

Towards a theoretical clarification of the co-creation experiences in online brand communities

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Abstract- *The acquisition of customers' skills and knowledge has enabled organizations to serve them more effectively and efficiently. The proliferation of technology has profoundly changed the way customers behave and enjoy their experience. Indeed, the understanding of co-creating online experiences is still limited given the changes in specific virtual environments. Based on a theoretical analysis, this article seeks to examine the motivations for customer engagement in co-creation experiences on online brand communities while developing a conceptual framework. At the managerial level, this article aims to provide organizations with valuable insights on how to create an experience to engage customers in the process of co-creating experiences.*

Keywords: *Co-creation experiences, Online brand communities, Value co-creation, Customer engagement, Motivations.*

I. INTRODUCTION

At the start of a new digital era transformation and innovation, the progressive digitalization that the world has experienced in recent years is becoming an integral part of daily life, revolutionizing the world of business, individual habits and consumer behavior. Indeed, the proliferation of technology has spawned new business models and contributed to the development of online brand communities that offer individuals from around the world with

similar interests, the ability to come together and share information regardless of location, distance, and time (Dover and Kelman, 2018).

In this context of postmodernism (Heilbrunn, 2008, as cited by Sundqvist and Walter, 2016) that characterizes our time, customers are no longer considered a "passive audience" who simply seek to satisfy specific needs, but active individuals who seek unique and memorable consumption experiences (Neuhofer et al. 2015; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). However, these experiences result from the collaborative interaction between the customer and the firm in a specific place, during a specific period, and for a specific event. This characterizes the basis of co-creation where customers and organizations generate and develop meaning together.

The process of co-creation experiences cannot take place without customer engagement (Storbacka et al., 2016), let alone explaining engagement isn't enough. It's also necessary to understand what results from it. Indeed, customer engagement in value actualization through co-creation provides new and highly interesting

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analytical frameworks, which allow researchers to revisit existing marketing theories, and give marketers actions that allow them to improve their knowledge in order to adapt their offer, and innovate.

In this vein, (Leclercq et al., 2016) underlined in their research agenda, the need to make a contribution on the co-creation experiences, given that the literature is still limited. This is why this research aims to answer the following question: How do customers engage in co-creation experience on online brand communities? The aim of this theoretical review is to discuss the concept of co-creation experiences as revealed and recognized in the research streams, to contribute to the literature with a refined understanding of customers engagement motivations for co-creating experiences in online brand communities, and provide organizations with valuable input on how to create an experience to engage customers in the process of co-creating experiences.

I. CO-CREATING EXPERIENCES IN THE ERA OF ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES**1. CO-CREATION EXPERIENCES**

Because of its importance, value is one of the most fundamental terms in social and management science research, which appeals to both researchers and practitioners. (Holbrook, 1999, as cited by Varshneya and Das, 2017) has revealed that value cannot be extracted directly from the products or services themselves, but is derived from the consumer experience. Furthermore, (Mathwick et al., 2001, as cited by Varshneya and Das, 2017) confirmed this conclusion, and determined that customers' perceptions of value are based on their overall consumption experience. This

experiential perspective was introduced with the work of (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982, as cited by Tynan et al., 2014) who defined it as "the behavior of people in general, and of consumers in particular is the fascinating and endlessly complex result of a multifaceted interaction between organism and environment".

The concepts of value and experience are closely related (Yang and Mattila, 2016). This is based on the assumption that customers attribute value to experiences, and on evidence that experiences co-created by clients and organizations provide value (Suntikul and Jachna, 2016). In this respect, value co-creation represents a joint collaborative activity of parties involved in direct interactions, aiming to contribute to the value that emerges for one or both parties (Grönroos, 2012). The dynamic and evolving nature of value co-creation over time has argued that it's affected by the actions of individuals in the past, and is forward-looking. This is particularly recognized by (Fan et al., 2020) who point out that value is both imagined, used and can be created from past, present and/or future experiences.

