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Article: **Antecedents and Outcomes of Intimate Co-creation: A Qualitative Inquiry**

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Antecedents and Outcomes of Intimate Co-creation: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

This study aims at re-conceptualizing intimate co-creation based on the qualitative approach of interpretive phenomenological analysis. Qualitative data obtained from eight in-depth interviews was transcribed and coded in QDA Miner Lite software for analysis. The results identified five emerging themes that explicate the phenomenon of intimate co-creation. Furthermore, this study has developed a new research framework on intimate co-creation with its antecedents and potential outcomes and also anticipates their mutual relationship. The proposed relationship may be investigated further by future researchers.

Keywords: co-creation, collaboration, idea disclosure, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), intimate co-creation, qualitative inquiry

Introduction

Organizations strive towards achieving agility which is impossible without well-motivated employees. Organizations also need better interpersonal engagement among their employees, which is dependent on personal intimacies established at the workplace, both in an informal and formal manner. Efforts for establishing intimacies based on co-creation require employees to have workplace persuasion skills (Jena & Pradhan, [2018](#)). Interpersonal persuasion not only contributes towards establishing relational co-creation but it also contributes towards establishing intimate co-creation at the first level, which is the level of an individual employee. At advanced levels, intimate co-creation contributes towards establishing better intimacies at dyadic, group, team and organizational levels (Rouse,

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[2020](#); Decoster et al., [2021](#)). Overall, it contributes towards an effective reciprocal arrangement at the workplace (Tse & Dasborough, [2008](#)).

Gronroos ([2012](#)) linked collective efforts made by employees at the workplace with better performance. Bowen ([2016](#)) explained that the co-creation process is also important with respect to the modern digital era and companies now require their employees to be value providers. Co-creation is typically vital for the frontline employees of an organization because they are the ones who carry forth its image (Santos-Vijande, [2015](#)). However, the positive role of leadership is also vital in promoting intimacies based on the co-creation of joint tasks and for realizing novel ideas (Rouse, [2020](#); Jarvi et al., [2018](#)).

Intimate co-creation is a new concept in management literature. Any new concept needs an empirical validation, ideally through a qualitative study in the first phase which becomes the basis for further empirical examination. The current study belongs to a series of studies on intimate co-creation, aimed to explore this phenomenon on empirical grounds. Previously, this concept was elaborated only on conceptual grounds (Rouse, [2020](#)). The current study is qualitative in nature. It is based on an interpretive phenomenological analysis conducted for the purpose of validating the concept of intimate co-creation. It is important to validate a new concept in literature through qualitative studies before conducting deductive studies for theory testing (Cresswell, [2013a](#)). In qualitative studies, if one has to study a phenomenon, then a deep understanding of the lived experiences of the respondents is of vital importance. The current study is based on the approach of phenomenology and it explores the phenomenon of intimate co-creation through interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). It is not a distinct methodology but a turnkey approach for qualitative data analysis, especially when someone is dealing with phenomenological data. It is more of a research philosophy and has a number of streams. Research questions are important for any qualitative study including IPA (Cresswell, [2013b](#)). The research question for the current study is “*what does intimate co-creation mean to those employees of an organization who are working on joint tasks for achieving novel and creative ideas?*” Here, employees experience intimate co-creation indirectly. The approach used to understand intimate co-creation is

phenomenology because the authors of this study are attempting to understand the essence of a phenomenon that occurs only at the workplace in specific conditions. The direct context of the participants is not very relevant, since phenomenology is an indirect approach that digs down deep into the understanding of the respondents about the essence of a phenomenon.

Apart from being a qualitative study conducted via in-depth interviews with informants, the current study contributes at multiple levels. Firstly, the concept of intimate co-creation is re-conceptualized and empirically theorized in this study, which further validates the theory of intimate co-creation beyond the conceptual level. Secondly, this qualitative study identifies five emerging themes that indirectly represent the phenomenon of intimate co-creation. Thirdly, the potential outcomes of intimate co-creation are identified at the organizational level. Fourthly, a new research framework is devised in this study that represents the five emerging themes as the antecedents of intimate co-creation, along with the potential outcomes of intimate co-creation. Fifthly, fourteen propositions are provided based on the proposed research framework, requiring empirical validation in the future by other researchers. Finally, useful future research directions are given for the further extension of this work, along with its theoretical and managerial contribution. It is expected that this research will open new avenues for future research on intimate co-creation and a significant theoretical contribution can be made in this area due to its novelty. It is also expected that this research will initiate a new debate about the concept of co-creation in management and its transplantation from marketing to management literature.

Conceptualization of Intimate Co-creation

Rouse ([2020](#)) proposed the construct of intimate co-creation that needs empirical validation. The current authors strive to validate the concept of intimate co-creation on both empirical and theoretical grounds. It is notable that any conceptual idea needs empirical validation after its inception. Rouse ([2020](#)) defined intimate co-creation as “*a process in which two people form and maintain a shared interpersonal boundary by engaging in a series of intimate creative interactions—interactions that involve unfiltered idea disclosure, supportive elaboration, and idea-focused*

evaluation—as they work together over time to develop novel, useful ideas and products.” Strong interpersonal relations at the workplace offer mutual support, creativity and novelty (Kark & Carmeli, [2009](#)).

