

Customer Empowerment: An antecedent and a consequence of customer engagement in value co-creation

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Abstract:

For its numerous benefits, value co-creation has caught the interest of scholars and practitioners, as it has become a key approach for monitoring the customer-company relationship. Thus, the success of value co-creation relies on the willingness of the consumer to engage, alongside the company in this process, and requiring companies to rethink their innovation process by integrating the resources and skills of customers, as they no longer accept the passive role of simple recipients of marketing strategies. From now on they become empowered customers seeking to acquire more control and power in what makes sense in their interaction with the company and its offerings. Consisting of the delegation of power to the customer (Wright et al., 2006), customer empowerment has emerged as an extension of the postmodern movement that rejects the disconnection between consumption and production, and therefore represents an opportunity to co-create value with the customer. Drawing on the existing literature, this paper seeks to explore the concept of customer empowerment as both an antecedent and a result of customer engagement in value co-creation. We therefore propose a conceptual framework stressing the potential associations among psychological empowerment as a prerequisite and perceived empowerment as a consequence of customer engagement in value co-creation as well as their intention of future participation. The proposed framework also highlights the mediating effect of customer engagement in the connection between customer psychological empowerment and customer value co-creation behaviors, the moderating effect of customer creativity in the association of customers value co-creation behaviors and perceived empowerment, along with the mediating role of customers perceived task enjoyment among their perceived empowerment and their aspiration to participation in future value co-creation activities.

Keywords: Value co-creation, Customer engagement; Customer psychological empowerment, Perceived empowerment.

JEL Classification: M31

Paper type: Theoretical Research

1. Introduction

Today's interaction between the consumer and the company in the process of developing new products and services has become a subject that is of interest to researchers, companies, and communities. We can see that many companies call upon their consumer communities to participate in the generation of new ideas, in the development, selection, testing and evaluation of new products or services, or they are asked to generate advertising content. These different actions are not new in themselves, since calling on consumer participation has always existed in marketing. What is new is the variation and multiplication of the forms of collaboration that coexist today between the company and the consumer. Moreover, in a connected world, today's consumer is no longer a passive consumer, he has become a "consumer-actor" who is both informed and networked, who has access to all types of information and can express his opinions, impressions and experiences with absolute ease, and who seeks to acquire more control and power over what makes sense in his consumption. This requires companies to rethink their innovation processes by integrating the resources and skills of consumers. To this end, companies are being challenged to move towards the paradigm of value co-creation in which companies can improve their growth and profitability by allowing customers to play a more active role in the process of creating and developing new products and services.

Value co-creation recognizes the role of consumers as a contributor, creators, and employees of knowledge, enabling them to create value for themselves while enhancing their experience of the product or service. Value co-creation therefore breathes new life into the notion of value and insists that it results from a process of joint creation that occurs between the customer, who is the true creator of value, and the company, which limits itself to providing a value proposition. It thus prompts a rethinking of the organization as a whole, giving the consumer the power to interact correctly and fluidly in all phases of the value creation process.

Moreover and thanks to the Internet, today the exchange evolves by increasing the level and the speed of the interaction and the possibility of the actors to be part of the networks and communities of the others. Exchanges are therefore becoming more balanced and the power dynamic is tending to change thanks to new technologies that simplify the voice of consumers who are aware of their power, their knowledge and the freedom of their choices. Traditionally, only the company holds power. With value co-creation, consumers not only present their ideas and opinions, but also ensure an active source of creativity. To do this, the company must be willing to delegate some of its power to these participants. This process of delegation of power, or customer empowerment, is a "top-down" relationship driven by the company towards its customer, allowing the necessary balance of power in the relationship to be achieved through the revelation of the consumer and his skills (Bonnemaizon et al., 2008). However, empowerment can also be a reverse dynamic, qualified as "bottom up", whereby the customer takes control of the service process and influence it. In other words, it is the customer who determines the meaning of his consumption, who contributes skills, makes decisions and appreciates the result (Prentice et al, 2016). It refers to an individual motivation based on self-awareness as an actor within a market (Morrongiello et al., 2017).

