Service-Dominant Logic and Supply Networks: Missed Opportunities for Businesses in Ghana

Mawuko Dza and Abraham A. Mensah

Abstract—Despite the developing body of literature on service dominant logic, the concept seems to have limited exposure, leaving the vast majority, especially academics and practitioners in most developing countries in oblivion. This paper assesses the level of dissemination of service dominant logic in Ghana, and further examines how the logic can be applied to supply networks to improve business processes and performance across the African continent. This empirical qualitative research adopts the constant comparative analytic approach to generate concepts and categories through various stages of coding. The findings revealed that almost all participants sampled have no prior knowledge about the existence of the logic. This notwithstanding, Practitioners based on knowledge acquired during the interview process were optimistic that applying service dominant logic to supply networks can lead to improvements in business performance. The paper thus addresses the deficiency of service dominant logic’s dissemination to academics and practitioners in the Ghanaian context, whilst providing support for its significance in improving performance when applied to supply networks.

Index Terms—Co-Creation, Constant Comparative Analysis, Service-Dominant Logic, Supply Networks.

I. INTRODUCTION

Emanating from the seminal works of [59], service dominant (S-D) logic is perceived as a progressive business concept capable of creating value by transforming business processes and practices to achieve superior performance. Indeed, proponents of S-D logic argue that because firms do not possess all the resources necessary to be productive, there is the need to collaborate with other actors in business engagements to have shared access to resources in order to jointly create value [60]. Thus a fundamental concept of the logic is that value co-created by the firm and suppliers through knowledge sharing and collaboration. Stated differently, value creation results from a reciprocal effort between a firm and its customers [59]. Proponents and researchers of S-D logic argue that supplier firms offer value a proposition to customers, and it is only when the offer is accepted is value co-created. In other words, value is created when a customer interacts with the resources and capabilities provided by the relationship with suppliers and other providers of resources [46]. It is important to understand that the supplier firm is integral to the value creating process where it acts as a facilitator by providing value-supporting resources for customers’ use [26]. For instance, in supply networks, one of the ways that firms can create customer value is by working with suppliers who are perceived to minimise costs and expedite merchandise delivery to reduce customers’ waiting time. The mutual benefits enjoyed by the actors of business engagements make them strive to develop strong relationships with their supply network partners [56].

It is significant to stress that with S-D logic the focus is primarily on operant resources. Operant resources are intangible resources such as knowledge, skills, technology, and competences, capable of acting on tangible resources or even other operant resources to create the required value [13]. Consequently, goods and services become resources through the application of operant resources. Operant resources are often core competences or organisational processes, and because they produce effects, they enhance firms’ ability to multiply the value of natural resources [44]. Indeed, the importance and recognition of operant resources date back to the late twentieth century as humans began to realise that skills and knowledge were the most critical and valuable resources for all economic and social endeavours [13]. It is nevertheless significant to stress that, all resources including tangibles are important to S-D logic, as their eventual function is to deliver service.

Arguably, one of the most researched areas as far as integrating S-D logic into productive activities of economies is supply chain management. However, supply chains have recently received criticisms from some practitioners and researchers for their simplistic view of the supply system and also their inability to incorporate strategically the complexities and inter-organisational relationships that take place among firms [36]. The reality is that, most firms have acknowledged the significance of supply network partnerships and have transitioned from the hierarchical, vertically integrated format of supply chains to a network of partnerships with key stakeholders [8]. The increasing preference for supply networks represents an attempt to make the concept wider and more strategic by harnessing the resource potential of a network in a more effective manner [41]. The network concept is stimulated by changes in global business which have resulted in the internationalisation of sourcing and distribution, partly due to the search for cheap manufacturing labour, the breakdown of trade barriers to create larger economic areas for cooperation, the rationalisation of supply network organisations into global operators offering integrated solutions to their customers, among other factors [49]. These changes have catapulted the integration of supply systems, which have moved competition into a new phase, where systems compete against systems to create efficiency and client value at each point of the system [38]. Consequently, firms are integrating individual operational functions, and externalising the focus of their management of operations beyond the firm’s boundary upstream into their suppliers.