Keeping in view the previously agreed concept of intimate co-creation (Rouse, [2020](#)), the current study empirically validates the theory of intimate co-creation through the lens of the five emerging themes. The authors further theorize intimate co-creation as “*a conscious individual level decision to establish intimacies with colleagues for shared interpersonal boundaries, creative idea disclosure, supportive elaboration, and idea-focused evaluation—as they work together over time to develop novel, and useful ideas and products. This essentially happens because of value formation, effective socialization, perception of synergy, workplace creativity and perception of joint innovation.*”

Literature Review

The concept of value co-creation based on service dominant logic is very popular in the marketing literature and practice. However, with the passage of time, management scholars have realized that the relational form of co-creation has an equally powerful application in human resource management (HRM). Rouse ([2020](#)) was the first management scholar who presented the idea of intimate co-creation in HRM, although only on conceptual grounds. Intimate co-creation is a kind of association in a team or group that needs an effective reciprocal arrangement. This reciprocal arrangement requires a helping behavior with team members, group members and at the dyadic level in response to others’ helping behavior. Such reciprocal arrangement is a source of shared interpersonal boundaries, creative ideas disclosure, relationship building and creativity. Intimate co-creation brings forth a sense of shared accomplishment and generates a collective sense of “us” among organizational members. However, past literature has not reviewed it from the perspective of dyadic associations for developing personal intimacies. Such dyadic associations have a potentially positive spillover effect on teams and groups that can prove to be extremely useful for effective pair formation in creative task accomplishment and in improving working relationships (Rouse, [2020](#); Tse & Dasborough, [2008](#); Stouten & Tripp, [2019](#); Perry-Smith & Mannucci, [2017](#)). An important element of reciprocal arrangement for employees is the necessary presence

of persuasion skills in them. Workplace persuasion potentially leads to intimate co-creation. However, there is no study available in the literature that tested the relationship of workplace persuasion and intimate co-creation. For such scholarly initiatives, an empirical investigation of intimate co-creation is needed (Jena & Pradhan, [2018](#)).

Collective workplace efforts of employees are the source of better performance. However, dyadic associations and the role of intimate co-creation remains to be studied for appraising the collective workplace efforts of employees (Gronroos, [2012](#); Brands & Mehra, [2019](#)). In the current digital era, the role of employees is that of value providers. This is especially true for the frontline employees of the organizations as they are the ones who carry forth the organizational image. Effective leadership is of pivotal importance in the process of inducing co-creation on different levels among employees. However, the role of leaders in effective team and dyadic formation for better innovation and creativity needs further exploration (Bowen, [2016](#); Santos-Vijande, [2015](#); Jarvi et al., [2018](#); Brands & Mehra, [2019](#)). Intimate co-creation helps the employees to generate and disclose creative ideas at the group, team or dyadic levels, using shared interpersonal boundaries identified by the members themselves. However, sometimes employees are afraid of their ideas being stolen by others. Therefore, the element of psychological safety is very important for intimate co-creation and it can be studied in the future, possibly through the lens of psychological contract theory (Rouse, [2020](#); Decoster et al., [2021](#); Santos-Vijande, [2015](#)).

As there is a greater need for a collaborative workplace in the modern era; hence, scholars have shifted their focus of research towards the social element of work. Forms of co-creation such as value co-creation, relational co-creation and intimate co-creation are among the social elements being studied by them (Gronroos, [2012](#); Zhou & Hoever, [2014](#); Tse & Dasborough, [2008](#)). For example, collective creativity was studied by theorists in the past (Harvey & Kou, [2013](#); Harrison & Rouse, [2014](#)). Moreover, there is a general consensus among scholars that psychological safety is of vital importance for creative idea disclosure, which is the essence of intimate co-creation. However, the mechanisms that provide such psychological safety need to be investigated further (Tse & Dasborough, [2008](#); Rouse, [2020](#); Gilson & Shalley, [2004](#); Kark & Carmeli,

2009). Effective communication at the group level also makes an impact on creativity (Cordova & Scott, 2001), which is possible at different levels including dyadic, team, group and organizational levels. However, further research is needed to explore the link of creativity with intimate co-creation (Rouse, 2020; Chua et al., 2012).

Creativity and intimate co-creation are interlinked. The diversity of individuals in a team is also a source of creativity (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Tse & Dasborough, 2008; Brands & Mehra, 2019). For example, newcomers bring new ideas with them and often become a source of diversity within an organization (Skilton & Dooley, 2010). If proper feedback is given to the employees by the top management regarding the effectiveness of their ideas and how much the organization values them, then the psychological safety of employees regarding their ideas increases significantly. Those acts that involve a single stakeholder don't come under the heading of intimate co-creation, since the process of intimate co-creation has, by default, multiple stakeholders and each one of them has to play their role. Hence, it's the involvement of each stakeholder in this process that makes it unique (Alvarez et al., 2007; Hunter et al., 2012).

The process of intimate co-creation requires the act of sharing ideas, as well as their mutual understanding and acceptance (Rouse, 2020; Prager, 1997; Sosa, 2011). Solano and Dunnam (1985) found with respect to group size that as it increases, the disclosure and relevancy of information shared in the form of ideas is reduced. This finding gives strength to the argument of Rouse (2020) that intimate co-creation typically happens at the dyadic level. Lewis (2017) explained that co-creation generates a feeling of positivity and wellbeing among the actors involved in the process. It generates a feeling of better understanding in them. Therefore, intimate co-creation is closely associated with interactional co-creation. However, the extent of this association needs to be explored by future researchers through empirical means.

Organizational structure also plays an important part in intimate co-creation. For example, advertising companies require more interaction and intimate co-creation between their employees during work; hence, the organizational structure of these companies is designed in a way that better aligns with intimate co-creation (Rouse, 2020; Hackley & Kover, 2007;

Perry-Smith & Mannucci, [2017](#)). This trend of closer work association is also popular in the organizations involved in the software development business; hence, it gives further strength to the argument of dyadic level effectiveness for intimate co-creation. Indeed, most of the time, software developers work in close proximity to each other (Cockburn & Williams, [2000](#)). For such close human interaction, team mindfulness is of pivotal importance (Underhill, [2006](#); Shahzad et al., [2019](#)). However, the mechanisms that warrant interpersonal interactions (first at the dyadic level) need to be explored further, particularly with reference to intimate co-creation.

