UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF CO-CREATION FOR ENTREPRENEURS

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Abstract: *The word "co-creation" is used in different disciplines and that can sometimes make it difficult to grasp. "Co-creation" can intervene in a wide range of practices, and the meaning of the concept seems to evolve and to depend on one's point of view (from co-innovation to co-production). This paper has two mains objectives. First, understand better the full implication of these different concepts linked with "co-creation". Secondly, help to understand how entrepreneurs should use co-creation, regarding to their marketing objectives. We will compare the definitions of co-creation, and present our project of qualitative study.*

Key Words: *Co-creation, User Experience, Fashion, Mass Customization and Personalization*

1. INTRODUCTION

The business world recognizes "co-creation" as an important trend (according to specialized media including Forbes) and these last years we have observed the launch of many projects inviting clients to collaborate with companies.

In academic literature, the concept of "co-creation" has different definitions, that are often close, but shades are important to understand. The definition of "co-creation" needs to be clarified.

We have two objectives. First, understand the links and the differences between all the definitions of "co-creation" we found, to give a more precise definition of the concept, and distinguishing it from other concepts that create sometimes confusion. Secondly, understand better how co-creation can help entrepreneurs better discern the perception of the managers concerning co-creation and its potential utility for their activities.

We will start by a literature review that will confront different concepts related to "co-creation", and to complete it, we will present a project of qualitative study. Our study will help to understand better how co-creation can change the relationship between entrepreneurs and their clients, and how company can use it. We will examine first the appearance polysemous of co-creation, then we will precise the links with other close concepts (customization, personalization, co-design). We will continue by questioning the relationship between consumer and producer, and we will complete by the presentation of the prosecution of our research.

2. CO-CREATION: A POLYSEMOUS NATURE?

2.1. History of the concept

Co-creation is a fashionable concept today, used in many different academic fields. And that can be confusing… How did it start?

In marketing, since the 70s, academic researchers have highlighted the fact that the consumer can be useful for the company [1]. Giving place to the consumer and making him contribute became an interesting way for a company to create value [2]. For Prahalad et Venkatram Ramaswamy, who both had a strong influence, stimulating exchanges between consumer and company is important to keep on innovating [3]. This question became more and more important with the facilitation of access to the Internet that can help establish the consumer as a "co-creator" of the experience [4]. For different authors as Hetzel (2002), the consumer is a co-creator, as he co-constructs the meaning.

And the fact that the consumer is active became a commonplace.

The growth of experiential marketing is linked to this idea of a non-passive consumer. To have an experience, the consumer needs to become an actor [5]. The experience is defined by Filser [6] as an interaction between an individual and an object, one that creates meaning.

Currently, the field of experiential marketing is evolving towards studies of "co-creation of the experience" [7]. The activity of the consumer is considered more and more important.

2.2 Co-creation of value

An integrative review published in 2016, based on the best 181 articles published in marketing during the last 10 years, recently helped form a definition of co-creation of value [8]. Their definition is: "A joint process during which value is reciprocally created for each actor (individuals, organizations, or networks). These actors engage in the process by interacting and exchanging their resources with one another. The interactions occur on an engagement platform where each actor shares its own resources,

integrates the resources provided by others, and potentially develops new resources through a learning process."

The question of the value is always central in marketing. Questioning the client role in this creation of value isn't new: "according to Vargo and Lusch (2008), the client is always a value co-creator" [9]. Vargo and Lush, founders of SDL (Service Dominant Logic), are criticized for offering a too "angelic" point of view, that occults an important part of consumers' practices that bring to light the fact that co-creation can exist outside of markets [10]. For Cova, ouyot-Gallichet and Bonnemaizon, "co-creation is the orchestration of a set of skills linked with the attraction, by the consumer, of resources made available by the company and their integration in consumer's own resources."[10]. Apart from BtB and BtC, CtC could become the most important place of value exchanges: it's the "value co-creation futurible" described by Badot and Cova [11], inspired by Nissanoff (2006). Authors like Perret consider that the value is totally made by the consumer himself [12].

Entrepreneurs pursue an objective of maximization of the value of their offer, and their consumers could be well positioned to help for that [2]. The concept of "co-creation of value", help to understand the importance of well understanding how the consumers perceived the creation of the value. If they believe that the value is principally created by them directly, they could choose, if they have the possibility, to skip from the entrepreneur. Are managers aware of this risk?

