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Curator livestreams as value co-creation

Internetowe transmisje kuratorskie jako współtworzenie wartości

Abstract

Online curation is a form of intermediation between producers and consumers supporting consumer decision-making. In this article we analyse this phenomenon based on the examples of selected platforms in East and Southeast Asian markets using the service-dominant logic (SDL) theoretical framework. Based on a literature review, we conceptualise it as its own unique model of value co-creation, where value appropriation is unevenly distributed between consumers and producers. Indeed, the consumers mostly receive intangible (experiential/hedonic) value, while the business actors appropriate the tangible (cost/sacrifice) value. Understanding the types of value that can be co-created using curatorship model, should make it easier to incorporate it into the marketing funnels of companies and integrate it with other communication and sales channels. The types of value co-created by different types actors in curatorship model could be further verified by qualitative studies of an ecosystem based around curatorship platform such as Taobao or Naver Shopping.

Keywords

curatorship, value co-creation, Asia, e-commerce

Streszczenie

Kuratorstwo online jest formą pośrednictwa między producentami a konsumentami, wspierającą podejmowanie decyzji przez konsumentów. W niniejszym artykule analizujemy to zjawisko na przykładzie wybranych platform w Azji Wschodniej i Południowo-Wschodniej, z wykorzystaniem ram teoretycznych nurtu *service-dominant logic* (SDL). Opierając się na analizie literatury, konceptualizujemy je jako unikatowy model współtworzenia wartości, w którym podział wartości pomiędzy konsumentami i producentami jest nierównomierny. Konsumentci otrzymują bowiem głównie wartość niematerialną (*experiential/hedonic value*), podczas gdy podmioty biznesowe otrzymują wartość materialną (*cost/sacrifice value*). Zrozumienie rodzajów wartości, które można współtworzyć za pomocą modelu kuratorskiego, powinno ułatwić włączenie go do procesów marketingowych firm i zintegrowanie go z innymi kanałami komunikacji i sprzedaży. Rodzaje wartości współtworzonych przez różne typy podmiotów w modelu kuratorskim mogą być dalej weryfikowane poprzez badania jakościowe ekosystemu opartego na platformie kuratorskiej, takiej jak Taobao lub Naver Shopping.

Słowa kluczowe

kuratorstwo, współtworzenie wartości, Azja, e-commerce

JEL: M31, M39

Introduction

The ever-increasing abundance of products makes purchasing decisions challenging for consumers (Scheibehenne et al., 2010). In response to this problem, some intermediary sellers take it upon themselves to create digital content (mostly in the form of livestreams) that present different products with their pros and cons, thereby helping consumers make informed

purchasing decisions, and driving the sales in the process. This phenomenon, known as online curation, can be defined as intermediation activity between producers and consumers supporting consumer decision-making. It has traditionally been associated with digital products or closely related to highly digitalised industries such as music, films and video games. However, online curation is becoming a growing trend, encompassing an increasing share of e-commerce

in general, with some industries, such as skincare, personal care and cosmetics, being particularly influenced by its growing prevalence – particularly in East and Southeast Asia (Arora, 2021). For instance, in China the live streaming e-commerce market is predicted to grow from 680 USD billion in 2023 to 1.13 USD trillion in 2026, meaning a 18.45% CAGR (Statista, 2024). Despite that, the literature dedicated to the subject of curators is extremely limited (exceptions include: Babin & Hulland, 2019; Silva & Costa, 2023). To our best knowledge, there are no papers that provide in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, involving the perspectives of its key actors.

Given that an important aspect of online curation is the involvement of consumers during livestreams, an appropriate theoretical framework for the analysis of this phenomenon is service-dominant logic (SDL), which posits that value is always co-created by multiple actors, including the consumers themselves (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Therefore, the main objective of the article is to conceptualise curatorship as its own distinct model of value co-creation, incorporating the actors, the ways in which they co-create value, and the types of value each actor appropriates. To this end we carry out literature analysis.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we discuss the basic tenets of SDL. Then we explore the specifics of curatorship and analyse it through the theoretical lens of SDL, conceptualising it as its own unique model of value co-creation. Finally, we present the theoretical and practical implications of such theorization.