Social interactions have become a source of performance and workplace creativity; therefore, they have also become the subject of scholarly research. However, social interactions are at times a source of frustration in employees that needs to be addressed in future researches (Elsbach & Flynn, [2013](#)). Hewett and Shantz ([2021](#)) presented the concept of HR co-creation. Based on this concept, HR practitioners are value providers to their respective organizations. Hence, different forms of co-creation including intimate co-creation are relevant for them (Nishii & Wright, [2008](#); Wright & Nishii, [2013](#)). Organizations need close cooperation for incorporating the values of co-creation in their setup. Individuals, when they find that their ideas are at risk in large groups, are more likely to drop these ideas. On the contrary, individuals who work in small groups are more likely to express their ideas (Mannucci & Perry-Smith, [2021](#)). The size of group matters with respect to creative idea disclosure.

Many scholars are of the view that a strong relationship among groups and teams is the source of creative idea generation (Chua et al., [2012](#); McFadyen & Cannella, [2004](#); Sosa, [2011](#)). Of late, scholars found that weak ties are more effective in idea generation, while strong ties are more useful in idea elaboration (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, [2017](#); Rouse, [2020](#)). Understanding the role of gender in collaborative workplace behavior is also of vital importance. This is especially crucial in male dominant societies where gender may be a hindrance in collaborative process engagement and hence, in intimate co-creation. The absence of studies on the role of gender comprises a literature gap with reference to creative idea generation, idea disclosure and intimate co-creation that needs to be

addressed by future researchers (Brands & Mehra, [2019](#); Mannucci & Perry-Smith, [2021](#)).

Methodology

Phenomenology is among the most common methods used in qualitative research (Cresswell, [2013a](#); Gill, [2020](#)). Glaser and Strauss ([1967](#)) emphasized that in qualitative research, inductive approach is utilized for theory development. Interviews and semi-structured interview guidelines are used in this type of research. In phenomenology, a small set of informants (ranging from 6 to 12 individuals) are interviewed to acquire an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon from their perspective, which is based on their conscious lived experiences (Moran, [2000](#)). The current study is one among a series of studies on intimate co-creation aimed to understand this phenomenon using inductive qualitative research. For a deductive theory testing approach, a separate study has been conducted by the authors.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a relatively recent approach introduced by Jonathan Smith. It produces interpretive data results based on the lived experiences of the participants obtained through semi-structured interviews (Smith, [2010](#); Smith, [2004](#)). This approach was followed in this study. IPA helps in creating an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon through semi-structured interviews and the subsequent analysis of these interviews through the elaboration of narratives that constitute a more extensive source of information than a research strategy, such as a survey (Smith & Osborne, [2003](#)). Usually, the minimum sample size for interviews is three informants. However, for the current study, eight participants were selected (Giorgi, [2006](#)) using purposive sampling technique for the interview process. The criterion for the selection of interviewees was that they must be engaged in the process of mutual task engagement / team work, which is an essential component of building intimacies based on co-creation (Boddy, [2016](#)). Rouse ([2020](#)) recommended that intimate co-creation needs to be studied in academia and healthcare sectors. Therefore, as per the recommendations of previous literature, six interviewees were selected from the university academia in Pakistan. Most of the informants were faculty members of universities engaged in mutual research and development projects, while those selected

from service-based organizations supervised a team of at least three individuals with whom they were actively engaged all the time (Rouse, [2020](#)).

Rouse ([2020](#)) suggested that empirical studies should be conducted to validate the concept of intimate co-creation through research on service-based organizations. Therefore, sample selection for this study was entirely from service-based organizations and no respondent(s) was selected from manufacturing-based organizations. Academia and healthcare sectors were particularly highlighted by Rouse ([2020](#)) for future research on intimate co-creation. Therefore, in the current study, five faculty members from five universities in Pakistan were selected along with three managers from other service-based organizations (two were bank managers and one was IT supervisor in a shopping mall) (Moran, [2000](#); Rouse, [2020](#)). Demographic details of the interview participants are given in Table 1. The participants knew their colleagues for at least three years and were engaged with them in at least one joint research or innovation-based project. The commonality between service-based organizations and academia is that the latter is also a service-based business. The results showed that intimate co-creation existed, regardless of the fact that the participant was working in university academia or in a service-based organization.

In-depth interviews were conducted on Skype and recorded with the due permission of all the interviewees. The prime reason for conducting online interviews was that the interviewees did not permit personal interaction due to the ongoing restrictions imposed because of COVID – 19. Hence, limited physical interaction was possible. The online mode of communication via Skye provided a convenient way of interaction with the participants and recording the interviews. The longest interview time was 37 minutes and the shortest interview was of less than 15 minutes. Average time per interview was 21 minutes. All the interviewees were given a detailed briefing about the research project as well as the concept of intimate co-creation. All the recorded interviews were transcribed after carefully listening to the audios in the transcription software at a very slow speed. Furthermore, repeated responses with informants' emphasis were identified and coded in QDA Miner Lite software using an open, axial and selective coding process. QDA Miner Lite is a software used in many of the previous

studies (Bubnovskaia, [2019](#)). It was found that there are five emerging themes that represent the phenomenon of intimate co-creation at the workplace. The respondents' viewpoint was taken regarding their engagement in official tasks. Hence, a limited amount of data was obtained from the interviews. Interview is a time taking task and not as easy as a survey. The respondents hardly consent for a semi-structured and recorded interview to represent their respective organization. In IPA, semi-structured interview guidelines are followed (Smith & Osborne, [2003](#); Cresswell, [2013](#)). The interview guidelines posed eight main questions and subsequent questions were asked from the individual respondents, for which sufficiently detailed interviews were conducted.

