

## A Systemic Perspective on Captive Services

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### Abstract

*Service captivity—a customer’s perception of lack of choice, voice, and power during service provision—has been addressed in service literature both as an experience and from a dyadic perspective. However, every service interaction today is embedded within a service ecosystem. Hence, the goal of this paper is to develop a systemic conceptualization of captive services (i.e., those services that typically generate the experiences of service captivity). Through a theory adaptation approach, we develop six propositions that start delineating the conceptual domain of captive services.*

**Keywords:** Service captivity; service ecosystems; captive services

### 1. Introduction

While most of the service literature addresses customers who seek to satisfy their needs or obtain positive experiences, recent literature has begun to recognize the idea that not all customers are willing customers by their own choice (Guillemot et al., 2022). Service captivity – a customer’s perception of lack of choice, voice, and power – is a pervasive phenomenon today (Rayburn et al., 2020). Examples of service captivity include the experiences of drug addicts going to a clinic against their will, parents whose child is removed from their home by social services without their consent, terminally ill wishing for euthanasia but receiving life-saving medical support, or homeowners who receive and pay for new public services against their will. While each example has distinct characteristics, they share an important commonality: a customer is nested in a service ecosystem with benefits and responsibilities against their free will, impacting their well-being and possibly that of their loved ones.

Service captivity can emerge due to constraints such as geographical location, regulations, market conditions, or resource dependency (Barnes, 1994; Rayburn et al., 2023; Guillemot et al., 2022). Research on service captivity has focused, for example, on types of service captivity (Rayburn et al., 2020), public services leading to service captivity (Jung, 2010), service captivity in healthcare (Wilson-Nash, 2021; Rayburn et al. 2024), and the negative effects of captivity for individual customers (Rayburn, 2015).

Despite increasing research, service captivity has been conceptualized as an experience; captive services (i.e., those services that typically generate the experiences of service captivity) have received less attention. By focusing on service captivity as an experience, service research has mainly adopted a dyadic perspective that focuses on the experience of focal customers in response to the interactions with a service provider (Rayburn, 2015; Rayburn et al., 2020; 2023). In dyads, the responsibilities and rights are defined in provider-customer contracts, although laws and regulations are often needed particularly in the case of monopolistic or oligopolistic market relations. However, customers are often nested in systems that influence their experiences (Lipkin & Heinonen, 2022), with several actors involved. As a consequence, a systemic perspective on service captivity has been called for (Furrer et al., 2021). In many cases, the service systems are complex, with multiple actors, actor-to-actor interactions, and interdependencies and collaborations between actors (Pinho et al. 2014). This means that also actor roles become more complex, and responsibilities are dispersed across them. This may result in difficulties in determining who in fact is the party captive of the service, and how the tensions related to captivity can be alleviated.

A systemic perspective zooms out beyond the focal actor or dyadic relationships experiencing captivity to service ecosystems as the unit of analysis (Vargo &

Akaka, 2009; Vargo et al 2008). It follows that such a perspective focuses on consequences not only for the individual customer but also for individual and collective generic actors (e.g., the family, the city, etc.). Moreover, a systemic perspective can shed light onto the value tensions value between these actors by explaining conflicts, collaboration, and reconciliations through the role of institutions (Vargo & Lusch, 2016; 2017).

Given this background, the aim of this paper is to develop a systemic conceptualization of captive services. We will achieve the aim through a conceptual, theory adaptation approach (Jaakkola, 2020) using a systemic theoretical foundation (e.g., Vargo & Akaka, 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2016; 2017) combined with empirical illustrations to develop a set of propositions that contribute to the understanding of service captivity and the captive service research domain in service research.

## 2. Service captivity

Service captivity refers to a customer's experience of lack of choice, voice, and power in a service relationship (Rayburn, 2015; Rayburn et al., 2020). In service literature, service captivity is conceptualized as an experience, meaning that the perception of captivity characterizes this concept (Rayburn, 2015).