Theoretical framework

SDL is a literature stream, which views value creation as a collaborative effort involving not only the producer, but also a myriad of other actors, chief among them consumers themselves (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), who determine the value phenomenologically, through their experiences of the value proposition put forward by the producer (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). In other words, the initial offering serves merely as a material base, which is then subjected to both physical and mental processing by different actors in the process of resource integration (Carida et al., 2019). Thus understood value has been dubbed value-in-use, and its purely subjective character is what distinguishes it from the more traditional interpretation, where value is seen as an inherent, objective quality ingrained in the offering and revealed at the moment of economical exchange (referred to as value-in-exchange) (Macdonald et al., 2011).

This redefinition of value also challenges the perception of consumers and their role prevalent in the traditional streams of management and economics literature, which see consumers as passive actors, merely reacting to the offerings put forward by the producers – by deciding to consume them or refraining therefrom, thus possessing agency to devour value, but not participate in its creation (Firat & Dholakia, 2006). However, since SDL sees value as relational and phenomenologically determined, it follows that companies ought to not only design an attractive value proposition, but also encourage co-creational activities and equip them with tools enhancing their transformational capabilities (Frow et al., 2015; Sheth, 2017). Thus established framework can incorporate a number of different methods of co-creation, conceptualized by different authors as sets of "Co-s". One such set of co-creation methods has been proposed by Ramani and Kumar (2008) and includes: value co-ideation, co-design, co-production, co-test or co-launch. Conversely, Sheth and Uslay's (2007) proposed ten Co-s: co-conception of ideas, co-design, co-production, co-promotion, co-pricing, co-distribution, co-consumption, co-maintenance, co-disposal, and co-outsourcing. Frow et al. (2010) expanded on the latter idea, adding co-creation of meaning, and co-experiencing, and thus creating the list of twelve methods of value co-creation. Regardless of the particular form it takes, by empowering consumers to shape their consumption experience (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006) value co-creation leads to their increased emotional engagement (Karpen et al., 2012; Payne et al., 2009). However, it is also worth noting that, according to some critics, co-creation can also lead to the exploitation of consumers, by leveraging their eagerness to customize in order to outsource a significant part of labour to them without offering proper compensation (Cova et al., 2011; 2015).

It is important to observe that while the focus of a lot of studies utilizing SDL framework seems to be placed upon value co-creation occurring within buyer-seller dyad (Autio & Thomas, 2020), some researchers, including the SDL founders, argue for extending the analytical lens beyond just that and studying value co-creation in a wider context (Akaka & Vargo, 2015; Wieland et al., 2016). Such context consists of various unique actors, bound together by a plethora of reciprocal links (Chandler & Vargo, 2011). Depending on the purpose and scope of analysis, this context can be extended to entire networks of different actors or narrowed to a single triad or even reduced back to a dyad (Vargo, 2008).

Some authors also further extend this understanding of context by paying explicit attention not only to the actors, ties connecting them and resources at their disposal, but also

including institutions and institutional arrangements (2016), understood as "humanly devised rules, norms, and beliefs that enable and constrain action, and make social life predictable and meaningful" (2016, p. 11). Thus defined institutions include formal codified laws, informal social norms, conventions (i.a. conceptual and symbolic meanings), and other routinized rules that provide a shortcut for cognition, communication, and judgment purposes (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Other authors expand the understanding of the context even further, paying increased attention to societal (Edvardsson et al., 2011) and cultural (Akaka et al., 2015) factors. However, regardless of different definitions and approaches, the importance of context for value co-creation has been widely recognized, to the point where the creators of SDL argued for replacing the term 'value-in-use' with 'value-in-context' (Vargo, 2008).

Nowadays, value-in-context co-creation often occurs via different kinds of digital platforms – digital technologies that connect independent actors (people, organisations and resources) to provide consumers with access to products and services (Van Alstyne et al., 2016). As pointed out by Autio and Thomas (2020), these technologies, on the one hand, foster servitization, and on the other, they also improve the recombability and flexibility of resources, thus greatly improving the possibilities in regard to value co-creation. Therefore, digital technologies become a fundament around which entire ecosystems emerge (Teece, 1997), allowing for flexible integration of different resources, and thus leading to service innovation (Lusch & Nambisan, 2015). However, despite their potential for value co-creation, digital platforms haven't been sufficiently analysed yet through the theoretical framework of SDL (Autio & Thomas, 2020).