Data Analysis

With the help of repeated open codes while analyzing cases in transcribed data using QDA Miner Lite software, axial codes were identified. These codes helped in the identification of five emerging themes that represented the phenomenon of intimate co-creation. These five emerging themes included value formation, effective socialization, perception of synergy, workplace creativity and perception of joint innovation. They were supported by nineteen axial codes / sub themes. Each theme was defined for the ease of thematic analysis via IPA. Following are the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1

Demographic Details of the Respondents/Interviewees (Source: Author)

Respondent No.	Gender	Age in years	Education level	Monthly Income (in Rupees)	Experience	Designation
1	Male	39	MS	Above 100,000	12 years	Unit Head – Corporate Lending
2	Male	40	PhD	Above 100,000	14 years	Assistant Professor
3	Male	36	MS	Above 100,000	10 years	Lecturer
4	Female	44	M Phil	Above 100,000	16 years	Associate Professor
5	Male	25	BSc	Above 30,000	7 years	IT Supervisor
6	Male	43	MS	Above 50,000	14 years	Lecturer

Respondent No.	Gender	Age in years	Education level	Monthly Income (in Rupees)	Experience	Designation
7	Male	40	MS	Above 100,000	12 years	Instructor
8	Male	31	BA	Above 40,000	8 years	Branch Services Officer

Table 1 shows that out of 8 respondents, only 1 respondent was a female. All other respondents were males. All were in the age bracket of 31 to 40 years. Five respondents had a master's degree, two had a bachelor's degree and only one was PhD. Monthly income of the respondents ranged from PKR 30,000 to PKR. 100,000 and above. Each informant had a minimum work experience of 7 years. Five interviewees were faculty members of universities, two were bank officers and one was from a commercial organization. All the interviewees were from Pakistan.

Coding frequency of axial codes and themes is equally important with respect to qualitative data analysis. The transcribed data of eight interviews was coded in QDA Miner Lite software and coding frequencies were analyzed in detail. Table 2 depicts the coding frequencies of the transcribed data.

Table 2

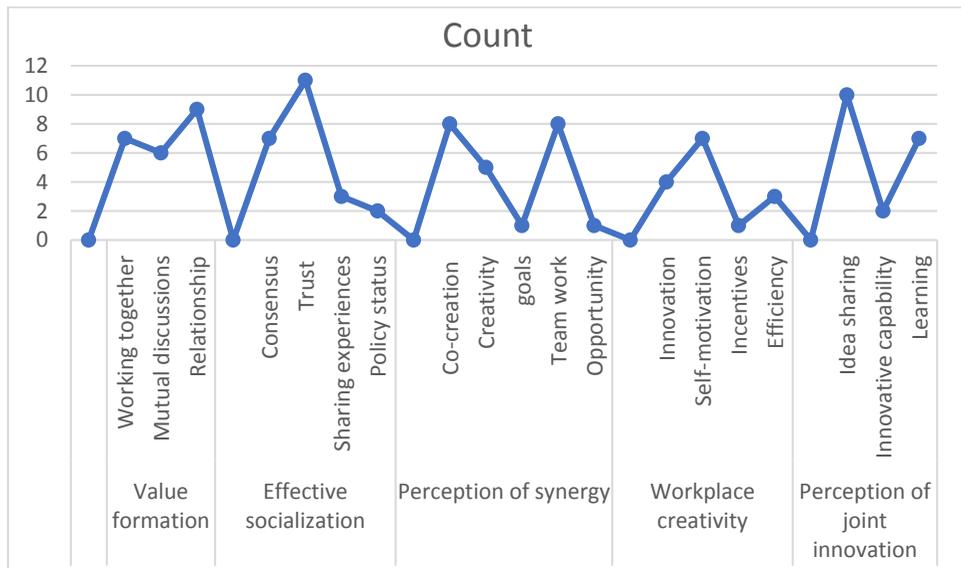
Coding Frequency of Codes and Themes (Source: Author)

Selective Codes / Theme	Axial Codes	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Value formation	Working together	7	5.50%	4	5.7 %
	Mutual discussions	6	4.70%	1	1.3 %
Effective socialization	Relationship	9	7.00%	7	9.4 %
	Consensus	7	5.50%	1	1.3 %
	Trust	11	8.50%	7	9.4 %
	Sharing experiences	3	2.30%	1	1.3 %
Perception of synergy	Policy status	2	1.60%	1	1.3 %

Selective Codes / Theme	Axial Codes	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Workplace creativity	Co-creation	8	6.30%	4	5.7 %
	Creativity	5	3.90%	8	10.8 %
	Goals	1	0.80%	2	2.7 %
	Team work	8	6.30%	4	5.7 %
	Opportunity	1	0.80%	3	4 %
	Innovation	4	3.10%	6	8.1 %
	Self-motivation	7	5.50%	3	4 %
Perception of joint innovation	Incentives	1	0.80%	1	1.3 %
	Efficiency	3	2.30%	3	2.7 %
	Idea sharing	10	7.80%	1	1.3 %
	Innovative capability	2	1.60%	1	1.3 %
	Learning	7	5.50%	3	4 %

Figure 1

Graphical Depiction of Themes and Related Codes along with Their Frequency of Occurrence (Source: Author)



It can be observed that different codes have different counts in the transcribed data. Indeed, some sub-themes are better established with more counts. For example, the sub-theme of trust in the main theme of effective socialization has the overall count of 11. The second sub-theme with the highest count is idea sharing with an overall count of 10 and it represents the main theme of the perception of joint innovation. The sub-themes of goals, opportunity and incentives have the lowest count of 1 each. In the same way, all the codes / sub-themes have their percentages for general appearance and for individual cases given in Table 2.

Thematic Analysis

The first emerging theme / axial code was ‘value formation’. This theme has two sub-themes / open codes including ‘working together’ and ‘mutual discussions’. One participant stated, “*team work, sharing of ideas and socialization is very important for running any institute*” (Batool, age 44). The other supportive sub-theme for the theme of value formation is ‘mutual discussions’. A participant stated, “*Definitely, when you are working together, it means you are discussing different ideas. By discussion with colleagues, there are more chances to move towards innovation as compared to doing yourself individually*” (Nabi, age 40). The quotes mentioned here clearly support the sub-themes which are further supportive of the main theme of value formation.

