers. The study demonstrated that student value creation contributes significantly to both the financial and market performance of private higher education institutions, highlighting the strategic importance of collaborative value creation beyond individual learning outcomes. While this multi-actor perspective represents an important advancement, the study relied on a quantitative design and predefined constructs to examine relationships among stakeholders. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to how students themselves understand and experience value co-creation within the broader university service ecosystem. Addressing this gap requires qualitative inquiry capable of capturing students' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to collaborative value creation.

Accordingly, this study adopts a qualitative research design using focus group discussions to explore how undergraduate students from public and private universities in Vietnam perceive and experience value co-creation within the university service ecosystem. Rather than focusing exclusively on classroom participation, the study investigates how students describe value co-creation across multiple academic, social, organizational, and community contexts, and how interactions with diverse stakeholders contribute to educational value creation.

Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do undergraduate students perceive and define value co-creation within the university service ecosystem?
- RQ2. Through what activities and interactions do students perceive that value is co-created during their university experience?
- RQ3. Which stakeholders and institutional conditions facilitate or constrain student value co-creation?
- RQ4. How do students perceive the outcomes of value co-creation for themselves, the university, and other stakeholders?
- RQ5. How do students from public and private universities differ in their experiences and perceptions of value co-creation?

This study contributes to the higher education and service management literature in several important ways. First, it enriches the conceptual understanding of student value co-creation by moving beyond a behavioral perspective toward a service ecosystem perspective, where value is viewed as an emergent outcome of continuous resource integration among multiple stakeholders. Second, it provides qualitative evidence from an emerging higher education context, complementing the predominantly quantitative literature and offering richer insights into how students construct meaning around value co-creation in their everyday university experiences. Third, by comparing public and private universities, the study demonstrates how institutional contexts shape

opportunities for collaboration and resource integration within university ecosystems. Finally, the findings offer practical guidance for university leaders and policymakers seeking to design collaborative educational environments that strengthen stakeholder engagement, enhance institutional value creation, and support the long-term sustainability of higher education institutions.

Literature Review and Research Methodology

Student Value Co-creation in Higher Education

The concept of value co-creation originates from Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), which argues that value is not created solely by organizations but emerges through interactions among multiple actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Within higher education, this perspective redefines students from passive recipients of educational services to active participants who collaborate with lecturers, peers, and universities in creating meaningful learning experiences.

Student value co-creation encompasses a wide range of voluntary behaviors through which students contribute to both their own learning and institutional development. These behaviors include active classroom participation, collaborative learning, providing constructive feedback, engaging in extracurricular activities, and supporting university initiatives. Rather than being viewed as consumers of education, students are increasingly recognized as partners who play a central role in shaping educational value.

Previous studies have consistently shown that value co-creation contributes to positive educational outcomes, including enhanced learning experiences, stronger engagement, improved academic performance, and greater institutional attachment. However, most existing studies conceptualize value co-creation through predefined measurement scales and examine its effects using quantitative approaches. Consequently, relatively little is known about how students themselves interpret these behaviors and how they experience value co-creation in different educational contexts.

Student Value Co-creation and Student Outcomes

Within the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), value is not embedded in educational services. However, it is co-created through interactions among multiple actors who integrate resources within a service ecosystem (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Accordingly, students are not passive recipients of educational services; rather, they actively shape their learning experiences by collaborating with lecturers, peers, university staff, and other stakeholders. Through these interactions, student value co-creation generates various educational outcomes that extend beyond academic achievement, including perceived value, student satisfaction, and student citizenship behavior.

Perceived value represents students' overall assessment of the benefits obtained from higher education relative to the resources they invest, such as time, effort, and financial costs (Zeithaml, 1988). In higher education, this evaluation encompasses not only academic knowledge but also personal development, professional competencies, social relationships, emotional well-being, and career preparedness (Ledden et al., 2007; Brown & Mazzarol, 2009). From the perspective of value co-creation, these benefits are not delivered solely through teaching activities but emerge from students' active engagement in collaborative learning processes and continuous interactions within the university ecosystem (Dollinger et al., 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Consequently, students who participate more actively in co-creating their educational experiences are expected to perceive greater value from their university education.