Establishing a focused dialogue with customers, and integrating their personal resources with those of organizations characterizes the co-creation experiences (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Co-creation experiences is a new paradigm for marketing, offering an innovative understanding of how and by whom experiences are created (Buhalis and Foerste, 2015). Co-creation experiences allows companies to gain a sustainable and distinctive competitive advantage if they

foster interactions with their customers while creating their own experience (Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013), especially in today's context where technologies allow them to access any information regardless of time, distance, and location. This is particularly recognized by (Neuhofer, et al., 2014) who demonstrate that technology is a key parameter to improve the co-creation of experiences.

Co-creating the experience requires the company to examine the content of the experience and develop personalized interactions with its customers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). This says that personalization is the end result of customers becoming co-creators of their own experience (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). In order for this personalization to occur, organizations need to create opportunities for their customers in which they can decide the level of engagement they want, and have the opportunity to experiment while creating an experience with them (Mathis et al., 2016). Moreover, (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) recognized that the customer would always be a value co-creator, regardless the nature of the customer experience. With an active role, the customer is able to influence and enhance the organization's available resources that can help create memorable experiences (Chathoth et al., 2016).

In co-creating experiences, organizations can no longer describe their customers as mere consumers of products, but rather must recognize them as partners in creating personalized experiences that add pleasure and value to their lives (Chathoth et al., 2016). (Neuhofer et al., 2015) have emphasized that the customer experience

should no longer be viewed as static or passively designed by the organization, but as dynamic, personal, and proactively co-created by staff and customer in a specific encounter (Neuhofer et al., 2015).

2. ONLINE BRANDCOMMUNITIES:COLLABORATIVE PLATFORMS BETWEEN CUSTOMERS AND ORGANIZATIONS

While the traditional view of organization focuses on total control of its value chains, co-creation experiences centers on customers as active participants in building their own experiences through customized and direct interactions with the organization (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Indeed, thanks to technological transformation, the progressive digitalization that the world has experienced in recent years has become an integral part of our daily lives and is revolutionizing the world of organizations and the behavior of individuals. In particular, online brand communities have proliferated over the last decade, allowing customers to communicate with brands, to share informations and experiences, to collaborate and socialize with other community members who have similar interests (Dover and Kelman, 2018). An online community is inherently an appropriate framework for developing parasocial interactions (Kim and Choi, 2019), as it is a space where members can share common interests and address their information, communication and knowledge exchange needs (Dover and Kelman, 2018).

A brand community can be defined as "groups of consumers who share an enthusiasm for the brand and a well-developed social identity, whose members jointly engage in group actions to achieve

collective goals or express their mutual feeling and commitment" (Hammedi et al., 2015). In this approach, the boundary of the brand community is not based on geography, but structures a set of values and meanings of the brand's admirers (Habibi et al., 2014). Consequently, it is an essential vector for fostering complex and lucrative synergies between individuals and brands (Schau et al., 2009).

As customers become increasingly proficient in using social networking sites, the organizations are trying to engage them through online brand communities. Online brand communities provide platforms for customers to share their experiences and feelings about brands (Hollebeek et al., 2017). In general, they enable brands to improve their differentiation and competitive position; it allows them to strengthen relationships and engage in co-creative experience activities (Tsai et al., 2012).

Increasingly as customers participate in online platforms to interact with other customers and brands (Kellet and Alden, 2016), marketers are struggling to understand how to create and maintain communities to increase customer value. By using and promoting online branded communities, the organizations are able to avoid the current consumer resistance to traditional media-based marketing programs.

II. CUSTOMERS ENGAGEMENT IN CO-CREATION EXPERIENCES: THE ROLE OF MOTIVATIONS

1. CUSTOMERS ENGAGEMENT IN CO-CREATING EXPERIENCES IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Customer engagement is a fundamental concept, frequently used in the context of value co-creation (Islam et al. 2018;

Storbacka et al., 2016). It can be defined as "cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity with positive valence linked to specific interactions between the customer and the brand" (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Sharing knowledge, helping other customers to consume better, making recommendations to improve customer experiences, engaging other potential customers to interact with a brand directly or indirectly, are some of the aspects qualified as customer engagement behaviour in the co-creation experiences (Sheth, 2019). More the customers are engaged in the process of co-creating experiences, more likely they are to gain a positive experience (Prebesen et al., 2013).