The second emerging theme that indirectly contributes towards intimate co-creation was ‘effective socialization’. An informant spoke about effective socialization as a key ingredient in the process of intimate co-creation at the dyadic level. She stated, “*I think working as two people helps us to achieve any task in a better way as compared to working with a team. When you are working with one person, you can convince her in a better way as compared to convincing five to six persons*” (Batool, age 44). According to another informant, trust and consensus are interlinked. He said, “*The first important thing is trust in relationship. Initially, most of the people do not want to come on consensus but if consensus is developed, then this goal is also achieved*” (Ibrahim, age 40). Therefore, this theme highlights the need for the sharing of experiences, collective working and the fact that working in dyads and teams can help in effective socialization

which, in turn, indirectly and positively contributes towards intimate co-creation.

The third emerging theme was the ‘perception of synergy’. This theme represents the belief of an individual employee that collective output is more significant than individual output. For example, one informant spoke about increased performance because of joint tasking and the resultant synergy for the joint task of publishing research papers collectively as faculty members. He stated, *“There was a mutual cooperation from each member and you will be amazed that we published research papers in HEC recognized journals and few are still in the process of publication”* (Ibrahim, age 40). Working together for synergizing may be due to the official requirement of the organization or it may be due to the personal motivation of an individual. An informant said in this regard, *“Sometimes, due to the order of boss, we work together and achieve the target and sometimes we prefer [on our own] to work together for common goal or target”* (Batool, age 44). Hence, with the help of supportive quotes for this theme, it can be concluded that perception of synergy positively contributes towards intimate co-creation.

The fourth emerging theme was ‘workplace creativity’. An informant was of the view that idea sharing with the management can help in enhancing workplace creativity. He said, *“Idea sharing with management is a source and reason of creativity and innovation. Yes, sharing of ideas does increase the chances of innovation and creativity”* (Abbas, age 39). The importance of motivation cannot be denied as well with respect to workplace creativity. An informant said, *“If we are to work efficiently to improve our business from my point of view, it is my motivation because I am at the front end of my organization. I am dealing with the customers. Each requirement of customers comes to me and I am motivated to interact with different departments; so that, I may get it done. So, this is my internal motivation”* (Abbas, age 39). Therefore, based on some of the quotes of the informants, it can be stated that workplace creativity indirectly contributes towards intimate co-creation.

The fifth emerging theme was the ‘perception of joint innovation’. An informant, who was a faculty member in a university and a PhD scholar as well, stated that group performance is a source of increasing efficiency. He said, *“I experienced that when I was working individually, there was very*

low output but when we started working in groups then our performance and our output regarding PhD thesis and finding research gaps, making research questions and objectives became clearer and the process became quicker as compared to when I worked individually” (Nabi, age 40). On the job learning is also a source of better output. An informant stated, *“I have learnt a lot from them [from senior colleagues]. I consult them for many tasks assigned to me and they also trust me that I am eligible and capable now that whatever task assigned can be done perfectly”* (Ahmad, age 36). Therefore, it can be concluded that the perception of joint innovation as a theme contributes towards intimate co-creation.

Results and Discussion

All the five emerging themes, elaborated through the quotes of the informants, support the subjective phenomenon of intimate co-creation. Literature support for the emerging themes can be further helpful in this inductive discussion. Gronroos (2012) linked value formation with the prevailing concept of value co-creation which depends on the formation of collective intimacies among the employees and the customers of an organization. Value co-creation can help in generating ideas that precisely define the market requirements of the customers. Moreover, the organization intentionally engages the employees with customers to execute these ideas. The case of relational co-creation is different since it typically happens within the organization and employees establish mutual intimacies for working on joint ideas. So, in both cases, regardless of it being value co-creation or any other form of interactional co-creation, the element of interaction remains the same (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018). Hence, employees remain the real value providers for an organization and their consent is of vital importance (Bowen, 2016). For example, one respondent stated with respect to the employer, *“The first important thing is trust in relationship. Initially, most of the people do not want to come on consensus [interpersonal and with employer], but if consensus is developed, then this goal is also achieved”* (Ibrahim, age 40). Another respondent stated that co-creation through joint working initiatives is the essence of existence in the workplace, *“When we work together, we can share ideas. We get socialized. We can achieve our results. And this is working like in a team. No one can run an institution or an organization without team work. So, success is*

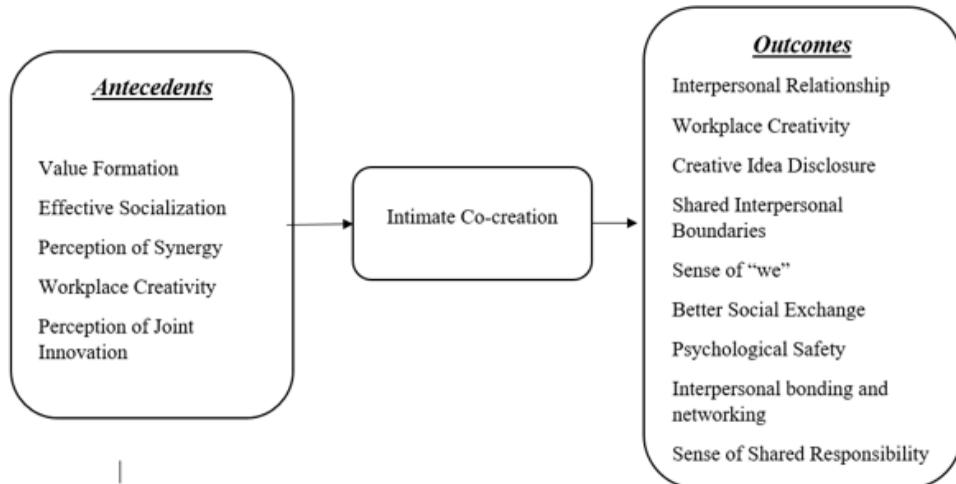
impossible, you cannot run even a home, department or an institution without team work. So, team work, sharing of ideas and socialization is very important for running any institute” (Batool, age 44)