Specificity of curatorship digital platforms

Curation involves the activity of curators on blogs, livestreams and other online services. They act as intermediaries between producers and consumers, helping the latter ones to make decisions, and consequently freeing up valuable cognitive resources (Bhaskar, 2016). In some ways, curators appear similar in nature to influencers – "individuals with big followings online who attract a large amount of engagement (e.g. likes), and are able to use this popularity for marketing efforts in a specific industry" (Kay et al., 2020, p. 250). Influencer marketing usually entails companies paying influencers "to share content on social platforms with the twofold goal

of reaching a target audience and keeping them engaged" (Tian et al., 2024, p. 1) and to build the company's image (Pourazad et al., 2023). However, curators, while also being capable of gathering large audiences (Arora, 2021), tend to focus more on co-creating product-related value by "offering valuable knowledge on how to evaluate, interpret, explain, understand and use specific products" (Balzer, 2014, p. 32). Since their aim is to match their products appropriately to the needs of consumers, they hold credibility and trust of their audience in high regard (Andjelic, 2020). For this reason, in the above mentioned studies they have been presented as actors who most often work not with specific companies, but with entire e-commerce platforms instead, which is another factor distinguishing curators from influencers (Chayka, 2024).

Currently, the leading region in terms of the proliferation of curatorship platforms are markets of East and Southeast Asia, due to a number of technological, economic and cultural factors (Hızla, 2022). As a consequence of increasing computing power and the range of associated capabilities, the progressive digitalisation of economies and societies is currently taking place worldwide. This manifests itself in the increasing transformation of processes, activities and behaviours carried out in the real world into their counterparts carried out in the virtual world (Kim et al., 2021), which provides the right conditions for the development of the phenomenon of curatorship. Economic factors revolve around the growing importance (measured mainly as a share of GDP generated) of the East Asian region in the global economy, leading some authors to call the 21st century "the century of Asia" (Frankopan, 2018). For instance, by 2050, China is expected to account for up to 20% and Asia as a whole for more than 50% of global GDP (PwC, 2017). As a consequence of rising GDP, the wealth of Asian countries is increasing as well, and therefore the centre of gravity of global consumption is shifting. In 2015, Asian consumers accounted for 36% of the spending of the global middle class, but by 2030 their share is expected to rise to as much as 57% (Kharas, 2017). In terms of cultural factors, the most impactful country in the region is China, currently the market with the largest curatorship presence (Vernotti, 2021). The growing volume of online sales is also due to the ability to maintain a direct relationship between buyers and sellers on the Taobao platform (Liu, 2021). This is because, unlike transactions on sites such as eBay or Amazon, it offers real-time chat conversations, sometimes lasting up to 45 minutes, honouring the Chinese tradition of maintaining *guanxi*, which is a system of social

networks and influential relationships facilitating business. Due to the low commissions (5%) on transactions made on the platform, it has an inclusive nature, enabling the sale of goods with lower margins, such as food or other everyday products (Li, 2017).

Curation has not yet developed in the West to a comparable degree, with businesses finding the live e-commerce feature difficult to set-up and the sales process slow and inefficient. Some of the well-known online platforms such as Pinterest, YouTube or Instagram have tried incorporating such sales channel into their business plans, but in the absence of comparable success to Chinese counterparts, have not developed this functionality (Pearse, 2023). Nevertheless, there are signs that some companies are experimenting with this format – as in the case of German chain Douglas, which in 2021 attracted 1.2 million viewers to live sales on its website (Kolf, 2022). Some of the other notable examples are Guess in Italy, Matas in Denmark, Lacoste and Leroy Merlin in France, Tommy Hilfiger and Avon in the USA, which, over time, may contribute to the development of this functionality in western countries (Yeremenko, 2024).

This is why we can claim that curation is still not a ubiquitous phenomenon. However, in view of the rapidly changing trends among e-commerce platforms, it may be suspected that in future more platforms will follow suit on incorporating this feature. So far, the most clear and representative examples of Asian curatorship platforms are Chinese Taobao and Korean Naver Shopping. Curators on these platforms play a somewhat similar role to that of an influencer, by presenting a carefully crafted offer based around their personality, taste, knowledge and understanding of consumer's needs. The shows themselves oftentimes boast high production quality, utilising professional lighting, studios and equipment (particularly in the case of curators with larger followings). The existing platforms featuring online curation expand original e-commerce platform functionality by allowing curators to stream live shows, during which they can present their merchandise, carry out sales, as well as interact with the audience – all in real time. Moreover, for the off-streaming hours, the platforms also offer an AI curator capable of answering consumers' questions in real-time (Alibaba.com, 2022). There are many curators specializing in different brands and products, which allows room for many actors and is a potential barrier against market dominance by the most popular curators.