There are diverse types of service captivity. Service captivity can range from perceived limited to severe constraints of choice, voice, and power (Rayburn, 2015) and vary in diverse dimensions (e.g., temporality, nature of interaction, and captivity source) (Rayburn et al., 2020). Rayburn et al. (2020) identified eight service captivity archetypes (e.g., monopoly, legal, and social). In consumer research, Fournier (1998) also identified types of brand relationships that can be characterized as service captivity (e.g., arranged marriages and enslavements). Service captivity is then a multidimensional and encompassing concept.

Service captivity occurs as a result of different reasons, mainly due to the power imbalances between a service provider that has control over resources and a customer who strongly needs these resources (Rayburn, 2015; Rayburn et al., 2020). These can manifest in, for example, high switching costs and barriers (Rayburn et al., 2020) and limited or no competitors in the market (Rayburn et al., 2020).

By focusing on the effects of service captivity for an individual customer, the service literature has mainly addressed negative consequences for them. Examples of those are negative emotional consequences (e.g., feeling judged and shamed), lack of hope, feeling trapped, and even potential customer vulnerability (Rayburn, 2015; Rayburn et al., 2020).

Overall, this research domain has focused on the service captivity as an experience for an individual customer through a dyadic lens. Research about captive services in the context of service ecosystems is missing (see Furrer et al., 2021). In the next section, we present cases that illustrate the inadequacy of focusing only on service captivity without a systemic perspective.

## 3. Illustrations

### 3.1. The Case of Involuntary Treatment for Addicts

Recovering alcoholics and drug addicts can be admitted in clinics and recovery programs against their will. Anthony, a recovering alcoholic with several years of sobriety, was admitted to a clinic against his will more than once. When recounting his experiences at the clinic, he tells that when his wife tricked him into an ambulance that took him to the clinic, he felt very hurt. He cried, he screamed, and he thought about running away. At the clinic, he thought that his wife would leave him there forever, he suffered abstinence effects such as hallucinations, and he just wanted to run away. And so he did and relapsed immediately.

The traditional view of service captivity in the literature fits Anthony's experience well. Anthony felt he had no choice, no voice, and no power over the situation. This led to negative experiences for him. Furthermore, the service did not immediately result in the desired outcome, as he immediately relapsed when he ran away. After many years of recovery, Anthony said that his time in the clinic was actually helpful for his recovery, as they planted the seed of hope in him when listening to other recovering alcoholics who were able to stop drinking. When looking from a dyadic perspective, thus, this would represent an instance of later recognized as positive.

The traditional perspective on service captivity misses the complexities that emerge when looking beyond the dyad, however. Alcoholism and other addictions are diseases that do not affect only the recovering addict but also their families (e.g., money, abuse, betrayal), their coworkers (e.g., missing work, working while drunk), and even society in general through public expenditures (e.g., in healthcare, in road accidents). Therefore, one needs to look at the addict's surrounding actors and systems.

While there are debates about the effectiveness of involuntary treatment, a systematic literature review concluded that there is not significant evidence of improved outcomes, with two studies even suggesting negative outcomes (Werb et al., 2016). Still, addicts' relatives, service providers, policy makers, and large part of society see these captive services as necessary

and effective (e.g., Mindock et al., 2012; Moore, 2024). A systemic perspective then reveals tensions between the addict (who experience negative consequences), wider systems (who believe in positive consequences), and these wider systems in the long-term (with no improved outcomes or potentially negative ones).

### 3.2. The Case of Social Services

In social services, ample evidence exists on service captivity as a systemic phenomenon beyond the provider-customer dyad. Prominent examples are substitute care and, in extreme cases, removing the child from their home due to behavioral challenges such as aggression, substance abuse, dropping out of school, or because the parents are unable to provide a safe environment. In such cases, the child is physically removed from the parents and placed in a child care facility or foster family, making the child become physically captive. The parents also become captive by default, as they must collaborate with child welfare services, foster parents/facilities, and other involved parties, effectively becoming co-customers in the process. The decision of care arrangement is made by a social worker if the family agrees or by the administrative court if the family opposes.