Student satisfaction constitutes another important outcome of student value co-creation. Traditionally, satisfaction has been conceptualized as students' overall evaluation of whether their educational experiences meet or exceed prior expectations (Elliott & Healy, 2001). However, contemporary higher education increasingly recognizes satisfaction as a cumulative evaluation developed through diverse experiences, including academic interactions, administrative services, extracurricular activities, campus facilities, and relationships with members of the university community (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Helgesen & Nasset, 2007). Because value co-creation enhances students' engagement, autonomy, collaboration, and sense of belonging, it contributes to more meaningful educational experiences that ultimately strengthen student satisfaction (Dollinger et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2017). Thus, satisfaction should be viewed as an emergent outcome of collaborative educational experiences rather than merely an assessment of teaching quality.

Beyond shaping students' personal evaluations, value co-creation also encourages voluntary behaviors that benefit the wider university community. These discretionary actions are conceptualized as student citizenship behavior, which refers to voluntary contributions that are not formally required but support the effectiveness, reputation, and sustainability of the institution (Groth, 2005). Drawing on the literature on customer citizenship behavior (Groth, 2005; Yi & Gong, 2013), student citizenship behavior includes helping fellow students, recommending the university to prospective students, participating in institutional activities, providing constructive feedback, and promoting the university's positive image. Such behaviors strengthen collaborative learning environments, reinforce social connections, and contribute to institutional development. As universities increasingly adopt partnership-oriented educational models, student citizenship behavior represents an important manifestation of students' commitment to the university community and their willingness to contribute beyond formal academic requirements.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how undergraduate students perceive and experience value co-creation within the university service ecosystem. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate when the aim is to understand participants' subjective meanings, lived experiences, and socially constructed realities rather than to test causal relationships among predefined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Because value co-creation is embedded in students' everyday interactions with multiple stakeholders, qualitative inquiry enables researchers to capture the complexity, context, and meanings underlying these experiences.

Specifically, focus group discussions (FGDs) were employed as the primary data collection method. Focus groups facilitate interaction among participants, allowing them to reflect on shared experiences, challenge one another's perspectives, and collectively construct meanings that may not emerge through individual interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997). This interactive format is particularly suitable for exploring socially embedded phenomena such as student value co-creation, where experiences are shaped through collaborative interactions within the university ecosystem.

Participants and Data Collection

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, a widely adopted strategy in qualitative research that enables researchers to select information-rich participants capable of providing meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015).

Two focus group discussions were conducted between undergraduate students from one public university and one private university in Vietnam. Each focus group comprised eight participants, yielding a total sample of sixteen students. Including students from different institutional contexts was intended to capture variations in educational environments and enrich understanding of value co-creation across university settings.

To ensure participants possessed sufficient experience to reflect on university life, the study included only undergraduate students who had completed at least three semesters of study and had participated in both academic and extracurricular activities. Participants represented diverse academic disciplines and years of study, allowing a broad range of perspectives to emerge during the discussions.

Each focus group lasted approximately 120 minutes and was facilitated by the researchers using a semi-structured interview guide. All discussions were conducted in Vietnamese, audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, and supplemented by detailed field notes documenting group dynamics, non-verbal interactions, and contextual observations. Data collection continued until the discussions generated sufficiently rich information to address the research questions, consistent with the principle of information power proposed by Malterud et al. (2016).

Interview Protocol

The semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the literature on Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016), student value co-creation (Yi & Gong, 2013; Dollinger et al., 2018), and higher education service research. The interview questions were designed to encourage participants to describe their experiences openly while allowing flexibility to pursue emerging topics relevant to value co-creation (Kallio et al., 2016).