2.3 How to define co-creation

As we just saw, co-creation could refer to different concepts, as value co-creation, co-creation of the experience… Also, different terms seem to be really close, as "co-innovation", "co-production", "co-design".

To simplify, "co-creation" can be considered as a "meta-concept" that incorporates different concepts as co-production, etc. [9]. For Sanders and Stappers, co-creation can be used to describe "any act of collective creativity (...) creativity that is shared by two or more people. Co-creation is a very broad term with applications ranging from the physical to the metaphysical and from the material to the spiritual" [13].

This choice to define co-creation as a "global concept" helps consider all the practices linked to it. But at the same time, it demands to be really precise when talking about something in particular.

2.4 Different levels of co-creation

If many authors agree that co-creation can refer to different phenomena and that it is therefore important to distinguish them to avoid confusion, the question of how to classify them is still pending. We found two different, but relevant, propositions. The first one linked with the level of consumer's investment, and the other depending on the phase of the process when co-creation happens.

a) Typology linked with the level of consumer's investment

"Research on co-creation commonly contain 'black and white' comparisons (no involvement versus involvement) while this is more diverse in practice" recognized Weber, Gruppelaar, and Oosterhof. They experimented with 2 different kind of co-creation, and their results showed that the level of involvement did matter: "purchase intentions and word-of-mouth will only be affected significantly in case of 'full' involvement" [14]. This observation could be coupled with Antéblian, Filser et Roederer (2013) that distinguish 3 levels: the interpretative collaboration ("collaboration interpretative"), the directed self-production ("autoproduction dirigée") and the creative co-production ("coproduction créative") [15]. We are going to detail them.

- **The interpretative collaboration**

According to the authors, it's the first level of consumer participation. It refers to "the work of interpretation done by the consumer to give meaning to the context to which he is exposed. This type of participation involves a mental process of constructing meaning and emotional responses." [15].

- **The directed self-production**

This concept refers to directed self-production developed by Dujarier (2008). For Antéblian, Filser and Roederer, directed self-production "includes all the actions that the consumer is required to accomplish in carrying out what is expected of him in a given servuction context. The consumer has no freedom for improvisation. This highly instrumental form of participation is a source of functional value. In the history of retailing, the success of self-service is a good illustration."[15]

- **The creative co-production**

This third level "calls upon the consumer's intelligence, competences and creativity and gives him fair degree of autonomy. Anteblian and al. (2013) posit that we can speak of creative co-production when the consumer is deeply involved and constructs meaning through his actions during the experience."[15]. At this point, the consumer's creativity is really active. We can now understand that, for certain other authors, "co-creation" could refer to this last category only.

A similar idea is presented by Hoyer and al.: "firms that are highest in their intensity of co-creation in a particular stage of product development rely exclusively on consumer for their development activities in that stage". Even if they didn't describe different steps of "intensity of co-creation", we understand that the intensity of co-creation is, for them, corollary of the importance given to the consumer action (and symmetrically the reduction of the company participation) [16].

Another proposition often appears in advices given at practitioner by professional media, as in academic literature: identify co-creation according to the moment when it takes place. We will present it before show how it can be related to the "level of consumer involvement" we just presented.

b) Typology depending on the phase of the process when co-creation happens

Le Nagard and Reniou [17] work on "co-innovation". As it can be related to co-creation, it's interesting for us to take a closer look at their proposition. They identify five steps of the innovation process, when the client can be solicited: ideas generation, concepts development, product/service development, tests, and communication [17].

We can see similarity with another proposition, made by Weber, Gruppelaar, and Oosterhof: "Four stages are particularly suitable for customer involvement: ideation, service development, commercialization, and post-launch activities." [14].

If there isn't yet a perfect way to classified co-creation process, we can already realize that co-creation can happen in many different contexts, and take different forms. And this could have consequences on consumer experiences [14].

c) Key variables: consumer's investment and phase of the process

For Hoyer and al., the level of consumer's investment and the phase of the process are both important, and they connect them in there concept of "degree of co-creation effort, which includes both the scope and intensity of co-creation". In more, they notice that threes sets of antecedents could influence the scope and intensity of co-creation: "consumer-level motivators, firm-level impediments, and firm-level stimulators." [16]

To illustrate how we can pay attention in the same time to these two points we just saw, we created the Table 1.