The perception of joint innovation was the second theme. One respondent stated that better social exchange is a source of innovation, *“Social exchange, wherever you experience, you get better results for that and it really helps in innovations and in bringing innovative ideas to your work. So yes, I agree with this that it really improves the innovative capability of the members working in a group”* (Ahmad, age 36). Employees’ active collaboration with managers, including top management, can help in building this perception of joint innovation in areas such as service and product innovation (Santos-Vijande, [2015](#)) and for overall socialization. Oertzen ([2018](#)) explained that there may be different types of positive co-creation activities and any such activity would help in building the perception of synergy at the workplace. One respondent stated that it is not always the order of boss that makes them work on a creative task. At times, colleagues among themselves take such initiatives for creative engagements, *“Sometimes due to the order of the boss, we work together and achieve the target and sometimes we prefer to work together for common goal or target”* (Batool, age 44). This supports the theory of intimate co-creation because of shared interpersonal boundaries, creative idea disclosure and establishing intimacies at the workplace for accomplishing shared goals (Rouse, [2020](#)). With respect to further empirical validation of intimate co-creation, future researchers need to understand such interpersonal phenomenon especially in the light of social exchange theory and social identity theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, [2005](#)). It is a sort of social exchange among the employees. For example, one respondent stated during the interview, *“I know that working together will be more helpful and will give them more understanding which makes the exchange of ideas possible with each other”* (Abbas, age 39). Such theoretical narratives need further validation. This would, of course, be possible through further empirical validation of this concept with the help of deductive studies. Based on the current thematic analysis, it can be concluded that five emerging themes can rightly play the role of antecedents for the phenomenon of intimate co-creation. These themes can be represented together in the form of a conceptual framework for future

researchers to conduct deductive studies in this regard and to test this framework and its related propositions generated from the qualitative phase of this study.

Figure 2

Proposed Research Framework on Intimate Co-creation (Source; Author)



In this proposed framework, the five emerging themes are incorporated as antecedents since they have been proven empirically as factors that explain the phenomenon of intimate co-creation. These findings are further supported by the fourteen propositions of this study.

Value formation emerged as the first theme of this study. With reference to this theme, one participant stated it as an open code, *"Team work, sharing of ideas and socialization is very important for running any institute"* (Batool, age 44). Another participant stated, *"Definitely, when you are working together, it means you are discussing different ideas. By discussion with colleagues, there are more chances to move towards innovation as compared to doing yourself individually"* (Nabi, age 40). Such initiatives of joint collaboration are sources of value formation in interactions based on intimate co-creation. Past literature also proved that different forms of relational co-creation, such as value co-creation, are sources of value formation in joint and collective relationships, such as those among the

employees themselves and of employees with other stakeholders including customers (Gronroos, [2012](#); Bowen, [2016](#); Santos-Vijande, [2015](#)). Based on this inductive and deductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 1: Value formation among employees positively contributes towards intimate co-creation.

The role of effective socialization is also crucial for interpersonal interactions which help to form useful relational intimacies at the workplace (Oertzen, [2018](#); Rouse, [2020](#); Cropanzano & Mitchell, [2005](#)). Most of the interviewees were also of the view that effective socialization contributes to intimate co-creation. One respondent stated, *“If two persons say that we should work on the same task then definitely this increases socialization. There is more social interaction with other colleagues and social environment increases. This is why there is the socialization factor”* (Ibrahim, age 40). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 2: Effective socialization among employees positively contributes towards intimate co-creation.

The perception of synergy is generated through mutual social exchange that positively occurs over a period of time. This helps in creating relational intimacies, especially at the dyadic level, in the first phase (Oertzen; [2018](#), Rouse, [2020](#)). For example, one interviewee stated, *“No one can run an institution or an organization without team work. So, success is impossible, you cannot run even a home, department or an institution without team work. So, team work, sharing of ideas and socialization is very important for running any institute”* (Batool, age 44). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 3: Perception of synergy among employees positively contributes towards intimate co-creation.

Past studies have proved that workplace creativity contributes to relational co-creation. Most of the previous research with regards to the relational form of co-creation was aimed at value co-creation. For value co-

creation, creativity and innovation for customized product design based on service dominant logic remains the prime motive. However, creativity is an obvious outcome of intimate co-creation (Zhang, [2017](#); Shih & Wijaya, [2017](#)). An interviewee stated that sharing of ideas contributes to creativity and innovation, “*Idea sharing with management is a source and reason of creativity and innovation. Yes, sharing of ideas does increase the chances of innovation and creativity*” (Abbas, age 39). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation.

Proposition 4: Workplace creativity among employees positively contributes towards intimate co-creation.

Perceived collective gain enhances a psychologically safe climate and it also contributes to a perception of joint innovation in relationships based on intimate co-creation, such as in dyads and teams (Oertzen, [2018](#); Rouse, [2020](#)). For example, one respondent stated, “*Social exchange wherever you experience, you get better results for that and it really helps in innovations and in bringing innovative ideas to your work. So, yes, I agree with this that it really improves the innovative capability of the members working in a group*” (Ahmad, age 36). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 5: Perception of joint innovation among employees positively contributes towards intimate co-creation.

As depicted in the propositions 1 – 5, the antecedents / themes of this study positively contribute towards intimate co-creation. Once intimate co-creation prevails in an organization due to the antecedents / emerging themes as proposed in this study, then it potentially leads to further positive outcomes at the workplace, as shown in the proposed framework. Rouse ([2020](#)) also proposed that it leads to better interpersonal relationships, creativity, innovation, shared interpersonal boundaries and a sense of “we”.