The discussions focused on the following broad topics:

- students' understanding of value co-creation within the university ecosystem;
- experiences of interacting with lecturers, peers, administrative staff, and other university stakeholders;
- participation in academic, extracurricular, community engagement, and university activities;
- experiences of seeking, sharing, and integrating knowledge and resources;
- perceptions of educational value derived from collaborative participation;
- experiences of contributing voluntarily to the university community; and
- recommendations for strengthening value co-creation within higher education.

Throughout each discussion, the moderator employed probing questions and follow-up prompts to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences, clarify meanings, and provide concrete examples, thereby enhancing the depth and richness of the data (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for exploring participants' subjective experiences because it acknowledges the active interpretive role of researchers in generating themes while maintaining close engagement with the data.

All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim immediately after each focus group discussion. The transcripts were repeatedly reviewed alongside field notes to achieve familiarity with the data and to preserve contextual meanings throughout the analytical process.

The analysis followed six iterative stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021):

1. Familiarization with the data;
2. Generating initial codes;
3. Constructing preliminary themes;
4. Reviewing and refining themes;
5. Defining and naming themes; and
6. Producing the final analytical narrative.

Coding was conducted manually to maintain close engagement with participants' narratives and to facilitate continuous comparison across participants and between the two focus groups. Rather than treating coding as a purely mechanical process, the researchers engaged in continuous reflection throughout the analysis to interpret meanings within the broader university service ecosystem.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the research team held regular discussions during coding and theme development to compare interpretations and refine emerging themes. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, iterative coding, and the use of verbatim quotations to illustrate participants' perspectives.

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis revealed that students perceive value co-creation as a holistic and dynamic process embedded within the university ecosystem rather than as isolated classroom activities. Participants consistently described value co-creation as emerging through continuous interactions with lecturers, peers, university administrators, student organizations, industry partners, alumni, and the broader community. Rather than viewing themselves as passive recipients of educational services, students regarded themselves as active contributors who jointly shape educational experiences and institutional value.

Across the two focus groups, six overarching themes emerged, illustrating how value is co-created throughout students' university journeys.

Theme 1: Value co-creation begins with students' active roles within the university ecosystem

Students consistently rejected the traditional notion that universities are solely responsible for delivering educational value. Instead, they emphasized that value is jointly created when students actively engage in various aspects of university life.

Participants explained that being a university student involves much more than attending lectures. It includes participating in academic activities, extracurricular programs, student clubs, research projects, competitions, volunteering, internships, and institutional events.

One participant commented:

"University gives us opportunities, but whether those opportunities become valuable depends on how actively we participate." (Public University, Participant 4)

Another student explained:

"Learning is only one part of university life. We also create value through clubs, volunteering, competitions and supporting university activities." (Private University, Participant 7)

These findings indicate that students conceptualize value co-creation as a university-wide process extending beyond formal teaching and learning.

Theme 2: Value is co-created through interactions with multiple stakeholders

Participants described value co-creation as a network of interactions involving numerous stakeholders rather than a simple student-lecturer relationship.

Students identified lecturers, classmates, administrative staff, academic advisors, student affairs offices, alumni, employers, and community organizations as important actors contributing to their educational experiences.

One participant noted:

"Every interaction matters. Sometimes administrative staff or alumni help us solve problems that lecturers cannot." (Public University, Participant 2)

Another student stated:

"Internships and company projects help us understand what employers expect, so they are also part of creating educational value." (Private University, Participant 5)

The findings demonstrate that students perceive universities as interconnected service ecosystems where educational value emerges through collaborative relationships among multiple actors.

Theme 3: Reciprocal collaboration is the foundation of value co-creation

Participants repeatedly emphasized that value co-creation depends on reciprocal participation rather than one-sided efforts.

Students believed universities should provide supportive environments, while students themselves must demonstrate initiative, responsibility, and willingness to contribute.

One participant explained:

"The university cannot create value alone. Students also need to participate and take responsibility for their own development." (Private University, Participant 1)

Similarly,

"If lecturers encourage discussion but students remain silent, then no real value is created." (Public University, Participant 6)

This reciprocal perspective closely reflects Service-Dominant Logic, where value is generated through resource integration among interacting actors.