Table 1. *Key variables*

Scope \ Intensity	Interpretative Collaboration	Directed self-production	Creative co-production
Ideation		X	X
Concept development		X	X
Service / product development		X	X
Tests		X	X
Commercialization	X	X	X
Communication	X	X	X

Each "X" figured in Table 1 could refer to a different type of co-creation, that could have (independently or combined) different effects on consumers experiences.

Now that we understand better the different visions of "co-creation", we can more easily question the link of the co-creation concepts to other that seemed, in first view, really similar. This is particularly pronounced in the "service/product development" part.

3. CONCEPTS LINKED TO CO-CREATION

Inside the "product/service" development, we can distinguish different models: co-design, co-production, personalization, customization... Their definitions can vary from one author to the other, but we will try to compare them.

3.1 Customization

If we look back to the typology of Antéblian, Filser and Roederer [15], customization can be considered as a directed self-production.

So, for authors like Marion, who only consider as co-creation the process that requires a real creativity from the consumer (closer to "creative co-production"), mass customization cannot be considered as co-creation: "Techniques of mass customization, that proposing co-design situations (...) fit precisely with the client's freedom space who can participate in the production process." [18].

In the other hand, for authors like Perret, customization is creative. He is not directly focused on the "do it yourself" aspect that can be integrated into customization, but analyzes that the most important thing that creates value is the "amateur choice": "His choice creates the offer from the stock" [12].

We can see that, even in one specific part of "co-creation", differing visions live along each other. Customization and mass-customization raises questions on the part of creativity and liberty given by the company and left to the consumer.

3.2 Personalization

The difference between Customization and personalization isn't always clear.

For Prahalad et Ramaswamy [3] Customization is not Personalization. "Personalization" "is about the customer becoming a co-creator of the content of their experiences", and "Customization" is when "consumers can customize a host of products and services (…) simply by choosing from a menu of features". For them, personalization offers more freedom than customization.

On the other hand, philosopher Olivier Assouly analyzes personalization as a narcissistic signature, fundamentally different from co-production that is a collective activity [12].

3.3 Co-design

To analyze the concept of "co-design", let's start with the researchers from the perspective of design: "By co-design we indicate collective creativity as it is applied across the whole span of a design process", wrote Sanders et Stappers [13] in the academic review "CoDesign". For them, "Co-design is a specific instance of co-creation. Co-design refers, for some people, to the collective creativity of collaborating designers. We use co-design in a broader sense to refer to the creativity of designers and people not trained in design working together in the design development process."

They also describe the influence of co-creation on the designer's practice: "The evolution in design research from a user-centred approach to co-designing is changing the roles of the designer, the researcher and the person formerly known as the 'User'. (...) The evolution in design research from a user-centred approach to codesigning is changing the landscape of design practice as well, creating new domains of collective creativity". [13].

4. KEY POINT: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSUMER AND THE PRODUCER

Supplier and consumer have been separated during the 20th century, due to the industrial era [19]. If the "BtC context is usually characterized by a large distance between the firm and its consumers" [16], the relationship between these two "poles" seems to evolve constantly (Maillet [12]).

Nowadays, every marketer pays attention to his "target". We know that if we are in BtB or BtC, the targets have their own specificities, and we don't forget CtC, working without a professional marketer... Whether the "producer" is targeting a "consumer", a "user", a "pair" or an "amateur" could make the process completely different. The way we define (and understand) the target impacts the whole project.

Addressing the receiver in the right way is a key point: "the term "consumer" doesn't work anymore. If we address the consumer as a consumer, this is particularly reductive and counterproductive. The consumer considers himself as a co-user and co-designer that owns the rights of the new products." (Moulier Boutang and Vicente [12]). Co-creation have changed the consumer and the marketer's roles, we should think about new way to understand them better.

These last years, a lot of new words appeared to qualify the "consumer" alternatively. The most famous in French appeared in 2001, in a professional article: "consom'acteur" (Maillet [12]). This neologism, that shows well the fact that the consumer is really active, can be translated by "consumactor".

Probably linked with the expansion of both Internet and Design cultures, the word "user" is frequently used. Even Von Hippel uses it in his famous concept of "lead user", to speak about clients with more competences than the "basic consumer".

The word "produser", notably used by Michel Bauwens, shows the convergence of the "producer" and the "user", particularly in the "open source world", where everyone who uses the product can modify it [20].