(<https://www.lastensuojelu.info/en/child-welfare-services/substitute-care/>)

Placing children outside of the home aims to provide them with a safe environment for their growth and development. Lauri, 12, has been placed five times unsuccessfully. The Finnish ombudsman for children, Elina Pekkarinen, has called such serial placements as counterproductive, and essentially representing “structural violence against children and adolescents”. In the case of placement outside of the home, neither the child nor their parents have choice, voice, or power, as the decisions are made within the system, by a case worker. In Lauri’s case, his single mother could no longer cope with Lauri’s aggressive outbursts, and she agreed that placement would be a good solution. The first and the second foster placement ended because the families could not cope with Lauri’s aggressive outbursts. The third placement, in a unit for disabled children, also ended for similar reasons. The fourth placement unit had to be closed due to problems in service quality (e.g. lack of personnel and physical abuse among children). Lauri’s mother explains that due to these shortcomings in service provision, she had wished that her son would not be placed in another unit of the same service provider. Despite her wishes, the municipality chose to do so. This placement also ended when the facility stated that they could not meet Lauri’s needs. Lauri’s mother feels devastated by this decision, as it suggests that even professionals are unable to

manage Lauri’s situation. Lauri is now moving to a new facility in a different area, which requires Lauri’s mother to relocate. This situation illustrates how systemic decisions influence multiple actors with interconnected needs, thereby contributing to a perception of being captive. (<https://yle.fi/a/3-12195095>)

Another case illustrating systemic captivity is that of 17-year-old Hans, who lives in a private child caring institution due to severe ADHD and consequent skipping school. Hans’s mother, Minna, tells how she was afraid that if she did not agree to Hans being placed in care, there would be no support available in the future. Despite being told that, if Hans attends school, he may return home immediately, this has not occurred. Hans has been in care for two years. Recently new challenges have emerged. Hans has been prohibited from moving back to his home city for the summer to get a summer job (which is difficult in the small city where the institution is located). The reason for denying the summer holiday is, according to the social services and the institution, “maintaining a balanced everyday life” for Hans. The mother suspects that the underlying reason for denying the summer leave is that the private institution where Hans is placed would lose the full monthly fee if the child is away for more than two weeks (the daily fee being 344 euros, this would result in substantial losses). In Hans’s case, both Hans and his mother are powerless and unable to escape the service captivity temporarily as the social services have decided the maximum length for his leave. (<https://yle.fi/a/74-20083009>). At the same time, municipalities who are bound by law to arrange care places for the children are dependent on private actors’ willingness to arrange care, which may influence decisions; therefore, they are dependent on collaboration of several actors beyond the dyad. It is also generally known that case workers’ workload is too high, and ending service relationships would burden them further. Nevertheless, Hans’s mother is happy that Hans is attending school that is going well, showcasing that placement, while detrimental to the family, is beneficial for Hans in terms of education.

### 3.3. The Case of Prisons

In most countries, places of confinement, such as prisons, are used to incarcerate individuals convicted of crimes considered severe by the legal system. While facilities and processes of imprisonment differ largely between systems, all prisons share the common goal of temporarily restricting the mobility of prisoners. Arguably, the primary value proposition of any prison is targeted at the public or the victim, rather than addressing the needs or interests of the prisoners

themselves. However, when assessing e.g., the U.S. Department of Justice goal declaration for U.S. correctional services, this conjunction becomes less clear. Next to goals that promise improvements to the wider public (i.e., increased safety through deterrence and incapacitation) and alleged justice (i.e. through retribution), it contains the goal of rehabilitating the prisoner. The latter is thus interesting because it directly aims at improving the functional capacity of the convicted, who, provided that the goal is attained, becomes a benefactor of imprisonment.

Drawing a scenario in which all four goals are met presents a situation that cannot be explained by the traditional view on service captivity. Prisoners are central actors in a service interaction with no choice, voice, or power to end the relationship with the prison provider. Also, the providers' value proposition cannot be fulfilled without maintaining captivity over the prisoner. And yet, the prisoner can build valuable relationships with the captive service provider, possibly resulting in positive outcomes for the focal actor and wider ecosystem.