Theme 4: Value co-creation generates value for multiple stakeholders

Participants emphasized that value co-creation benefits not only individual students but also lecturers, universities, employers, and society.

Students described multiple forms of value generated through participation, including knowledge acquisition, professional skills, confidence, social relationships, employability, institutional reputation, and community development.

One participant remarked:

"When students actively participate, everyone benefits—not only ourselves but also lecturers and future students." (Private University, Participant 3)

Another student added:

"Helping junior students today creates a better learning environment for everyone tomorrow." (Public University, Participant 8)

Students therefore viewed value creation as collective rather than individual.

Theme 5: Institutional conditions enable or constrain value co-creation

Although students from both public and private universities expressed similar motivations to contribute, they perceived different institutional conditions affecting their opportunities.

Public university students frequently mentioned larger class sizes, administrative complexity, and limited access to lecturers.

Conversely, students from private universities highlighted personalized support, smaller classes, flexible communication, and greater encouragement to participate.

As one participant explained:

"Our university encourages students to propose ideas and organize activities, so we feel our opinions really matter." (Private University, Participant 6)

Meanwhile,

"Sometimes we want to contribute, but the procedures are too complicated or nobody follows up." (Public University, Participant 1)

These findings suggest that organizational environments significantly influence students' opportunities to participate in value co-creation.

Theme 6: Value co-creation fosters a sense of belonging and long-term commitment

Students described value co-creation as strengthening their emotional attachment to the university.

Many participants indicated that active participation made them feel respected, connected, and proud of being members of their university community.

Consequently, they became more willing to recommend the university, support institutional events, mentor junior students, and maintain relationships after graduation.

One participant stated:

"When the university values our contributions, we naturally want to contribute even more." (Private University, Participant 2)

Another reflected:

"Being involved makes me feel this university is partly mine, so I want it to become better." (Public University, Participant 5)

This finding suggests that value co-creation encourages long-term commitment and voluntary contributions extending beyond graduation.

Discussion

The findings provide new insights into how students conceptualize value co-creation within higher education and contribute to a broader understanding of student participation from a service ecosystem perspective. Rather than perceiving value co-creation as a collection of discrete behaviors, participants described it as a continuous process of interaction, collaboration, and resource integration that unfolds throughout their university journey. This perspective is consistent with the fundamental premise of Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), which argues that value is co-created through reciprocal exchanges among multiple actors rather than produced unilaterally by service providers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016). More importantly, the findings illustrate that the university functions as a service ecosystem in which students actively integrate resources through their relationships with lecturers, peers, administrative staff, student organizations, employers, alumni, and community partners.

These findings both support and extend previous conceptualizations of student value co-creation. Existing research has generally adapted customer value co-creation behavior to the higher education context by emphasizing behaviors such as information seeking, information sharing, responsible behavior, and personal interaction (Yi & Gong, 2012; Dollinger et al., 2018). These dimensions conceptualize value co-creation primarily as a set of individual participatory behaviors occurring during service encounters. Participants in the present study recognized the importance of these behaviors; however, they also described value co-creation as involving broader forms of engagement that extend beyond direct interactions with lecturers or classroom activities.

Students associated value co-creation with participation in student organizations, community engagement, research projects, internships, mentoring, university governance, and collaboration with external stakeholders. These findings suggest that the existing behavioral dimensions represent important mechanisms of value co-creation but do not fully capture the complexity of students' experiences within contemporary higher education.

The study therefore expands the conceptual boundaries of student value co-creation by shifting attention from individual service encounters to the broader university service ecosystem. From students' perspectives, value is not created through isolated interactions but through the continuous integration of knowledge, skills, relationships, institutional resources, and social networks across multiple educational settings. This broader interpretation resonates with the service ecosystem perspective, which emphasizes that value emerges through interconnected networks of actors operating within shared institutional arrangements rather than through dyadic provider-customer relationships alone (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Consequently, student value co-creation should be understood not merely as students' participation in learning activities but as their active contribution to the development of the university community as a whole.