Drawing on the relative literature, this paper aims to propose a conceptual framework investigating how customer empowerment can be examined in value co-creation process. To this end, we start by introducing value co-creation from a customer perspective, emphasizing the behaviors of participation and citizenship, and the crucial role of the engagement concept in the manifestation of these behaviors in value co-creation. Afterwards we explore the concept of customer empowerment and its possible relationships with value co-creation, underlining the mediating role of customer engagement accordingly to relevant studies. The

following paper explores in an original approach the dual position of customer empowerment as an antecedent and a prerequisite to customer engagement in value co-creation but also as a consequence of this engagement emerging as customers perceived influence on products, services and decision-making. Furthermore, the framework point out the moderating aspect of customer's creativity in the linkage between value co-creation behaviors and perceived empowerment. It also shows the impact of perceived task enjoyment on perceived empowerment and consumer intentions to participate in future value co-creation activities.

2. Theoretical incursion

2.1 Customer value co-creation

Value co-creation, according to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), is the personalized interaction between companies and consumers. It is defined as collaborative work between a consumer and a company in an innovation process, whereby the consumer and supplier engage to varying degrees in the activity of co-ideation, co-design, co-development, and co-creation of new products or services (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Building on this definition, Ind and colleagues (2017) argue that the "co-" part of co-creation involves a key role for participants and organizations. They go on to define co-creation as an active, creative, and social process that involves collaboration among both organizations and participants in order to generate benefits for all parties involved and create value for stakeholders (Ind et al., 2017).

Value co-creation thus involves a symbiotic relationship within firms and users (Polese et al., 2017) through the customization and co-production of products/services (Payne et al., 2008). Frow et al. (2011) state that value co-creation is an interactive process that involves two or more actors willing to integrate resources, who are engaged in particular aspects of respectively advantageous collaboration, resulting in value creation for these actors. Similarly, Leclercq and colleagues (2016) believe that value co-creation is a joint process in which each actor (individual, organization, or network) creates value for themselves and others. These actors interact and exchange resources in order to engage and participate in the process. The interactions take place on a platform for interactive and engaging participation. Each actor contributes its own resources while also integrating and incorporating resources offered by other actors, and can potentially develop new resources throughout the learning process (Leclercq et al., 2016).

Co-creation is a valued consumer behavior for service businesses (Jaakkola et al, 2015). According to Tynan et al. (2010), co-creation is a value-creation process between customers and service companies, using knowledge and effort to provide pleasant and satisfying service experiences. According to Ranjan and Read (2016), value co-creation includes two key elements: coproduction and value-in-use. Customer value co-creation, according to Grönroos (2012), occurs while customers participate into and improve the service process, hence increasing the value of the product or service. Customers can engage in a variety of behaviors during the value co-creation process, which Yi and Gong (2013) divided into two categories: customer participation behaviors and customer citizenship behaviors.

The process of including customers in the development and delivery of services is known as a customer participation behavior (Revilla-Camacho et al., 2015) ; it is a fundamental customer in-role behavior needed for value co-creation (Shamim and Ghazali, 2014; Yi and Gong, 2013). According to Revilla-Camacho et al. (2015), customer participation behaviors include the information search process, information sharing, responsible behavior, and personal interaction. Customers provide and exchange information with catering organizations, for example, to improve and enhance service value (Chang-Hua Yen et al., 2020).

Customer citizenship behaviors are optional and extra-role customer activities that give exceptional value to the company but are not necessary for value co-creation (Shamim and Ghazali, 2014; Yi and Gong, 2013). These behaviors have to do with customer suggestions for improving the service, assisting and helping other customers, as well as spreading positive word-of-mouth (Bettencourt, 1997). Customer citizenship behaviors involve feedback, advocacy, assistance, and tolerance (Revilla-Camacho et al., 2015). For example, after having a good meal at a restaurant, a consumer actively recommends it to friends and family members (Chang-Hua Yen et al., 2020). Value co-creation thus presupposes that consumers engage in interactions with the firm (Verette and Hamdi-Kidar, 2013). This implies that without engagement there can be no value co-creation (Storbacka et al., 2016).

