

**CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF
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**L'EMPOWERMENT DU CONSOMMATEUR : UNE SOURCE DE CO-
CRÉATION DE VALEUR**

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Submission date: 03/01/2020

Acceptation date: 20/04/2020

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to clarify, through a literature review, another trend practiced by many companies through which they produce their products and services. It is mainly the delegation of power to consumers to participate in the creation of business offers according to their expectations. This new trend manifests itself by the use of empowerment strategies (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006) that are recently adopted by a set of companies in their value co-creation approach. With the evolution of new digital technologies, the passive consumer of the 80s has become a consum'actor (Badot and Cova, 1992), in other words, an active consumer, actor of his own consumption and his own choices. This fact leads the companies of nowadays to delegate a set of tasks, due to the opportunities offered by new digital technologies in order to benefit from the skills of consumers to co-create together products according to their expectations. While involving the consumer in their process of value creation, who's the cardinal purpose is to defend a new marketing orientation that asserts that the customer is not only an individual with needs to be satisfied, but also an agent acting with skills that can co-create value and/or experience (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) according to the new SDL logic (vargo and luch 2004).

KEY WORDS: Empowerment, Competence, Co-creation, Value, SDL

RÉSUMÉ

L'objectif de cet article est d'éclaircir à travers une revue de littérature une autre tendance pratiquée par un ensemble d'entreprises par laquelle elles produisent leurs biens et services. Il s'agit principalement de la délégation du pouvoir aux consommateurs pour participer à la création des offres d'entreprises selon leurs attentes. Cette nouvelle tendance se manifeste dans l'emploi des stratégies d'empowerment (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006) du client que récemment un ensemble d'entreprises adoptent dans leurs démarches de co-crédation de valeur. Avec l'évolution des nouvelles technologies digitales, le consommateur passif des années 80 est devenu un consom'acteur (Badot et Cova, 1992), disons un consommateur actif, acteur de sa consommation et ses choix. Ce constat amène les entreprises d'aujourd'hui à déléguer un ensemble de tâches, à travers les opportunités offertes par les nouvelles technologies digitales afin de bénéficier des compétences des consommateurs pour co-crédier ensemble des produits selon leurs attentes. Tout en faisant participer le consommateur dans leurs processus de création de valeur, dont la finalité cardinale est de défendre une nouvelle orientation marketing qui affirme que le client n'est pas seulement un individu avec des besoins à satisfaire, mais un agent agissant avec des compétences qui peut co-crédier de la valeur et/ou de l'expérience (Prahalad et Ramaswamy, 2004) selon la nouvelle logique SDL (vargo et luch 2004).

MOT CLES : Empowerment ; Compétence ; Co-crédation ; valeur ; SDL.

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

INTRODUCTION

With the evolution of new technologies, mobile applications, voice assistants, social media and connected objects, the passive consumer of the 80s has become a consumer actor (Badot and Cova, 1992), in other words, an active consumer who participates and gets involved alongside the companies, and who has taken all the power to collaborate with them. This increased power by consumers and their empowerment has confirmed the thinking of a majority of marketing research authors who have privileged a new direction. It's mainly about companies that promote the empowerment of customers in the development of new products and services through innovative ideas proposed by their customers and that they also consider them as companies that will gain a competitive advantage over "traditional" companies who do not empower their customers. All this based on the article published by Christoph Fuchs and Martin Schreier in 2011, which testified that the way of creating new products, in which firms are solely responsible for generating new product ideas, and deciding which products should be brought to market, is increasingly being contested by academics and innovation management practitioners (e.g., Chesbrough, 2003; Cone, 2006; Lakhani, 2006; Pitt et al., 2006; Von Hippel and Katz, 2002). In particular, many have advocated the idea of democratizing innovation by empowering customers to take a much more active role in the development of new business products (Von Hippel, 2005). This has become feasible because the Internet, now is allowing businesses to build strong online communities where they can listen and integrate thousands of customers from around the world (Dahan and Hauser, 2002; Füller et al., 2006; Nambisan, 2002; Sawhney and Prandelli, 2000; Sawhney et al., 2005). This reflection defended by Christoph Fuchs and Martin Schreier in 2008 confirms the idea announced by Fayn et al. (2019, p. 122) that, with the advent of the empowered consumer, exchanges are re-balanced and the balance of power tends to be reversed. This state of affairs has clarified why a set of companies today are adopting "Empowerment" strategies (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006) by involving the consumer in their value creation processes within the framework of the new SDL logic "Service Dominant Logic" (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008; Lusch and Vargo, 2006), which specifically aims to consider companies and consumers as actors who collaborate to create value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). In this