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and suppliers’ suppliers, and downstream into their customers and their customers’ customers [35].

In spite of efforts aimed at disseminating the logic to a global audience, especially academics and practitioners, recent exploratory research suggests that effective dissemination has not occurred. Notwithstanding the numerous publications relating to S-D logic since 2004, many of which discuss the significance of the logic to economic growth and development, the logic does not seem to be well understood by many. This article examines the extent of knowledge of the logic among academics and procurement practitioners in Ghanaian universities and further investigates the impact of integrating the logic into supply networks on business performance.

II. SERVICE DOMINANT LOGIC

Service refers to the application of knowledge, skills, and information, through deeds, processes, and performance for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself [42]. Service thus involves at least two entities, one applying the competences and another integrating the applied competences with other resources and determining the benefits [53]. With S-D logic, service is regarded as a means to an end, and also a perspective of value creation [58]. Service depends on division of labor and effective co-creation of value leading to complementary specialisation of comparative advantage among participants [50]. To render a service that creates value for customers require efficient resource deployment by customers [29]. Partners to a business engagement whether customers, suppliers, providers, and other stakeholders anticipate that service would achieve the expected value for their businesses. Hence, the goal of business is reciprocal value creation, with service as an integral factor in this process [27]. The supplier, a principal actor in the value creation process acts as a facilitator by providing value-supporting resources for customers’ use [26].

S-D logic perceives firms as being involved in their customers’ value generating processes, thereby increasing co-operation and better operational efficiency among partners [24]. The logic allows all actors to integrate their resources for their own benefit and for the benefit of others in a service-for-service exchange [60]. Here, value is not created by the firm or provider, but rather created in the customers’ value-generating processes of accepting and using the firm’s offerings. Indeed, what the supplier or firm does is to develop a value proposition, and if the customer accepts the value proposition during consumption as their value foundation, they add their own skills and other operant resources needed for the value-generating process in order to achieve value fulfillment in the form of value-in-use [25]. Thus the customer not only determines value [58], but also co-creates value with the firm [26]. S-D logic supports the value-in-use concept and stresses that a service cannot be of value if customers fail to accept and use the offerings of service providers [42].

The logic also acknowledges the significance of value-in-exchange for firms’ survival and growth, but focuses more on value-in-use, as it gives special recognition and obtains key insights by examining the value that users obtain from the experience of using a business offering and integrating it with other resources [46]. It is impossible for value-in-use to exist without value-in-exchange [42] because in the process of co-creating, value is driven by value-in-use, but mediated and monitored by value-in-exchange [61]. With value-in-use, S-D logic argues that knowledge is ubiquitous in the market and is generated by all participants. Thus when value creation is seen from a service perspective, the producer-consumer distinction disappears and all participants contribute to the creation of value for themselves and for others [61]. It is therefore imperative that firms ensure that their value proposition is appealing to all stakeholders who must see the potential value for themselves in value propositions being realised and their role in value co-creation with customers. It is also the firm’s responsibility to assure that the firm’s value proposition is communicated to, and understood by the entire network of stakeholders [46].

Researchers in S-D logic have long argued that in order to be successful, businesses must embrace the logic and agree to move their unit of analysis from products to value creation, whilst understanding that the essential drivers for value creation are operant resources [58]. This view is grounded in, and largely consistent with, the resource advantage theory [12]. The resource-based view (RBV) provides theoretical support for the significance of collaborations as a solution to exploit complementary capabilities to achieve competitive advantage [5]. The RBV further suggests that firms seek to develop a competitive advantage through building relationships with other firms, having a sound understanding of what the partner firm can bring to the collaboration [64]. To gain and sustain competitive advantage, a firm must control valuable and rare resources and capabilities that are not easily substitutable. These resources and capabilities can be tangible and intangible assets, including a firm’s management skills, its organisational processes, and the information and knowledge it controls [4].