Relational co-creation is a source of better interpersonal relationships at the workplace. The same applies to intimate co-creation (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, [2018](#); Gronroos. [2012](#); Rouse, [2020](#)). An interviewee stated, “*This relationship building makes you enjoy your work in the office. If you have good relationships in the office, you enjoy it. You don't get tired early. So,*

all these activities matter” (Ahmad, age 26). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 6: Intimate co-creation positively contributes towards building interpersonal relationships at the workplace.

Once the creativity and innovation of employees enhances due to intimate co-creation, then this fact also contributes towards enhancing the overall workplace creativity. Employees often want to be creative at the workplace and for that matter, breaking silos is central. Therefore, establishing personal intimacies at the workplace and finding the partners of their choice for creative assignments is essential, such as for authoring research papers in academia, software development and in advertising industry. Indeed, personal and relational choices at the workplace have an established outcome in the form of creativity (Rouse, [2020](#); Hewett & Shantz, [2021](#)). An interviewee stated, “*Ideas become more mature upon sharing and others also better collaborate with us in this way*” (Nabi, age 40). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 7: Intimate co-creation positively contributes towards enhancing workplace creativity.

Relational forms of co-creation, particularly intimate co-creation, are a source of creative idea disclosure. This mostly happens in small groups such as dyads, although it has a positive spillover effect on large groups and teams. It also helps in enhancing the managers’ understanding that the choice of dyadic formation is central to intimate co-creation. Hence, forced formation of teams should be avoided for better performance. When employees working together on official tasks have a good interpersonal relationship, it spills over into their personal life as well. Hence, the establishment of such friendly relationships not only helps the employees but also the organization to achieve the routine tasks (Rouse, [2020](#); Gronroos, [2012](#)). An informant stated, “*This idea sharing with management is a source and reason of creativity and innovation. Yes, sharing of ideas does increase the chances of innovation and creativity*” (Abbas, age 40).

Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 8: Intimate co-creation positively contributes towards creative idea disclosure by individuals at dyadic, group, team and organizational levels.

In most relational forms of co-creation such as value co-creation, HR co-creation and intimate co-creation, shared interpersonal boundaries are established over a period of time among the stakeholders (Rouse, [2020](#); Hewett & Shantz, [2021](#)). When individuals form personal intimacies at the workplace based on their interpersonal understanding, it helps them to identify their shared interpersonal boundaries. In the context of the banking sector, an informant stated, *“It also affects socialization because when the customers and other people enter in the bank and when they see that we collectively do the efforts for providing them with good services, then they judge that all persons are working as a team. They also develop trust on others”* (Rehman, age 31). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 9: Intimate co-creation positively contributes towards the formation of shared interpersonal boundaries among employees at the workplace.

Rouse ([2020](#)) stated that intimate co-creation generates a collective sense of “we” instead of “I” among the employees. Hence, a joint objective becomes the priority instead of individual goals. A respondent stated, *“When we do our work collectively and all staff members give 100% and perform their roles and when they see one person in a lot of pressure, others help him to make that person stress free. It is a needful for every staff member in a private or government organization that when they see a person with a huge work load, then the seniors and coworkers must help him”* (Rehman, age 31). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 10: Intimate co-creation positively contributes towards the formation of a collective sense of “we” among the employees instead of fostering individualism.

Social exchange contributes towards creating a better interpersonal understanding among employees. This factor contributes positively towards intimate co-creation (Oertzen, [2018](#); Rouse, [2020](#); Cropanzano & Mitchell, [2005](#)). A respondent stated, “*Yes, social exchange wherever you experience, you get better results for that and it really helps in innovations and in bringing innovative ideas to your work*” (Ahmad, age 36). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 11: Intimate co-creation positively contributes towards better social exchange at the workplace.

Perceived safety of creative ideas is important for any individual in the workplace. If a psychologically safe climate exists in the organization, it leads to greater sharing of creative ideas (Rouse, [2020](#); Decoster et al., [2021](#); Santos-Vijande, [2015](#)). A respondent stated, “*If I have an idea, I will share with my colleague and he will have the same idea but he will add some more points. He will tell me more techniques. He will add his own idea in those techniques or in whatever that I am thinking. So, by sharing your ideas, you can do more work*” (Batool, age 44). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 12: Intimate co-creation positively contributes towards enhancing the psychological safety of employees, provided the ownership of creative idea disclosure remains intact with the person who first presented the idea.

Intimate co-creation is a source of interpersonal bonding and better understanding among employees (Rouse, [2020](#); Hewett & Shantz, [2021](#)). A respondent stated, “*Absolutely, it helps in relationship building, trust and in creating a strong bond among the members which, in turn, helps to create a harmonious and effective workplace. Environment is a key to success*” (Ahmad, age 36). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

Proposition 13: Intimate co-creation positively contributes towards interpersonal bonding and networking in an organization.

Shared responsibility is also an obvious outcome of intimate co-creation. This is due to the fact that the focus of stakeholders remains on a collective sense of “we’ instead of “I” (Rouse, 2020; Hewett & Shantz, 2021). An informant stated, “*I have already shared one of my ideas that there is a lack of awareness regarding co-working which is highly needed to convince people and work together. It not only increases official performance and innovation but also makes people more understandable. They become more trustworthy and their relations become very strong which allows them to work together in such an environment*” (Nabi, age 40). Based on this inductive logic, the following proposition is expounded in this study for further empirical validation:

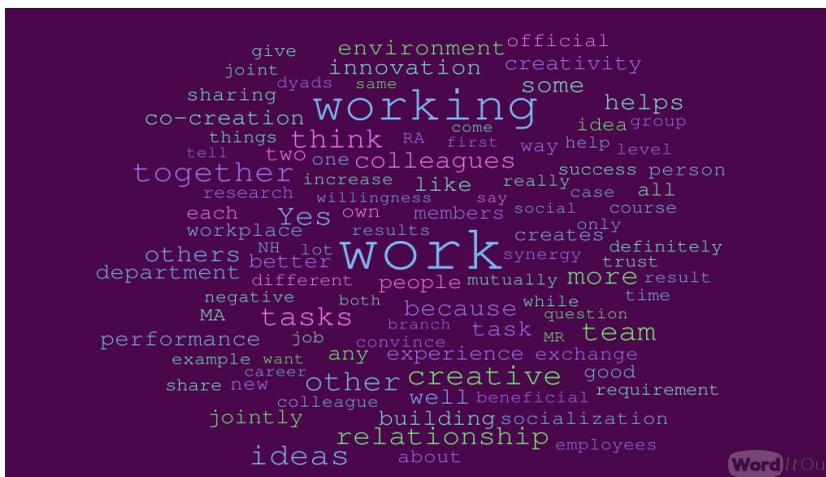
Proposition 14: Intimate co-creation positively contributes towards the generation of a collective sense of shared responsibility.