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

new approach, Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008, focus on mobilizing the resources of consumers and companies to create value. The company could no longer limit itself to transfer value to the consumer, but must co-create it together with him (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). And as a testimony of companies that excel in involving and integrating their customers in a co-creation process, there is for example Lego Ideas: it is an online platform (<https://ideas.lego.com/dashboard>) on which Internet users can propose ideas for construction or figurine through the votes of its customers. There is also *Déathlon* which has developed a platform (*Déathlon Création*): *The Sport idea Box* to allow consumers to test products and then propose ideas for improvement of the the brand's sport equipments. This illustration clarified that it would be useful to think about client empowerment in terms of two basic dimensions in the context of new product development, while relying on two types of empowerment strategies that have been distinguished in the literature: empowerment to create, which allows clients to submit ideas for new products, and empowerment to select, which is based on consumer votes for the choice of products that will ultimately be marketed (Fuchs and Schreier, 2010). So the purpose of our article is to clarify the approach of value co-creation through the two previously mentioned empowerment strategies in order to understand the role assumed by the client, approach which has opened up and offered him a new way and new opportunities that place him on the same level of equality in the process of value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2008).

1- THE LOGICAL DOMINANT SERVICE THEORY (SDL)

The most important purpose of any business is to create value for stakeholders (Woodruff, 1997). Historically, this concept of value has been a very well appreciated research topic (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008). In the marketing literature, researchers have tried to define value, especially by identifying its main determinants. However, differences in the conceptualization of value have persisted because of differences in clients perceptions of it in a very abstract, subjective and situational way (Guillermo, 2009). Moreover, the notion of value differs according to two paradigms: the dominant logic of good and the dominant logic of service (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Regarding the first logic, it is consolidated from the

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

economical paradigm of the classical school commissioned by Smith (1776) in which companies focus on the maximization of benefits and the efficiency of the functions of producing and products marketing. This logic is based mainly on the supply side, and therefore on one entity which is the "producer". Its main goal focuses on maximizing corporate profit and the efficiency of the production and product marketing functions that characterize goods by their exchange value. Following this logic, Vargo and Lusch (2004) consider that the place where the value is produced (the organization) is different from the place where happens the interaction between the supplier and the customer (the market). Indeed, the main place of interaction between the company and the customer is the market, the real meeting point between supply and demand. However, Vargo and Lusch (2004) are among the researchers who have considered that the logic based on goods and the company is no longer adapted to the economical context of the Internet age, and favors the emergence of a new SDL logic. This second service-dominant market logic is considered as spaces where companies and customers deploy and integrate resources, which are the basis of value creation and which are mainly inspired by the result of the combined effect of operant resources, which is defined as a set of knowledge, skills, expertise, capacity, activated by each of the stakeholders, the company and the consumer (Brodie, Little and Motion, 2008) in order to co-create value. For these authors, the consumer is always a co-creator of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Value is no longer only created by the firm (and its suppliers) and then destroyed by consumers; but, it is "co-created" by different stakeholders who exchange knowledge and skills (Ramirez, 1999). In this perspective Service Dominant Logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008), consumers and firms mobilize their respective resources to create value. The company can no longer be limited to transfer the value to the consumer but must co-create it with him (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). This has given the opportunity to many companies today to adopt "Empowerment" strategies (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006) by involving the consumers in their value creation process in order to create offers that meet their expectations.

If we address the case of products to be developed, these strategies are materialized by the implementation of various co-creation practices such as brand communities (Cova and Ezan, 2008), interactive crowdsourcing (Djelassi and Decoopman, 2016), etc. This new orientation

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

of companies in customer involvement is linked to the new usage and practice of new technologies, and this is where the consumer feels his power increasing and becomes a true partner of the company or service provider (Payne et al., 2008).

2- THE SDL: AN INNOVATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE EVOLUTIONS OF MARKETING RELATED TO THE ROLE ASSUMED BY THE CONSUMER

For some researchers, the starting point of the value co-creation phenomenon together with the consumer is essentially attributed to the evolution of the consumer's role over time (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000; 2004 a and b). This so-called «postmodern» evolution emanates from the sociology of consumption (Badot and Cova, 2003, Lipovetsky, 2006). From this perspective, consumers are considered to have gradually become "more active, more participative, more resistant, more activist, more playful, more social and more communitarian" (Cova and Carrère, 2002). The consumer is described as being more enterprising in his relationship with the company to make heard his voice (Cova, 2008), better informed thanks to the rise in power of the Internet, more connected to others through the proliferation of social media, and more engaged in his choices and consumption practices (e.g. Gonzalez et al., 2009; Kreziak and Cova, 2010). This aggregate of acquisitions contributes then to what is defined today as a "power grab" or "consumer empowerment". And as proof of this evolution, the three figures of the new consumer who have emerged from the marketing speeches of the last twenty years, the individualistic consumer for the early 90's, the hedonistic consumer at the turn of the millennium and the creative consumer since the mid-2000s which confirmed the increase of consumer skills. To the individualistic consumer dialogue practices, have been added the playful and aesthetic practices of the hedonistic consumer, and then the resources integration of the creative consumer. These practices have been synthesized by Cova and Cova (2009, p92) in the following table:

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

Table 1 - New marketing approaches - Cova and Cova, 2009			
The new approaches to marketing	Figures of the new consumer	Skills of the new consumer	example
Relationship marketing	Individualistic consumer	Dialogue	Express satisfaction, or claim on a product
Experiential marketing	Hedonistic consumer	Dialogue + play a role	Participate in the competitions
Collaborative marketing	Creative Consumer	Dialogue + play a role + integrate resources	Propose new concepts

Source: Cova, B., & Cova, V. (2009). Figures of the new consumer: a genesis of consumer governmentality. Marketing Research and Applications (French Edition), 24(3), 81-100.

The transformation of consumers into more connected, informed and active players in the market has changed the habit that firms have adopted in the design of their products. Consumers have more power and are aware that they could by themselves create value. When consumers and companies collaborate, we talk about co-creation. When a firm decides to incorporate their consumers into its innovation process, we also talk about customer empowerment, a special case of co-creation.

3- THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT IN MARKETING

The concept of empowerment is defined by Gibson (1991) as "the social process of recognizing, promoting and enhancing the capacities of individuals to meet their needs, solve their problems and mobilize the necessary resources to control their lives". It is a concept that has its origins in work carried out mainly in the fields of educational science (Freire, 1977) and psychology (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988). Hence, these different works define the concept of empowerment as a four-phase process (Fayn, 2017):

1. An individual phase: This corresponds to an awareness of an individual as the bearer of a singularity through observation and analysis of his situation.

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

- 2. A collective phase:** This consists of creating links and sharing experiences, organizing to develop a wider knowledge in a specific field.
- 3. A collaborative phase:** This allows learning, to decide on his choices, act, produce or co-design.
- 4. A societal phase:** that allows thinking about the evolution of society and democratic renewal.

It is this progression of phases that will transform the "empowered" individual, gives him more confidence, control, ability to take part in the decisions that concern him by promoting a sense of autonomy and control in his decision-taking, enabled by the perception of skill gain (Lincoln et al., 2002). As debated by Marie-Gerges and Fayn Veronique in the French management review N° 278/2019, a variety of approaches to define the empowerment in Marketing, is it redistribution or power takeover? The question remains open because, for some people, the empowerment refers to a permission given to consumers to control certain product variables. We will then discuss the "topdown" movement driven by the company towards its customer. But it also happens that empowerment characterizes an inverse dynamic, "bottom up", where the consumer frees himself from the expertise of the professional by relying on his own experience, and on that of his peers to assert an independent position and define autonomously his needs. These antagonisms, related to the nature of the empowerment, are found in theoretical debates: Empowerment is sometimes seen as a process, part of a company's "top-down" or "bottom-up" approach, linked to spontaneous community involvement, and sometimes as a psychological state. For the first type of empowerment as a process, for some researchers, customer empowerment, also known as "power delegation" (Bonnemaizon et al., 2008), is a "top-down" relationship, a subtle combination of information and educational tools that facilitate the customer's choices. With the rise of digital technology, some tasks could be conceded to the consumer, such as the choice of the technical or aesthetic characteristics of the product, its design, its mode of distribution or its price. Empowerment then comes close to allowing the consumer to control certain variables. The company will support customers in mastering their consumption experiences, and then

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

integrate them into the creation of value. Such cooperation blurs the differences in status, and consumers become co-producers, co-innovators, marketing assistants, relays, performers or part-time employees (Bonnemaizon et al., 2012). Conversely, according to other researchers, the empowerment expresses an aspiration that starts from the bottom up and rises, releasing the consumer from the imposed straitjacket ("bottom-up" approach). The initiative goes to the consumer. This is not about partnership but about taking control. Top-down or bottom-up dynamics, these processes refer to different conceptions of the client, a conciliatory buyer, influential expert, or vigilant citizen.

The second type of empowerment as a **psychological state of the consumer** is defined by Wright (2006) as "a mental state generally accompanied by an action that enables a consumer or group of consumers to assert their own choices and make decisions based on their needs, desires and requests towards other individuals or organizations in the marketplace". Indeed, Fuchs et al (2010) show that involving actively the consumer by offering him the possibility to personalize the product is a way of developing on him a strong feeling of "psychological attachment" to his purchase. According to Guintcheva (2014) "Limited to the taking of autonomy within the market sphere, this "feeling" goes beyond self-assertion to "environmental control".