Moreover, the value formed in captivity emerges neither in isolation nor in a transactional or even dyadic manner. The social circles such as friends and family outside and inside the prison exert great influence on the perceived success of imprisonment. Neither the service provider nor the public receiving the service can be reduced to one entity. In many cases, the service provider consists of a system covering a wide range of social, medical, correctional, and economic actors. Likewise, societal compositions exhibit immense complexity, for example when comparing the victim's perception of the prisons' success with the perception of other interest groups. Finally, news cases show that the declared goal of rehabilitation is largely dependent on society's ability to integrate ex-prisoners into the routines of their functioning. The prison's success can consequently only be successful when the key actors such as prison and prisoner are nested in a working system.

Current literature on service captivity distinguishes between contextual and experienced captivity. The illustrative case of prison services and their confinement shows that captivity can be both contextual, and experienced, and yet foster sustainable value to all parties involved. To better understand this contradiction, a systemic view is needed. Applying a systemic view ultimately means zooming out from the dyad and investigating the roles of other actors and their influence on the phenomenon. Not only can this serve as a more nuanced understanding of different levels of aggregation, but also highlights the consequences of captive services that reach beyond the relationship of prison and prisoner. Lastly, without the perspective of a

system, it remains largely unclear who the confinement serves, who is integrating resources how, and what the emergent value is to whom.

As these illustrations show, service captivity as an experience is not enough to address the complexities of this phenomenon. For this reason, we use a service ecosystems perspective to conceptualize captive services. Building on the conceptual theory adaptation approach (Jaakkola, 2020) we expand the domain of service captivity in service research (e.g., Rayburn et al., 2020) by incorporating insights from the service ecosystems literature (e.g., Vargo & Lusch, 2011; 2016; 2017). Next, we present the method theory we use to develop propositions.

#### **4. Service Systems Perspective**

Historically, scholars have adopted a dyadic perspective to service research (Siltaloppi & Vargo, 2017). However, service research increasingly adopts a systemic perspective to understand diverse phenomena (e.g., Vargo & Lusch, 2011; 2016; 2017) such as customer experience (Akaka et al., 2015), actor engagement (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014), and innovation (Chandler et al., 2019). We argue that a systemic perspective can also advance the conceptualization of captive services in several ways.

First, a systemic perspective can expand the unit of analysis from a focal customer or the dyad between service provider and customer to include the service system surrounding this dyad. Service captivity literature has studied service captivity mainly from the individual customers' perspectives. A systemic perspective argues for the broadening of the unit of analysis from individual actors and dyads to service systems (Vargo & Akaka, 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2014). This is because value creation happens in service ecosystems whereas actors integrate resources from their context and networks (Vargo & Lusch, 2006; 2008). Service ecosystems can be defined as "a relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange" (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, pp. 10-11). Service ecosystems focus on interactions between actors and their environments as well as the flow of service provision among different actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), allowing one to understand the same phenomena from micro, meso, and macro levels of aggregation (Vargo & Lusch, 2017).

Second, a systemic perspective can enrich the understanding of captive services by focusing on consequences beyond the individual customer. The service captivity literature has focused mainly on negative consequences to individual customers or, in

other words, the value individual customers experience (Rayburn et al., 2020). In the systemic perspective, value refers to “an emergent, positively or negatively valanced change in the well-being or viability of a particular system/actor” (Akaka et al., 2021, p. 381). This perspective adopts an actor-to-actor conceptualization (Vargo & Lusch, 2011) in which generic actors can be individual and/or collective, such as teams, firms, networks, and nations (Becker et al., 2023; Vargo & Lusch, 2011). Therefore, value should also be considered for broader service systems (e.g., society in which the individual customer is embedded).

Third, a systemic perspective can enrich the understanding of captive services by clarifying how value tensions between individual customers and broader systems can be reconciled. When considering value from a broader system perspective, tensions are likely to arise, as individual customers may experience negative consequences while captive services facilitate value for other actors. A systemic perspective encompasses the conflicts, cooperation, and reconciliation in service ecosystems through the role of institutions (Vargo & Lusch, 2016; 2017). Institutions refer to “humanly devised coordinating mechanisms, such as rules, norms, symbols, etc., that enable and constrain value-cocreating actions” (Akaka et al., 2021, p. 381).