Another "new figure" is the "amateur", a word that doesn't have the same meaning in French and in English. In French, this word can name a "non-professional", but also a big fan, lover, connoisseur… This concept, linked with the cultural field, was notably developed by the sociologist Antoine Hennion. The amateur was also the object of a book directed by Olivier Assouly in 2010, confronting it directly to the fashion and creative fields.

The amateur needs the contact, and to recreate some links with the producer (Heilbrunn, [12]). He is a co-producer [12], and appears as non-adapted to the actual consumption system. His practice isn't compatible with consumption [19]. For Perret, the amateur is the real producer, the only one who creates the meaning and the only value [12].

The amateur, blurring the usual references, offers an alternative model of the classic "production / consumption".

As marketing is positioned between these two poles, between supply and demand, its role should evolve too.

Behind this relationship between "producer" and "consumer", there is an important question of how the balance of power between them is evolving. The consumer is a worker [21], and can become an "exploited worker"... How can we remunerate the collective creative intelligence? [12]

5. PROSECUTION OF PRESENT RESEARCH: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

After this shelling of definitions of co-creation, we face a whole range of possibilities for entrepreneurs: co-create with their consumers can take many different forms (as showed in table 1). Which one should be chosen and why? We will try to start answering. For that, we need first to understand better the interest for entrepreneurs linked with co-creation.

The future research, a qualitative study, will first be centered on the analysis entrepreneurs make of the meaning of "co-creation", the reasons that motivated them to try, and the experience they proposed to their consumers.

To start, interviews of European entrepreneurs that mounted co-creation projects in fashion design (e-shops that offer personalized bags, tee-shirt customization, brand based on a community of designers...) will help to unveil the emergence of a wide variety of practices linked to the concept of co-creation. We choose the European scale because it's one common market (and most of the e-shop offer now an easy delivery in all European country). The fashion sector is interesting for three main reasons. First, it's a sector well known as a "creative industry", it's easy to understand that co-creation should have an important impact there. Secondly, we can observe there a lot of co-creation projects (in luxury with company as Gucci or Balenciaga, in sportswear with Adidas, as in fast fashion with Jules or Promod, or in new models proposed by start-up as Away To Mars or Post Couture...). Last point that explain or choice is that we can already find, in the academic literature, some searches on that specific sector, and it will be interesting to link our results with them.

Even if we focus on fashion, we will compose a diversified sample (different sizes of company, from all ages, targeted different markets...). We will construct a detailed interview guide, composed with open-ended questions. We will try to know more about their perception of "co-creation", to collect their personal conception and definition, to understand why they are interested by this concept, how they discovered it, what are their sources of information and inspiration... Also, we will ask them to explain us in detail their motivations to try co-creation experiment, what are their objectives, the expected effects on consumer behavior, and the results (if they already tried). Another important point will be the process itself, we will try to get as many information about it as we can (when, where, how, how much, how long?). Like that, it will be easier to compare all the projects that we will discover with our qualitative study.

The questions will be asked in face to face, and we will record the integral exchange (with the permission of our respondents). The exchanges will be in a language comfortable for the respondents. We will try as often as possible to communicate in French or English, but if the respondents don't feel well, we will work with a professional translator. All the collected data will be treated with a thematic content analysis.

Collect definitions of co-creation given by the actors themselves will help to understand why they chose these

practices, to get to know what their goals were, and to learn their analysis of the process. The company's point of view will give access to more data. Interviews will be a way to learn more about how this co-creation process influences consumer experience according to managers, and how they consider there "consumer" today.

This quality method will help narrow down the definition of co-creation, understand its subtlety from the manager's point of view, and apprehend this trend with a focus on the creative field (fashion design). Starting the data collection by interviewing managers will also let appreciate the level of interest regarding the impact of co-creation on consumer experience.

6. CONCLUSION

Letting the consumer finalize the product is interesting (Moulier Boutang and Vicente [12]), even architects like the collective "Encore Heureux" are starting to work with this idea in mind. Co-creation impacts our practices of design, architecture, but also communication, marketing, etc. With co-creation, the roles of "supplier" and "consumer" are changing. The decision-making roles evolve (and inflect the prescription relation), as the managerial organisation of the company is impacted… (Darses de Montmollin [22]). Understanding the meaning given by professionals to co-creation will complete our literature review, and our results should help the entrepreneurs to know better how co-creation can be used for building a good relationship with their "consumers".

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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