2.2 Customer Engagement in Value Co-Creation

Several concepts are used to demonstrate consumer adhesion to value co-creation, such as participation, involvement, flow, and immersion. However, the concept of engagement has been found to be the most commonly used by researchers in the context of value co-creation (Leclercq et al., 2016; Vivek et al., 2014; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Verette and Hamdi-Kidar, 2013; Grönroos, 2012; Brodie et al., 2011; van Doorn et al., 2010; Scholer and Higgins, 2009). Engagement is therefore used to explain the consumer behavior toward a particular brand or company beyond commercial transactions (Van Doorn et al., 2010). It has also been shown to be a prerequisite for consumer participation in the firm's activities (Brodie et al., 2013).

Different customer engagement perspectives are conceptualized by distinguishing the behavioral dimension from the psychological dimension. Patterson et al. (2006), drawing from a variety of disciplines including social psychology and organizational behavior, define customer engagement as a psychological state characterized by a degree of vigor, dedication, absorption, and interaction. According to Brodie et al. (2011), customer engagement is a psychological state that arises as a consequence of interactive and co-creative consumer experiences with an agent or an object (a brand for example) in service relationships. However, Bowden (2009) posits that customer engagement implies a psychological process that promotes and encourages loyalty.

Van Doorn et al. (2010), on the other hand, view customer engagement as customers' behavioral manifestations toward a company or a brand that goes beyond purchase and is driven by motivational factors. Consumer, firm, and contextual variables are the key influencing components in Van Doorn's et al. (2010) customer engagement theory model; customer engagement influence customer's attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral outputs, it also affects corporate finances, prestige, and legality, among other repercussions. According to Van Doorn et al. (2010), "consumer engagement behaviors" (CEB) cover a wide variety of behaviors such as word-of-mouth (WOM) activity, recommendations and suggestions, helping and assisting other customers, blogging, writing reviews, and even initiating legal actions. Furthermore, the authors go on to provide a unified conceptual framework that encompasses an extended range of customer behaviors that had previously been studied individually, such as patronage, co-creation activity, and word-of-mouth.

Customer engagement, according to several studies represent a multidimensional construct that describes a customer's state of mind as a result of their interactions with a service supplier (Brodie et al., 2011; Harrigan et al., 2017; So et al., 2014). According to Brodie et al. (2011), customer engagement is based on five sub-processes, namely learning, sharing, advocacy, socializing, and co-development. So et al. (2014) therefore established customer engagement as a construct that combines five elements: identification, enthusiasm, attention, absorption, and interaction. In the online context, Paruthi and Kaur (2017) define engagement as

consumers' psychological state of mind and the strength of their awareness, affection, participation, and connection with the firm.

According to Kumar et al. (2010), customer engagement can result in a range of customer values for firms, including customer lifetime value, recommendation value, influencer value, and knowledge value. It can also increase customer loyalty and operational efficiency (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; So et al., 2016), resulting in a long-term competitive advantage (Kumar and Pansari, 2016). The linkage between value co-creation and customer engagement has been established conceptually, with co-creation positioned as one of the customer engagement manifestations (Bijmolt et al., 2010; Fernandes and Remelhe, 2016). Therefore, considering customer engagement to encompass value co-creation (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Brodie et al. (2011) also emphasize the importance of interactive customer experience and value co-creation as the underlying conceptual foundations of customer engagement. Furthermore, according to Lusch and Vargo (2006) particular collaborative and co-creative customer experiences can be perceived as the act of "engagement."

Companies and researchers have long acknowledged the importance of customer engagement in value co-creation (e.g., Fuller, 2010; Hoyer et al., 2010; Maglio et al., 2009; Payne et al., 2009; Sawhney et al., 2005). Value co-creation can help a firm open up to the outside world and innovate with consumers and other stakeholders, generating potential benefits such as more relevant ideas, better insights, a better knowledge of customers, testing and refining internally created ideas, beta product testing, a stronger sense of connection with customers, cost saving, profitability and income, speed to market, risk reduction, and a competitive advantage (Ind et al., 2017; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Kazadi et al. 2016, Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2010; van Doorn et al. 2010; Sawhney et al. 2005; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000).