Co-creation experiences involves combining the resources of customers with those of organizations (Chathoth et al., 2016), which involves transforming customers from passive partners to active partners (Chathoth et al., 2016). Carù and Cova (2007) suggest that customers can be passively or actively engaged. Passive engagement focuses more on a "push" communication approach in which messages are disseminated by an organization and customers provide follow-up. While, active engagement occurs when the organization is involved in all stages of the process, from message communication to response, in other words, it allows customers to immerse themselves in an experience, providing them with a psychological benefit that affects their motivation (An et Han, 2020). However, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argue that co-creation experience is influenced by the active engagement of customers before, during, and after use. The challenge for organizations is to actively engage customers by providing a space in which they can combine their resources to

generate a variety of potential co-created experiences (Sigala, 2015).

Driven by the development of technologies, co-creation experience has recognized the emergence of online brand communities, which primarily serve to strengthen consumer engagement (Hollebeek, et al. 2017). Engagement in brand communities refers to it as “an individual’s intrinsic motivation to cooperate and interact with other members of the same social community” (Hollebeek, et al. 2017). According to Dover and Kelman, (2018) communities tend to be identified on the basis of commonalities among their members, which creates connections and transforms the community into a powerful platform for engagement. Indeed, highly engaged customers can also be a crucial source of knowledge, helping organizations with various activities such as new product design, and development ideas (Agrawal and Rahman, 2015). By providing feedback, or by participating in product design or assembly, customers contribute to improving the organization's offering through collaborative innovation, a key process of value co-creation (Neuhofer, 2016).

We argue that without customer engagement, there can be no value co-creation (Storbacka et al., 2016). However, not all customers are necessarily willing to engage in value co-creation. If such engagement is necessary, it must be stimulated. Indeed, consumer motivations would be the key drivers of the process of engaging in value co-creation (Leclercq et al., 2016).

Customers tend to be motivated¹ by their goals (Deci and Ryan, 2000). According to self-determination theory (Deci and & Ryan, 2000), the motivational factors that drive customers to engage in co-creative experience communities may be intrinsic or extrinsic (Roberts et al., 2014; Neghina et al., 2014). Intrinsic motivations refer to doing something voluntarily without expecting a reward, whereas extrinsic motivations involve a willingness to collaborate directly with the organization or influence its activities (Roberts et al., 2014). This has been recognized by (Fernandes and Remelhe, 2016) who argued that customers need to be motivated to participate in the co-creation experiences and that a better understanding of motivational factors is needed. (Zhang et al., 2015) explained that the degree of value co-creation depends on the willingness of the firm and the customer to participate in the process. The more actors engage in value co-creation, the more collaboration and value creation can occur (Abaidi and Vernet, 2018).

(Fernandes and Remelhe, 2016) examined the factors that encourage customers to participate in the co-creation experience process in an online brand community to distinguish relationships between individuals' willingness to engage in value co-creation and possible engagement factors. The latter includes intrinsic factors, knowledge factors, social and financial motivations. Intrinsic factors include experiences, enjoyment, and curiosity. Knowledge factors include knowledge transfer, self-improvement, and product

2. MOTIVATIONS FOR ENGAGING CUSTOMERS IN THE CO-CREATION EXPERIENCE

¹“Motivation is the desire to do something” (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

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improvement. Social factors include sharing of ideas and participation in a community, as well as organization. And, financial motivations include rewards for participation. However, the authors recognized that these findings apply only in the context of online communities that are already engaged in value co-creation activity (Fernandes and Remelhe, 2016).

(Roberts et al., 2014) also examined, through online interviews with gamblers, their motivations for engaging in value co-creation. Indeed, they found that there were four general motivations for engaging in value co-creation, but that the influence of each motivation depended on the type of activity and the individuals. These engagement factors were pleasure and interest, product improvement, love of the product, and social status within the group.