Another important finding concerns the reciprocal nature of value co-creation. Students consistently emphasized that meaningful value creation requires active contributions from both universities and students. Universities provide educational resources, learning opportunities, institutional support, and collaborative environments, whereas students contribute through participation, communication, knowledge sharing, responsibility, leadership, and social engagement. This reciprocal understanding differs from traditional higher education models in which universities are viewed as primary producers of educational value and students as passive recipients. Instead, the findings reinforce recent arguments that universities should be regarded as facilitators of resource integration, enabling multiple stakeholders to co-create educational value.

The comparison between public and private universities further highlights the importance of institutional context in shaping value co-creation. While students across both institutional types demonstrated similar motivations to contribute, differences emerged regarding opportunities for participation, organizational responsiveness, communication practices, and institutional support. Students from private universities generally perceived greater accessibility to lecturers, stronger institutional encouragement, and more flexible participation opportunities. In contrast, students from public universities more frequently described structural constraints such as larger class sizes and administrative complexity. These findings suggest that value co-creation is influenced not only by students' willingness to participate but also by the institutional conditions that either enable or constrain collaborative interactions. This observation extends previous quantitative studies by illustrating that contextual factors should be viewed as integral components of the value co-creation process rather than merely antecedents or moderators.

Finally, the findings contribute to the higher education literature by demonstrating that student value co-creation generates value beyond individual learning outcomes. Participants associated value co-creation with personal growth, stronger interpersonal relationships, professional development, institutional improvement, and contributions to the wider university community. This broader understanding aligns with contemporary perspectives that educational value is multidimensional and co-created among interconnected stakeholders. It also suggests that universities should evaluate value co-creation not only in terms of academic performance or

student satisfaction but also through its contribution to institutional development, social connectedness, and long-term sustainability within the university service ecosystem.

Conclusion and Managerial Implications

Conclusion

This study explored how students perceive and experience value co-creation within the university service ecosystem through focus group discussions with undergraduate students from one public university and one private university in Vietnam. Adopting a qualitative approach enabled the study to move beyond predefined conceptualizations of student value co-creation and capture students' own interpretations of how educational value is jointly created throughout their university journey.

The findings demonstrate that students do not perceive value co-creation as limited to classroom participation or interactions with lecturers. Instead, they view it as a continuous process of collaboration involving multiple stakeholders across the university ecosystem, including peers, lecturers, administrative staff, student organizations, alumni, employers, and community partners. Through these interactions, students actively integrate their knowledge, skills, experiences, and social relationships to create value not only for themselves but also for the wider university community.

The study also reveals that value co-creation is inherently reciprocal. Universities provide resources, learning opportunities, and institutional support, while students contribute through active participation, knowledge sharing, collaboration, feedback, leadership, and community engagement. Educational value therefore emerges from ongoing interactions rather than being delivered unilaterally by the institution.

Furthermore, institutional context plays an important role in shaping opportunities for value co-creation. Although students from both public and private universities expressed similar motivations to contribute, differences in organizational culture, communication practices, institutional support, and learning environments influenced how students engaged with the university ecosystem.

Overall, the findings contribute to the growing literature on student value co-creation by presenting a broader ecosystem perspective in which educational value is continuously negotiated and co-created through collaborative relationships among multiple actors. This perspective extends existing understandings of student participation beyond classroom engagement and highlights the collective nature of value creation in higher education.

Theoretical Contributions

This study offers several theoretical contributions to the literature on higher education and service management.

First, it extends Service-Dominant Logic by demonstrating that student value co-creation is embedded within a university service ecosystem rather than confined to individual learning activities. Educational value is generated through the integration of resources contributed by multiple stakeholders, supporting the ecosystem perspective proposed in contemporary service research.

Second, the study broadens the conceptualization of student value co-creation by revealing that students associate value co-creation with a wide range of academic, social, professional, and community-oriented

activities. These findings suggest that student value co-creation should be understood as an ongoing process of participation across the entire university experience instead of a collection of isolated classroom behaviors.