In addition, we also focus on other visions and conceptions, whose main goal is to light up the main basic pillars introduced in literature reviews around the word *empowerment*. For Prentice et al (2016), they focus on company-client relations through the prism of the "service dominant logic" (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

Emphasis is placed on collaboration with the provider to co-build more services, but there is no mention of broader customer expectations such as knowledge sharing between consumers or skills development. Similarly for Denegri-Knott, Zwick and Schroeder, 2006, *consumer empowerment* could be conceptualized as process or outcome. As a process, it is defined as a set of actions put in place by the consumer to exercise control over decisions that concern him (e.g. the price of products, their production process, distribution channels, etc.). As a result, its definition is more subjective because it is linked to individual perception, it concerns the

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

feeling that the consumer has of being able to control, understand his environment and actively try to master it. In the same logic, the concept of empowerment has also made sense in research on consumer behavior. Hence two types of empowerment are distinguished; the first is structural empowerment, which refers to a strategy initiated by the company in the context of co-creation activities (Fuchs et al., 2010). The second is defined by psychological empowerment, which refers to a gain in skills, autonomy and consumer control (Wathieu & al, 2002; Davies and Elliott, 2006; Denegri-Knott and al., 2006; Pruche et al., 2015). Thus, several currents of research have emerged considering the consumer as "empowered". This is the case, among others, of the works on co-creation, mentioned at the beginning. It is defined as "an active, creative and social process, based on collaboration between producers and users, initiated by the company to generate value for customers" (Prahalad and Ramswamy, 2004). In this perspective, the process is initiated by the company to generate value for customers. Identically, in marketing literature the concept of empowerment has also been extensively studied in the context of new product development for the elaboration of an innovative offer (Füller, Jawecki and Mühlbacher, 2009; Fuchs and Schreier, 2011; Fuchs, Prandelli and Schreier, 2010). Finally, the marketing literature has confirmed that the concept of empowerment has taken three aspects that are considered as the basic pillars of the concept:

1- Collaborative managerial strategies by which companies involve consumers in the creation of new products, and this is where we find the two main strategies adopted by companies and which were developed by Fuchs and Schreier, 2011 in two managerial practices of consumers empowerment: empowerment to create and empowerment to select. Empowerment to create consists on involving the consumer in defining promising new product concepts, by relying on the consumer's creative and innovative capacities, through innovative ideas proposed by customers; and the empowerment to select, which aims to select the offer that will be produced and marketed by the company that relies on consumer votes for product selection.

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

2- Consumer resistance towards firms marketing practices.

3- Psychological empowerment which refers to a personal subjective experience through which the consumer masters his consumption through the resources and information at his disposal.

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

CONCLUSION

After a conceptualization of the term empowerment among many authors, through a literature review, we noticed a diversity of visions. Each one of them conceptualizes it in a different way according to their reflections and circumstances but in the whole they unite and gather around the same idea, that the empowerment manifests itself in the acquired power and perceived competence of customers. Similarly if we return to the literature we will find some authors defending the involvement of customers in the creation of products as the case of von hippel, Prahalad and Ramswamy, 2004 in the work of co-creation, and Füller, Jawecki and Mühlbacher, 2009; Fuchs and Schreier, 2011; Fuchs, Prandelli and Schreier, 2010 in the creation of new innovative products. This fact is based on the same reflection of our thematic why a majority of companies have adopted the application of new collaborative managerial strategies by which they involve their consumers in the creation of new products, relying on two strategies developed by Fuchs and Schreier, 2011 empowerment to create and empowerment to select. This business orientation is explained by the development of new technologies that empower customers (Shaw et al., 2006), and gives them a new role that allows them to have a transformed relationship with the company (Laurent, 2008). Notably, a more egalitarian relationship of partnership and collaboration, conferring the consumer the status of actor (Firat and Dholakia, 2006), co-creator of values (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Lusch and Vargo, 2006). This increase in skills translates into real empowerment of the client, that is to say, the acquisition of "power" (Scott and Jaffe, 1998). Which pushes these companies to rethink their relationship with their customers and to integrate it in their approach through empowerment strategies, regarding some successful experiences of a set of companies that give the opportunity to customers to propose their creations through platforms such as the case of Lgo and Ikia in order to involve the skills of customers and integrate it in their co-creation process, whose the purpose is to offer products and services in line with the skills of the new empowered consumers.

Finally, these companies are aware that they are in front of a consumer who is more free, more involved in his consumption (Firat and Dholakia, 2006) and co-creator of his value

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

(Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Lusch and Vargo, 2006) or rather a consumer who is "more active, more participative, more resistant, more activist, more playful, more social and more communitarian" (Cova and Carrère, 2002). So our article defended through a synthesis of a literature review, has confirmed the power acquired by the consumer and the role he has taken on, which has opened up and offered him new paths and new opportunities that place him on the same level of equality in the process of value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2008).

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

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CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: A SOURCE OF CO-CREATION OF VALUE

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