(Zhang et al., 2015) investigated the motivating factors for tourists' engagement in value co-creation. The review involved a literature review to mobilize a conceptual model to identify three motivations for customer engagement in value co-creation: brand, community, and financial reward.

(Morosan, 2015) also studied tourists' willingness to co-create value using mobile devices and found that safety, trust, personalization, innovation, and customer involvement all had a significant relationship with engagement in co-creating value.

(Constantinides et al., 2015) conducted a quantitative study on Facebook to determine the relationship between possible factors of engagement in value co-creation. They examined learning, social integration, personal integration, hedonic, and financial

factors, and found that opportunity to improve the product, satisfaction with the process and outcomes, community benefits, and enjoyment had the highest level of relationship with engagement in value co-creation. In addition, the authors distinguished a difference between "motivated co-creators" who were more likely to be attracted by an opportunity to improve the product, and "unmotivated co-creators" who were more interested in the enjoyment of the process (Constantinides et al., 2015).

(Jürgens and Leuenberger, 2014) also conducted a case study to investigate the motivating factors that lead students to participate in the value co-creation process. Like other studies, they found intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate engagement. Intrinsic motivators include pleasure and curiosity, while extrinsic motivators include financial gain and social recognition (Jürgens & Leuenberger, 2014). They also studied the effect of brand awareness and other social aspects on engaging in value co-creation, and found that positive brand awareness and improved relationships could increase the likelihood of engaging in value co-creation. In addition, the researchers confirmed that motivation to engage in value co-creation comes from a combination of sources rather than a single motivating factor (Jürgens and Leuenberger, 2014).

(Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014) conducted a case study to determine the drivers of engagement in value co-creation. They interviewed several stakeholders involved in a railway system in Scotland. The results showed that individuals become motivated to engage in value co-creation if they feel a

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desire to improve the organization's products or services. This is due to the individuals' sense of commitment to product development, as well as the organization's willingness to share the experience (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014).

(Shamim and Ghazali, 2014) developed 32 conceptual motivational factors for individuals to engage in value co-creation based on a review of the literature on social and experience motivations. The factors they focused on are, "experiential value" and "social influence". They proposed that experiences such as service and customer enjoyment, as well as social aspects such as community and status, are likely to motivate individuals to engage in value co-creation.

(Ophof, 2013) examined the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that motivate students to engage in value co-creation, and showed a combination of three motivational factors, such as learning, hedonic, and personal factors that were most related to engagement in value co-creation.

III. CONCLUSION

Co-creating experiences in online communities is of major interest to researchers and practitioners, and represents an essential level for managing the customer/company relationship. This article has attempted to dig deep into the literature on co-creation experiences to extract the various factors that motivate customers to be engaged in this process. This study is mainly based on a theoretical analysis that allowed us to discuss the different currents of existing research. Co-creation thus makes it possible to facilitate exchanges between customers and organizations, a better integration of actors' resources with those of companies, a

better engagement of customers by improving the degree of connection between them, and a sustainable and distinctive competitive advantage.

Papers implications

Managers can better manage customers and effectively involve them in the co-creation process if they better understand the different motivations that drive them to be engaged. A clear understanding of customer expectations could help managers provide memorable and personalized experiences (Neuhofer et al., 2015). Co-creation allows companies to have close ties with their customers, which increases their engagement, resulting in greater value added. Managers also need to find ways to keep their customers up to date with changing technologies. However, this requires a lot of hindsight on the part of the organization, as many co-creation efforts in the past have clearly backfired, resulting in negative publicity. Managers must also make efforts to create memorable customer experiences, and any service resumption must be addressed through active customer engagement in the event of a service failure. In the long term, co-creating experiences could lead to a competitive advantage for the company and a higher level of customer satisfaction, proving a win-win proposition for both.

Limitations and future research

Like all researchers, this one also has its limits. It was limited solely to analyzing customers' motivations for engaging in the co-creation of online experiences in a B2C context. Future research may be interested in exploring how customers engage in C2C co-

creation experience, and in demonstrating also the roles and contributions of organizations in the co-creation experience process.

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