Simultaneously, the personalized character of the entire process, which also involves gamification elements (such as contests) fosters establishing

relationships and trust between the parties, as well as community building (Inquix, 2022). In result, some of the curators boast impressive followings – for instance, two of the most popular curators on Taobao live, Li Jiaqi and Huang Wei, managed to gather an audience of 240 million followers in total. The curators themselves do not have to be affiliated with or represent a specific brand or company, which can also be perceived as a source of trust from customers. However, some of them do in fact cooperate with companies and are paid for featuring their products during their livestreams. Some companies also attempt to turn their current employees into curators, and thus gain more control over the entire selling process (Chou, 2020).

Hence it is also worth highlighting the potential risks associated with this model of e-commerce. One of the more exploitable factors is the fact that the curators are increasingly becoming hired by specific companies, so they can be more biased to put the products of the companies that hired them in positive light. In this way curation could potentially turn into live influencer marketing, where maximizing sales would become the new focus, while also harnessing dishonest marketing practices. The main limiting factor here remains the community's trust in the curator in question, which will remain loyal as long as the streamer acts for the benefit of the consumers and remains objective in his or her judgement of the products.

Methodology

In order to map the co-creation process occurring during curator livestreams, we aimed to capture three main elements: the actors participating in the process, the types of co-creation which occur during this process, and what types of value emerge from such cooperation and are appropriated by respective parties. As concerns the actors, we decided to include four main parties in the analysis: curators, companies, platforms, and consumers. The choice of frameworks for types of co-creation and types of value was based on a review of SDL literature.

In order to examine the types of co-creation occurring within curatorship value co-creation model, we utilise the already discussed framework of Sheth and Usley's (2007) expanded by Frow et al. (2010), which identifies co-conception of ideas, co-design, co-production, co-promotion, co-pricing, co-distribution, co-consumption, co-maintenance, co-disposal, and co-outsourcing, co-creation of meaning, and co-experiencing. Of this list, five types of co-creation apply to curator livestreams: co-promotion, co-pricing, co-maintenance, co-creation of meaning and co-experiencing.

Table 1: Types of value – after Smith and Colgate (2007)

Type of value	Main aspects of value
Cost/sacrifice value	Economic Psychological Personal investment Risk
Functional/instrumental value	Correct/accurate attributes Appropriate performances Appropriate outcomes
Experiential/hedonic value	Sensory Emotional Social/relational Epistemic
Symbolic/expressive value	Self-identity/worth Personal meaning Social meaning Conditional meaning Self-expression

Source: Smith and Colgate (2007).

As pertains to types of value co-created during curator livestreams, we adopted the value typology by Smith and Colgate (2007). While not strictly a SDL framework, it has been utilised for the analysis of value co-creation (e.g. Lindman et al., 2016) and has a distinct advantage of combining different perspectives (rather than focusing strictly on consumer or business value), while maintaining brevity. The details regarding the typology are presented in Table 1.

Findings

Based on the identified actors, types of value co-creation, and value types, we created a curatorship model of value co-creation, presented in Table 2.

In the process of co-promotion, the actors cooperate during the stream to jointly promote the product, with company providing the product, the platform providing the network infrastructure, the curator conducting the livestream, and the consumers asking questions, participating in the competitions etc. All types of actors appropriate some value. While for the business actors the value belongs to the cost/sacrifice type (as the cooperation with others decreases the cost of promotion by dividing it between multiple parties, each focusing on their core competencies), the consumers mostly derive experiential/hedonic value from the process, due to the entertainment factor of the livestreams themselves. Potentially they can also appropriate cost/sacrifice value in the form of saved time, as they receive compact knowledge of product features without the need to research market offerings by themselves.

Similarly, in the co-pricing the prices are negotiated from the company's initial price by the curators and consumers. The consumers again appropriate experiential/hedonic value (derived from the gamified nature of the price reduction during the curator livestreams). They also appropriate cost-sacrifice value, as they are able to purchase products with reduced prices. Other actors do not appropriate value from this particular dimension of value co-creation.