Third, by comparing students from public and private universities, the study highlights the importance of institutional context in enabling or constraining value co-creation. This finding enriches existing research by illustrating that organizational conditions shape not only students' opportunities to participate but also the meanings they attach to collaborative educational experiences.

Managerial Implications

The findings provide several implications for university leaders, academic staff, and policymakers seeking to strengthen student engagement through value co-creation.

First, universities should move beyond viewing students as recipients of educational services and instead recognize them as strategic partners in creating educational value. Institutional policies should encourage students to participate in curriculum feedback, academic governance, quality assurance, student-led initiatives, and strategic development activities. Such involvement enhances students' sense of ownership and strengthens their commitment to the university community.

Second, universities should cultivate an ecosystem that facilitates interactions among multiple stakeholders. In addition to strengthening lecturer-student relationships, institutions should create opportunities for collaboration with administrative staff, alumni, employers, professional associations, and community organizations. Experiential learning, internships, service-learning projects, mentoring programs, and interdisciplinary collaborations can provide meaningful platforms for value co-creation beyond traditional classroom settings.

Third, institutional support systems should lower barriers to student participation by promoting open communication, responsive administrative services, transparent feedback mechanisms, and inclusive decision-making processes. Students in the focus groups emphasized that they were more willing to contribute when they perceived that their ideas were acknowledged and could lead to tangible improvements. Universities should therefore establish formal mechanisms through which student contributions are systematically collected, evaluated, and incorporated into institutional practices.

Fourth, universities should foster a culture of collaboration rather than one of passive service delivery. Student organizations, peer mentoring schemes, leadership development programs, volunteer initiatives, innovation competitions, and community engagement activities can encourage students to contribute not only to their own learning but also to the development of their peers and the institution as a whole. Such initiatives reinforce reciprocal relationships that are central to value co-creation within the university ecosystem.

Finally, while both public and private universities can benefit from adopting ecosystem-oriented approaches, institutional strategies should reflect their specific organizational contexts. Public universities may focus on reducing structural barriers that limit student participation, such as large class sizes and complex administrative procedures. Private universities, meanwhile, can build upon their strengths in personalized support and flexible learning environments by further integrating students into institutional innovation and decision-making processes.

Collectively, these managerial implications suggest that sustainable educational quality depends not only on improving teaching and learning but also on creating collaborative ecosystems in which students and other stakeholders jointly participate in the continuous creation of educational value.

Limitations of this study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research adopted a qualitative design based on two focus group discussions involving undergraduate students from one public university and one private university in Vietnam. While this approach generated rich and context-specific insights into students' experiences of value co-creation, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to the broader higher education population. Future studies could employ quantitative methods with larger and more diverse samples to validate and extend the themes identified in this research.

Second, although the study intentionally compared students from public and private universities, it did not include participants from other institutional contexts, such as international universities, vocational institutions, or community colleges. Educational policies, institutional cultures, and learning environments vary considerably across different types of higher education institutions and may influence how students perceive and engage in value co-creation. Comparative studies across a wider range of institutional settings would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the university service ecosystem.

Third, the study focused primarily on students' perspectives. Consistent with the principles of Service-Dominant Logic and Service Ecosystem Theory (Vargo & Lusch, 2012), value co-creation is a collaborative process involving multiple actors, including lecturers, university administrators, professional staff, alumni, employers, and community partners. Future qualitative research could adopt a multi-stakeholder perspective to explore how these actors jointly contribute to value creation and how their interactions shape students' educational experiences.

Finally, this study explored students' perceptions and lived experiences at a particular point in time. Because value co-creation is a dynamic and evolving process, students' experiences may change throughout their academic journey and in response to institutional reforms, digital transformation, or changing societal expectations. Longitudinal qualitative studies or mixed-methods research could provide deeper insights into how student value co-creation develops over time and how universities can continuously strengthen collaborative relationships within the higher education ecosystem.

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