2.3 Customer Empowerment

Customer empowerment has been defined as the increasing amount of control given to consumers by the companies themselves or through information and communication technologies (Pires et al., 2006; Wathieu et al., 2002). Some scholars have pointed out the variety of definitions and the confusion they can bring (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006; Pires et al., 2006). Accordingly, in marketing as in other research fields, we distinguish between two meanings of empowerment, which are "conferring the power to" and "gaining the power to".

According to Wright et al. (2006), empowerment refers to the delegation of power to the customer; it is regarded as a process as well as a result. Respectively, as a "process" empowerment relates to a company's strategic actions oriented towards delegating power to the customer (Wathieu et al., 2002; Wright et al., 2006). Empowerment as a "result" aims to consider the growing control of the customer's expanding participation in marketing strategies (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006). On this account, customer empowerment is a step in shifting and redistributing resource control to customers (Shaw et al., 2006). Han and Li (2006) define customer empowerment as a perceived mental state that is influenced by service providers. The authors identify perceived consumer meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact as four components of empowerment. Likewise, and according to Len et al. (2006), customer empowerment in marketing is fundamentally distinctive to the individual consumer mentality.

Conforming to Denegri-Knott et al. (2006), customers have been given (structural empowerment) or perceive (psychological empowerment) new roles in the marketplace. The authors highlight an assortment of power strategies strongly related to customer empowerment:

- Information as power: customers use information as a method to develop their decision-making skills;

- Control over relationship as power: in the customer/company relationship, control can determine whether or not customers are willing to engage beside the firm;
- Participation as power: co-creation results from customer participation in the creation of content;
- And aggregation as power: when customers interact and engage with other like-minded consumers to reinforce benefits or engage in activism against the firm.

Customers can easily look for and spread information about products, services, brands, and destinations thanks to the Internet's strength and the emergence of opinion forums and social networks (Harrison et al., 2006). As a result, each customer has the ability to interact with brands or consumer communities, and use various channels to disseminate and promote word of mouth messages, to transmit and share experiences, even anonymously, along with the ability to initiate long-term communication with others, such as companies and other customers. According to Cova and Ezan (2008, p.73), customer empowerment denotes a modern societal phenomenon wherein customers possess an increasing number of abilities and know-how capable of subverting corporate goals and steering corporate actions in the direction they prefer. The method takes into consideration the power of customers to influence corporate behavior through their skills and knowledge and invites firms to "take into consideration the other, the consumer, not by learning about him, but by learning from him, from his expertise, from his experiences"(Cova and Ezan, 2008, p.73).

Following Spreitzer's (1995a) approach which stresses the other meaning of empowerment; emphasizing the gain of power, Füller et al. (2009) define the concept of perceived empowerment as the perceived influence of consumers on product design and decision-making. Consumers may feel empowered when they have to perform a product development task, when they feel competent to perform it, or when they feel that they have an impact on the development decisions of a new product (Füller et al., 2009).

In the marketing literature, the concept of empowerment as seen above feeds a plurality of approaches. Some define empowerment as giving consumers the ability to control specific variables of a product. This is a "top-down" process driven by the company towards its customer. Fuchs and Schreier (2011) describe empowerment as a strategy adopted by companies to give consumers "a sense of control over the product selection system". According to Fayn et al., (2019, p.121), customer empowerment is a top-down relationship that relies on a subtle combination of information and educational tools that serve to foster customer choice. This says that empowerment implies permission or authorization granted to consumers allowing them to control certain variables or even tasks such as the choice of technical and aesthetic features, design, distribution method or price of the product. During this process, the company guides its customers in the control of their consumption experiences, thus integrating them in the creation of value (Fayn et al., 2019, p.121).