III. SUPPLY NETWORKS

Traditionally, supply networks have been characterised by arms-length, even adversarial relationships between different actors. The practice of sharing information, either with suppliers or customers was minimal. However, more recently there has been encouraging signs of a greater willingness to work in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration in many supply networks. Getting the right product, at the right price, at the right time to the consumer is not only a requirement for competitive success but also the key to organisation survival and growth [9]. This development is essential because research shows that an important requirement for improved supply network performance is an understanding of the network that connects the business to its upstream suppliers and their suppliers, and to its downstream customers and their customers [10]. A growing body of research in the study of relationships affirms that there are opportunities for mutual advantage if information is shared between parties of a business engagement [18]. Indeed, supply network literature stresses the increasing importance of measuring and
monitoring performance within relationships because of the increased dependency between parties to business engagements [17].

Supply networks denote series of relationships between partners based on value creation exchanges of information [7]. The nature and composition of supply networks require effective comprehension of how the various levels function and this can be done through effective relationship building with suppliers, customers, partners, and other stakeholders. Proper management of supply network interfaces that connect the individual actors and exchange, and leverage knowledge across the network is essential, because the strength of the relationships at the interfaces can become the basis for building organisational reputation and creating an environment more conducive for co-operation and knowledge sharing [11]. The idea that knowledge can be gained through closer relationships with stakeholders is now widely accepted [6] and organisations are increasingly exploiting the benefits of inter-organisational knowledge sharing in order to optimise performance [2].

Researchers of inter-organisational business networks describe network organisations as autonomous organisations with high degrees of interdependence and co-operation [40]. The bond among these autonomous organisations lies between resources and activities, which identify them as a network [40]. It is important for firms to realise that, whereas tangible assets such as raw materials are relatively easy to access, to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, firms must focus on those assets that are rare, durable, not easily traded, and difficult to imitate [39]. As each partner’s success is tied to the success of the overall network, firms as much as possible pursue common goals. It is also significant that firms within a network understand the processes involved in establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relationships with all their exchange partners [37]. Subsequently, the network perspective has begun to replace the dyadic and chain perspectives because interactivity [30] has taken hold of the hitherto unidirectional flow models, and relationships are developing as a super-ordinate concept of a model of one entity acting on the other [57].

IV. SERVICE DOMINANT LOGIC AND SUPPLY NETWORKS

S-D logic has similarities in terms of business processes and relational exchanges with supply networks. A significant attribute of the logic is its focus on information dissemination and sharing among stakeholders of a business process. Information sharing and feedback from partners has become a crucial component and essential resource in managing business processes as any misleading or adulterated information given to a partner or client could have devastating consequences on firms’ operations [42]. It is widely accepted by practitioners and the research community that, economic growth has in part been driven by the growth in knowledge and a reliable information flow [48]. It is therefore imperative for businesses to integrate their information systems with customers, suppliers and partners in order to access timely and reliable information so as to attain operational efficiency [31].

A crucial determinant of the customer’s ability to create value is the amount of accurate information and other operant resources that they can access and use [50]. Through direct and indirect feedback, customers influence the development and modification of products and services offered by suppliers, and influence product and service design [20]. S-D logic also stresses the need for efficient and unbiased intra and inter-organisational communication. These communications should include not only customers, but also all stakeholders who may be affected by service exchange [43]. In addition, the logic supports effective coordination and relationship building, stressing that the competitive advantage of firms is dependent on the network of relationships in which they are embedded [16]. Firms guided by S-D logic cannot be indifferent to customers or society because both parties must collaborate in order to co-create value. A relational approach to business makes it possible for partners to learn from each other’s experiences, build rapport, boosts communication between partners, and facilitates the identification of new collaboration opportunities [3].

V. SUPPLY NETWORKS AND BUSINESS PROCESSES

Supply networks are nested within wider inter-organisational networks and consist of inter-connected entities whose main purpose is the procurement, use and transformation of resources to provide packages of goods and services [34]. The conduct and performance of supply firms can fully be understood by examining the network of relationships in which they are embedded [28]. As networks potentially provide the firm with access to information, resources, markets, and technologies, relationship building may not only be the most important resource to the firm [21], but also the source of a sustainable competitive advantage that may lead to business success (But and Purchase, 2004).