## 5. Conceptualizing Captive Services from a Systemic Perspective

While a systemic perspective expands the unit of analysis from a dyad to a broader system, it also demonstrates that captive services can offer value not only to the focal customer or individual, but also to other actors and systems, as exemplified by the case of prisons. A captive service has a value proposition to a focal individual at the micro level (e.g., who can benefit from the service in the long-term), to their surrounding actors at the meso level (e.g., that the relatives of recovering alcoholics know they are taken care of), and, at a macro level, a city or a country (e.g., that rehabilitation of prisoners will reduce crime).

*P1: Captive services can propose value to different actors at micro, meso, and macro levels of service systems.*

However, captive services can offer services that are experienced as negative or positive, effective or not. Within a systemic view, captive services can facilitate value, such as when they help prisoners in their rehabilitation or provide a safer home to a child, or they can contribute to negative value construction, such as when involuntary treatment has adverse effects.

*P2: Captive services can facilitate negative or positive value creation to different actors at micro, meso, and macro levels of service system.*

A systemic perspective also reveals the tensions that might emerge between actors in a service system. A focal customer is likely to have negative experiences while captive, while their captivity might benefit other actors in a given service system. For example, a prisoner likely prefers their freedom, while relatives of someone murdered feel relief that punishment is served. A recovering alcoholic might experience that involuntary treatment was beneficial because it planted the seed for their recovery but might fail to recognize that an alternative course of treatment might have been more effective sooner, thus avoiding suffering for his family. Therefore, the provision of captive services is likely to result in tensions between several actors in a service ecosystem.

Moreover, beyond tensions among actors, the same actor might experience value co-creation that is positive at some point and negative at another, such as the case of Anthony who experienced service captivity at its fullest while at the involuntary clinic, but now attributes his sobriety, at least in part, to being in the clinic.

*P3: The provision of captive services results in tensions in value experienced within and among actors at micro, meso, and macro levels of a service ecosystem.*

This tension derives, at least partially, from different institutional logics guiding different actors. An actor, whether an individual or a political party, might be driven by a belief that crimes should be severely punished (i.e., viewing prison as punishment), while another might focus on rehabilitating prisoners to reintegrate them into society (i.e., viewing prison as rehabilitation). This leads to different types of captive service provision and different experienced value.

*P4: Tensions resulting from the provision of captive services derive from institutional complexity.*

When expanding the unit of analysis beyond the dyad, this should also be applied to the service provider side. An effective captive service can be defined as one that successfully delivers its value propositions to multiple actors within a service ecosystem, including the focal customer. As the illustrations show, fulfilling its promise and avoiding additional negative value creation requires considering serial service provision. For example, Lauri’s repeated placements in foster homes illustrates this need. Similarly, involuntary addiction treatments are unlikely to be effective without

continuous support such as participation in a self-help group.

*P5: Collaboration through the serial provision of captive services is essential for these services to fulfill their value propositions.*

Beyond considering multiple service providers over time, one should recognize that customers integrate resources from multiple actors in their context to co-create value (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Our illustrations and a systemic perspective show that fulfilling the value proposition requires that the focal customers also rely on resources from their networks. For example, a recovering alcoholic or someone who leaves prison has a high probability of relapse if they continue connected with specific actors. Therefore, we propose:

*P6: The effectiveness of captive services relies on collaboration with actors beyond the immediate dyad.*

## 6. Conclusions

While the literature has addressed service captivity as an experience (e.g., Rayburn et al., 2020), there has been little research on captive services and their systemic effects. We adopted a systemic perspective to conceptualize captive services and developed propositions to begin delineating this conceptual domain (MacInnis, 2011). By considering a systemic perspective on captive services, these types of services will be better equipped to help their customers and higher systems to create value for themselves and society.

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