Future researchers may closely examine intimate co-creation based on social, relational, and perceptual perspectives, particularly for validating the given framework and propositions expounded in this study.

Word cloud is a useful tool in qualitative research for the depiction of words the respondents emphasized during the interviews. The word cloud generated from the transcripts of the interviews is given below:

Figure 3

Word Cloud Obtained from the Transcribed Data of Interviews (Source: Author)



Theoretical and Practical Implications

It is important for the modern day workplace to have employees engaged in creative tasks for the sake of better productivity. However, it requires interpersonal relationships among employees in an environment of effective socialization and value formation with the realistic perceptions of synergy (Rouse, [2020](#)). It is not easy to establish such bonding among employees in routine hierarchical structures. Hence, network-oriented organizations are the need of the hour. Especially, when it comes to establishing partnership for accomplishing a creative task, most organizations (such as those in the public sector) do not often allow the employees to form dyads, groups and teams of their choice for creative task accomplishment. This restricts creativity, innovation and productivity. If employees are allowed to make dyadic associations of their choice, irrespective of gender, cultural and organizational restrictions, then such interpersonal associations may lead to exceptional task accomplishment through intimate co-creation. Previous research, that is, Rouse ([2020](#)) showed that some sectors, such as the advertising agencies and software houses, allow creative task accomplishment through dyadic formation based on personal intimacies. Such dyads perform much more creatively in these two sectors as compared to solitary individuals working in such situations.

Social exchange is always a source of interpersonal relationships and bonding at the workplace. However, it is equally vital that the nature of social exchange must be positive. So, its implications would be positive among the employees and between the employees and managers. Negative social exchange, such as the use of power politics, bullying, misuse of authority, harassment, and gender discrimination are the sort of negative tactics with the power to destroy the potential of human capital. Such kind of social exchange has been elaborated in the past studies and through social exchange theory. This theory also explains the phenomenon of relational intimacies formed through intimate co-creation. Practical managerial implications of intimate co-creation are what that the managers need to keep in mind, so that negative social exchange could be minimized and positive social exchange could be enhanced for forming better personal intimacies leading to intimate co-creation (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, [2018](#); Gronroos, [2012](#); Rouse, [2020](#)). Social identity theory elaborates that when people are

part of a group that they feel proud of, then they try to portray it as their identity. Intimate co-creation also forms an identity for the individuals engaged in this phenomenon (Rouse, [2020](#); Hewett & Shantz, [2021](#)). Therefore, social exchange theory and social identity theories support the phenomenon of intimate co-creation. However, at the intrapersonal level, individuals' planned intentions for establishing personal intimacies for creative performance at the workplace may also be studied in the light of the theory of planned behavior.

Managers need to know that it is always preferable to give autonomy to employees involved in creative tasks. For example, a faculty member in a university knows that who is the best person with whom they can work on a creative research project or collaborate with for writing a research paper. Forced formation of teams by managers may hinder employees' creative capabilities and may in fact provoke them towards a deviant behavior that can further lead to workplace politics. Such factors rather hamper the performance of the organizations. Therefore, individuals should have autonomy to form dyads and groups of their choice regardless of the gender, cultural or organizational restrictions and this is the essence of intimate co-creation.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study was an empirical qualitative examination of the concept of intimate co-creation with the help of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Hence, it aimed to capture the lived experiences of the participants. Due to the time and resource constraints, grounded theory could not be adopted. Future researchers may want to study this phenomenon with the help of grounded theory and an effort can be made to approach a point of saturation with respect to the collection of qualitative data from maximum informants for the purpose of theory generation. Rouse ([2020](#)) conceptualized intimate co-creation for the first time and suggested two sectors for exploring this phenomenon, that is, academia and the health care sector. In the current study, most of the respondents were taken from university academia. Future researchers may want to conduct such a study on the healthcare sector. It will be interesting to see the results from the healthcare sector with respect to establishing shared working intimacies, especially in the post COVID – 19 period.

Future researchers may also want to further validate this study with the help of the deductive approach, that is, quantitative studies on intimate co-creation.

This study also identified the five emerging themes of intimate co-creation that were taken as the antecedents of the proposed research framework. It also identified the potential outcomes of intimate co-creation and subsequently determined the given propositions. Future researchers may want to further validate the proposed model and the propositions through deductive studies. The current authors hereby propose that other sectors can be explored with respect to studies on intimate co-creation. For example, multinational companies and SMEs can be studied. Also, it would be very interesting to study the individuals' intent versus their actual level of involvement in the activities based on intimate co-creation in public sector organizations and compare them with the private sector organizations. Future researchers are welcome to further extend this work by empirically theorizing and validating intimate co-creation.

Conclusion

This study was an empirical attempt to validate the concept of intimate co-creation. Thematic analysis of five emerging themes proved to be helpful in understanding how these themes helped to explain the concept of intimate co-creation. Furthermore, the proposed research framework clearly identified the antecedents and outcomes of intimate co-creation. Propositional analysis would be helpful for future deductive studies to formulate precise hypotheses. More research is needed to further establish the theory of intimate co-creation.

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