Networks have risen to prominence due to a number of factors such as, industrial restructuring, large-scale downsizing, vertical disaggregation and outsourcing, and management layers being replaced with leaner, more flexible firms focused on core technology and processes. Firms are closely aligned in a network of strategic alliances and partnerships with customers, suppliers, distributors and competitors [1]. As business networks are being formed around knowledge bases, the maximisation of knowledge is obtained through network collaboration rather than individual business units. Such knowledge-driven networks rely on external actors to acquire the desired resources for the firm to grow and increase profitability [51]. The challenge of supply networks is one of coordination [32], which is further compounded by increasing complexity and dynamic supply networks [34]. The ability to efficiently and effectively coordinate activities within supply networks would greatly enhance a firm’s performance and success. To reduce cost, increase efficiency and improve flexibility in supply networks, it is necessary to improve coordination of flow of goods and information across intra and inter-organisational boundaries. Accurate and timely information sharing among network partners is crucial as the quality of coordination processes is highly dependent on the visibility and accuracy of all information needed [32]. The firm
categories, properties, and generative questions that evolved from the analytical process. To uphold the confidentiality of participants’, pseudonyms of ‘PP1’ to ‘PP25’ were used to identify procurement practitioners, whilst academics were identified by ‘AC1’ to ‘AC60’.

VI. METHOD

Data were collected through open-ended interviews and observations on academics and procurement practitioners of public and private universities across Ghana, and analysed within 24 hours whenever possible. All interviews were audiotape recorded under the express consent of participants. Identified concepts were built into composite concepts through constant comparative analysis [54; 55]. Selective coding was then used to build composite concepts into categories of description or themes. As in qualitative approaches, the multiple data sources for this research led to data triangulation that has addressed the potential problem of trustworthiness of research findings [63].

A. Sample and analysis

Data collection was done in two folds – 25 procurement practitioners, and 60 academics from 25 public and private Ghanaian universities purposively selected. Participating universities were selected on the premise that they had functional procurement departments. In selecting procurement practitioners, snowball or chain sampling approach was used to identify cases of interest from participants who knew other people who could provide rich information on the subject under investigation [14]. In relation to academics, selection was random and based on availability and willingness to be engaged during interview sessions. Data collection and analysis were done concurrently. This approach was significant as it informed the next interview and facilitated constant comparison of concepts [54]. The constant comparative approach also enabled interview texts to be analysed line-by-line, provisional themes noted; and subsequently compared with other transcripts in order to ensure consistency and identify negative cases [22]. Then emerging concepts were used to classify the data separately and connections made between these concepts providing the basis for a fresh description [15]. After the conceptualisation phase, concepts that pertained to the same phenomenon were grouped together to form categories. Memos were used to keep track of all the categories, properties, and generative questions that evolved from its significance, and of course assess its usefulness to economic development.

When asked about his opinion as to whether knowledge of and application of S-D logic to productive activities could improve performance, AC5 affirms:

`Sorry, but how can I tell? I’m hearing of this concept for the first time through your interview. I’m yet to fully digest what the concept stands for, and until I do, I don’t think it’ll be intellectually right to comment on its application to other sectors. I hope you do understand.``

Reacting to the same set of questions, PP 21 points out:

`I’ve never heard of S-D logic. You know if this concept proves as good as you explained, it might take another century for it to be introduced to Africa. This is how it has always been. They just don’t want us to catch up with them. They always try to hide their research breakthroughs, when we willingly share whatever we discover with the rest of the world. The concept seems fascinating so I’ll certainly explore and find out what the logic has in store for businesses. For now, I can’t comment on how its applicability can affect businesses.``

Another academic AC46 reacting to the questions indicates:

`S-D logic? I’ve an MBA in Marketing and a member of the Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply (CIPS) UK, and as far as I’m concerned, I read widely. How come I’ve not come across your so-called logic if it has been in existence for more than a decade now as you’re claiming? Mind you we’re proud intellectuals and very much in-tune with what goes on in our professions thanks to the Internet. I think whoever the proponents are, there’s a need for strategy change, as the current strategy evidently is not yielding any results. Of course I’m hungry for knowledge but how can I access something I completely have no idea about its existence?``

AC11 intimates:

`I’ve no idea. Are you surprised? Look my brother; marketing is a very vast field of study with options for specialisation. Mind you I’ve lots of journal article publications in both local and international journals to my...`
credit, so I’m aware of what happens in the marketing world. However, I should say if publications on S-D logic started in 2004, then probably either it is not a fascinating area or I didn’t just do enough to acquaint myself with new developments in the field of marketing. I’ll surely want to learn more about this logic.