Through co-maintenance consumers have their questions and problems regarding the product answered by the curator. Thus they gain

Table 2. Curatorship model of value co-creation

Co-creation type	Type of value co-created/appropriated by the actors			
	Curator	Company	Platform	Consumer
Co-promotion	Cost/sacrifice	Cost/sacrifice	Cost/sacrifice	Experiential/hedonic Cost/sacrifice
Co-pricing	–	–	–	Cost/sacrifice Experiential/hedonic
Co-maintenance	–	Cost/sacrifice Experiential/hedonic	Cost/sacrifice	Experiential/hedonic
Co-creation of meaning	Cost/sacrifice	Cost/sacrifice	Cost/sacrifice	Symbolic/expressive
Co-experiencing	Experiential/hedonic	–	–	Experiential/hedonic

Source: authors' own elaboration, based on Smith & Colgate (2007).

experiential/hedonic value, due to their increased understanding of the products features and limitations. The platform and the company appropriate cost/sacrifice value, as this helps to solve the consumer issues that would otherwise have to be handled directly by their support departments. For companies this can also be a source of experiential/hedonic value, as they can use co-maintenance process to learn the most commonly cited issues with their products, as well as the ways they are being dealt with by other consumers.

Through the process of co-creation of meaning, the participating actors jointly (re)negotiate the symbolic dimension of the product. For consumers, this becomes a source of symbolic/expressive value, as they can express themselves through these products (e.g. demonstrate their taste by praising stylish jewellery, or criticising an ostentatious handbag). For other actors this constitutes a source of cost/sacrifice value, as normally this symbolic meaning of the product would have to be created through the process of market positioning.

Co-experiencing, as in jointly enjoying (or not) the product (e.g. admiring the design of a piece of clothing) as well as the livestream itself is a source of experiential/hedonic value for the consumers. It can also be argued that this joint experience can also provide experiential/hedonic value to the curator themselves who interact with the consumers in their chosen area of expertise.

Discussion and implications

The analysis carried out has a number of theoretical and practical implications. The first one pertains to the subject of value appropriation. In the curatorship model of value co-creation, the consumer is the only actor that appropriates all types of value, while also appropriating value from all the included types of co-creation, which could potentially be perceived as consumers being the actual 'winners' in the model. However, only in the process of co-pricing the appropriated value is of financial nature. The situation is reversed in the case of business actors, who mostly appropriate cost/sacrifice value. This raises the question of whether this model of value co-creation is actually exploitative towards the consumers, whose contributions to the livestreams are a crucial component of the overall service, but who mostly receive intangible value in return, while the business actors appropriate the tangible value.

Indeed, this provided a sufficient foundation for the creation of customer experience based on

intangible values (Murphy, 2022). Moreover, like in the most cases of value co-creation, the consumers participate in the process out of their own volition. However, as noted by Cova, Dalli and Zwick (2011), from some perspectives (particularly the Marxist one) this still does not exclude the possibility of exploitation, and neither does the consumer's enjoyment of co-creation. Indeed, sometimes consumers decide to participate in value co-creation despite knowing they are being exploited – motivated, for instance, by brand loyalty, thus creating a sort of compromise between exploitation and emancipation (Cova et al., 2015).

At the same time, the potential advantages of the curatorship model of co-creation (from the consumer's perspective) are not limited to pure experience, as they can also involve the increased knowledge and understanding of the offers available on the market (thus allowing for more informed decisions), lower price and saved time. Thus, on a theoretical level, it is difficult to clearly categorize consumers as winners or the oppressed in this form of cooperation, as specifics regarding the additional types of value appropriated by consumers will differ between livestreams, and their subjective evaluation – between the consumers. Therefore, whether the intangible value offsets the expenditure of time necessary to participate in such value co-creation remains unclear and the exact balance should be explored in future studies, ideally including the consumers' perspective.

Another important question to consider is how ultimately different this model of value co-creation is from the others – particularly the co-creation involving influencers. Both models of co-creation rely heavily on companies utilizing a third-party actor in the process of creating a unique and valuable experience for the consumer, essentially turning marketing into something that consumers would seek out and engage with of their own volition, rather than being forced to do so, like in the traditional push-type marketing (Andjelic, 2020). In other words, the co-creation and appropriation of experiential/hedonic value by the consumer is where these two phenomena are similar. The postulated difference, on the other hand, stems from the aforementioned third-party, with the main premise behind the curators (as opposed to the influencers) was their supposed genuineness, impartiality and ability to provide the consumers with proper and useful knowledge and help them make informed decisions (Chayka, 2024). In other words, aside from the usual experiential/hedonic value (stemming from the experience itself), curators are supposed to co-

create epistemic sub-type of experiential/hedonic value as well. This indeed can be an advantage (from the consumer's perspective) over influencers directly cooperating with the companies, and thus providing biased overview of the discussed products. That being said, as already mentioned, in some cases the curators are actually companies' employees (Chou, 2020). And even those who are not can still potentially provide biased perspective, influenced by the livestreaming platform they cooperate with. At the same time, not all influencers directly cooperate with companies – for instance, in the gaming industry, some influencers livestream a lot of different games, while not being affiliated or sponsored by any of its producers, instead being mostly motivated by the need to create and build social relationships (Young & Wiedenfeld, 2022).