One thing was however certain. Almost all participants expressed their utmost desire to learn more about S-D logic and how it could enhance efficiency and improve business performance.

There was equally an overwhelming lack of knowledge about S-D logic by procurement practitioners. However, practitioners showed varying degrees of idea about the possibility of applying the logic to supply networks. Practitioners noted that per the little insights offered through the interviews, they could deduce that relational exchanges and the recognition that value is a reciprocal effort between customers and stakeholders, would not only enhance efficiency, but improve quality as well. They further explained that quality in areas of delivery times; product specification, sourcing, and distribution, among others could be improved as all stakeholders become responsible for the eventual outcome of products or services.

PP8 explains:

besides the ‘service’ aspect of the logic which is a bit confusing, one could say the logic is almost synonymous to supply networks. What it means is that if the aspect of ‘service’ and value ‘co-creation’ is applied to supply networks, it could yield good results. There is the need for me to properly and adequately understand this concept in order to appreciate the technicalities so as to be able to make informed judgment about its applicability to supply networks. For now, my conclusions are solely based on information you’ve provided me.

PP17 responding to the same issue stresses:

You see, I think the main point here is collaboration. If organisations or firms collaborate with their networked partners, they are able to share accurate and timely information for their mutual benefits. Again when both the supplier firm and customers understand that value creation comes about through joint effort, there’ll be less antagonism because effective relationships have to be built and developed to ensure equity and respect for one another. This is my understanding of how S-D logic can lead to improvements in performance when applied to supply networks.

Evidently, some practitioners accept the proposition that applying S-D logic to supply network activities could improve organisations’ processes and performance. PP21 supports earlier participants’ position indicating:

It is important that organisations foster close relationships with their suppliers because it gives them the opportunity to source for information. In the same way, suppliers must be given information by organisations they deal with in order to be able to meet their delivery and supply requirements. This implies that it takes the firm or organisation and suppliers to combine resources in order to co-create value. It is obvious that organisations independently cannot create value, likewise suppliers alone.

It is significant to acknowledge that the practitioner does not only support the idea of value co-creation, but essentially understands the significance of the concept in addressing improvements in performance.

Two practitioners expressed doubt about the logic’s applicability not only to supply networks, but also to other fields of endeavours. They argue that the world is naturally moving from transactional to relational exchanges, and that all economies need not classify themselves as service economies to experience growth. PP3 angrily yells:

What’s all this nonsense about? How can one say all economies are service economies, and that goods are mere distribution mechanisms for service provisions? How on earth can you say firms and companies don’t produce or create value alone? Who produces value then? This is inconceivable.

VIII. DISSEMINATION OF S-D LOGIC

Analysing participants’ responses about their knowledge of S-D logic in Ghana led to intriguing results. All 85 participants working either in private or public universities either as academics or procurement practitioners indicated that they had no knowledge of S-D logic. Arguably, S-D logic may not be a fascinating research area for many researchers, academics, and practitioners; nevertheless, it will not be out of place for one to express some level of disbelief and reservation especially when entire research communities have absolutely no idea about the concept in spite of the numerous journal and conference publications on the subject. If researchers and proponents of the logic perceive it as important in transforming modern business processes, then certainly either there is something wrong with the strategy of dissemination or perhaps participants are not information ‘hungry’ enough to strive to break new grounds in modern research. With Internet access in all academic institutions, one wonders why a concept that has received much publicity on the international stage and in international journals, conferences and symposiums is yet to catch up with academics and practitioners in most developing countries. Perhaps, there is a need for strategy change and a paradigm shift from the current mode of disseminating. Indeed, just as researchers and practitioners in developed economies are offered research platforms through the organisation of conferences, workshops, symposiums, or seminars where the concept of S-D logic is the focus of discussion, similar events could be organised for developing countries. With all the important contributions the application of S-D logic is purported to make on economies, the least that can be done for developing countries will be to make the logic readily available and accessible to all.