This seems to suggest that, while the curatorship model does indeed differ from the other existing models of value co-creation, its superiority to the influencer-based value co-creation is not as clear-cut and absolute as some of its proponents suggest. Nevertheless, it is probably still a well-suited contemporary take for the phenomenon – and thus a commercially viable one, as shown by the examples of East and Southeast Asian markets. However, the risk of fraudulent 'smuggling' of the influencer model under the guise of claimed curatorship should be kept in mind.

Based on this, some managerial implications can be formulated. First, platforms offering curatorship-based services should cooperate with the other platform actors in order to put forward clear rules and institutions that would foster curator independence from companies as well as transparency, thus helping to clearly differentiate curatorship value co-creation from influencer value co-creation. This will help them define clear value proposition for partnered companies.

Similarly, for companies, understanding the types of value that can be co-created using curatorship model, should make it easier to incorporate it into their marketing funnels and integrate it with other communication and sales channels. From this perspective, curators and influencers could both be utilized by companies, with the former providing consumers with honest breakdown of company's offer and knowledge of how to make use of it, and the latter – generating attention and interest.

As this paper is conceptual in nature, its limitation is lack of empirical testing of the proposed model. Accordingly, this constitutes a direction for future research. The types of value co-created by different types actors in curatorship model could be verified by large qualitative studies of an ecosystem based around curatorship platform such as Taobao or Naver.

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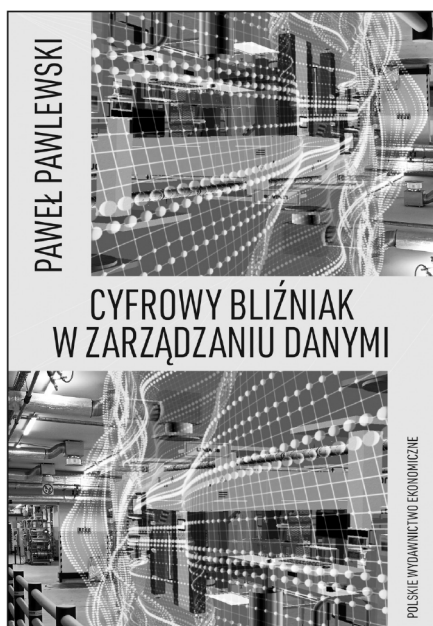
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ZAPOWIEDŹ



PAWEŁ PAWLEWSKI

CYFROWY BLIŹNIAK W ZARZĄDZANIU DANYMI

Książka jest podsumowaniem badań i doświadczeń autora z ostatnich kilkunastu lat w obszarze modelowania i symulacji procesów wytwarzania i intralogistyki. Celem działań naukowych i praktycznych autora jest zbudowanie takiego podejścia, aby wychodząc od tego, co się dzieje w fabryce, umożliwić budowanie modeli symulacyjnych fabryk w taki sam sposób, jak budowane są (projektowane i wdrażane) procesy w fabrykach rzeczywistych. Zburzyłoby to istniejące w tej chwili bariery we wdrażaniu technologii symulacyjnych w praktyce działania fabryk, dając inżynierom produkcji i logistykom narzędzia, które są dla nich jasne i zrozumiałe, a przede wszystkim potrzebne. Jednocześnie podejście takie wymaga wiedzy o zasobach

fabryki, o procesach, o sytuacjach, w których są podejmowane decyzje, o logice podejmowania decyzji, jej skutkach wyrażających się wynikami działania fabryki. To wszystko powoduje, że przestaje się mówić jedynie o modelowaniu symulacyjnym, pomagającym rozwiązać pojawiający się problem, a zaczyna się rozważać obszar dużo szerszy, który w tej chwili oznaczany jest pojęciem cyfrowego bliźniaka fabryki.