A. Integrating S-D logic into supply networks

Most of the research participants saw similarities between S-D logic and supply networks. Practitioners agreed that based on information obtained from the author about S-D logic, the concept could be successfully applied to supply networks to improve business efficiency and enhance profitability. The significance of S-D logic can only come to fruition when the logic becomes widespread and available to researchers and practitioners. Efficient relational management and understanding that value is a co-creation
between actors in business will encourage cooperation, collaboration, and integration of activities to improve productivity and business processes. The notion that businesses operate as network organisations based on their competitive advantage will enhance knowledge sharing among business networks. However, with the majority oblivious of the logic, it becomes increasingly difficult to make reliable and informed judgment about contributions the logic can make towards the improving the socio-economic wellbeing of people. Modern competition is based on the value proposals co-created by the entire network, from raw material extractors to end-users, through dynamic, multi-party dialogue, knowledge exchange, and utilisation of operant resources. Networks that provide end-users with better service experiences gain perceptions of higher value-in-use, which in turn result in higher levels of collaborative value-creation behaviours from end-users such as loyalty, and further dialogue with network members [56]. Collaboration addresses joint opportunity or problem recognition and solution development [19]. Superior value propositions emerge from a deep understanding of customers as well as supply network capabilities, resources and constraints [19]. For instance, in supply networks, one of the ways that firms can create customer value is by working with suppliers to minimise costs and expedite merchandise delivery to reduce customer wait time. The mutual benefits enjoyed by the actors of business engagements make them strive to develop strong relationships with their supply network partners [56].

B. Improving organisation business performance with s-d logic

There is little doubt that integrating S-D logic into supply networks can change the way business is done in most developing countries. Efficient relational management and understanding that value is a co-creation between actors in business engagements would encourage cooperation, collaboration, and integration of resources to improve productivity and business processes. The notion that businesses operate as network organisations based on their competitive advantage would enhance knowledge sharing among actors in business engagements. With S-D logic, a firm’s competence in developing collaborative service based relationships is a key resource in attaining a sustainable competitive advantage [47]. The logic suggests that value cannot be embedded in either the factory or the distribution process; rather, it is co-created with customers [42]. Value is co-created when customers and suppliers engage in dialog and interaction during product design, production, delivery, and consumption. Thus value is defined and co-created by customers rather than being embedded in the outputs of suppliers [62]. To engage customers in co-creation, supplier firms must plan and implement relationship experiences for customers that encourage active engagement of customers in designing goods and services. The design of relationship experience includes determining time commitment and resource requirements to generate opportunities for value co-creation [52].

IX. CONCLUSION

Significantly, very little has been done in most developing to bring S-D logic to the limelight. This could be attributed to the over concentration of the logic’s programs in few developed countries. Ironically, most of the countries who host S-D logic conferences, symposiums, workshops, and seminars, are countries that are already conversant with the concepts. Hosting these conferences in those countries could best be described as duplication of efforts as the same issues are discussed. A wider audience for S-D logic could be achieved by examining the current dissemination strategy, towards one that is all embracing. If the eventual goal of S-D logic is to attain a theory status, then it should be made known to the wider intellectual and practitioner communities instead of the current selective dissemination strategy being adopted. In relation to the impact of applying S-D logic to supply networks on performance, practitioners even with rudimentary knowledge about the logic indicated that the application of the logic could lead to improvements in performance of businesses. These improvements, practitioners explain results from resource sharing among networked partners. Besides producing quality goods and services, researchers of the logic argue that because firms do not possess all the resources necessary to be productive, there is the need to collaborate with a network of partners in order to have shared access to resources to jointly create value [60].

X. FURTHER RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Further research could extend the horizon to cover industry actors and other government establishments as well. The authors acknowledge the limitation of generalisability associated with qualitative research and that of geographical boundary of the study, while arguing that these do not diminish the significance of the findings.

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