For others, in contrast to the "top-down" process, empowerment characterizes a reverse "bottom-up" dynamic in which the customer liberates himself from the professional's knowledge and expertise by relying on his own and his peers' experience to establish an independent position and identify his needs and wants autonomously. The consumer in this process takes the initiative to hold control and exercise power. According to Harrison et al (2006, p.974) empowerment refers to a process of personal development that enables individuals to assert their needs and influence the way they meet and participate as citizens in a community. Cova and Cova (2009, p.69) assume that empowerment leads individuals to "participate through their skills in a movement to take power over their consumption and thereby be consumers". Guintcheva (2014, p.64) supposes that empowerment refers to the consumer's belief that they have the ability to control, understand, and actively endeavor to master their environment. For Prentice et al (2016, p.39), empowerment corresponds to a process by which the customer takes control of the service process and influences it. They

determine the meaning of their consumption, contribute skills, make decisions and appreciate the outcome.

Empowerment can also be seen as a consumer psychological state. For Spreitzer (1995a), psychological empowerment represents a state that characterizes several components that are competence, choice, self-determination and influence. Building on the definition proposed by Spreitzer (1995), Morrongiello et al (2017, p.69) define psychological empowerment as intrinsic motivation based on cognitions about oneself with one's role in the market. According to Wright et al. (2006), empowerment is indeed a mental state that is frequently accompanied by actions that allows a consumer to affirm their own choices and make decisions tailored to their requirements, wants, and demands towards other parties in the marketplace. Prentice et al (2016) circumvent that consumer psychological empowerment refers to a perceived control over the process and outcome of the service, which are influenced by the empowerment policies of service providers. This control consists of the meaning of consumption, ability to consume, self-determination, and impacts (Han and Li, 2006).

According to Fayn et al (2019, p.121) empowerment refers to a polysemous notion that proposes a new positioning stipulating that empowerment, initiated by the company or the consumer, is built on a sharing of knowledge and experiences.

2.4 Customer empowerment and value co-creation

Consumers can take part in value co-creation activities by actively participating in the creation and production of new products or services, in the generation and evaluation of new ideas, in the elaboration, evaluation, or discussion of concepts, in the discussion and improvement of the details of optional solutions, in the selection and customization of prototypes, in the testing of new product features through simulations, or simply through the consumption of the company's offer. Consumers can thus be considered as partial employees that co-create products and services but also enrich their consumption experiences. Engaging customers and involving them in co-creation of value, allows the company to reduce operating costs and can improve the functional and technical qualities of the service (Lovelock, 2011). The company can thus make optimal use of customers' capabilities during the empowerment process to improve its value proposition, thus generating a competitive advantage.

According to Füller et al., (2009), value co-creation empowers customers and allows them to enjoy and value their participation experience. As a result, they may be more innovative and eager to make the necessary effort and perseverance required to produce significant contributions. Thus co-creation approaches require specific qualifications from participants. Customers can experience a feeling of control and self-determination only when they are qualified (Wathieu et al., 2002).

Through the sharing of their knowledge with companies, customer engagement in value co-creation allows them to believe that they are partnering, and contributing effectively to the development of the company's products and services, and to be assured that their contribution will be taken into account, providing these customers a level of empowerment, mastery, and control. Hence customers believe that they are qualified and competent to complete the product development assignment allocated to them, that they thus have an impact on new product development decisions, they can feel empowered (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Therefore, Spreitzer (1995) considers perceived empowerment as the consumer's perceived influence on product design and decision-making.

Customers who feel empowered and competent of completing the assigned task are referred to as empowered in the context of virtual co-creation. This empowerment, according to Bandura (1997), boosts individuals' belief in self-efficacy, decides the initiation of an

activity, and increases task performance persistence. A feeling of powerlessness, on the other hand, drives to a decrease in responsibility and motivation (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). As asserted by Füller et al., (2009), virtual customer co-creation occurs when customers contribute by sharing information with several entities in a dispersed innovation environment. Consumers now have more discretion over how they access and use information than in the past; they are connected to one another and can learn from one another since they can exchange information and content (Rothaermel and Sugiyama, 2001). As a result, consumers who engage in virtual co-creation may sense a feeling of empowerment, and their virtual participation should be viewed as more than merely taking an online survey. Individuals' motivation to repeat the task in which they feel empowered is increased by the sensation of empowerment. Therefore, the perception of empowerment should increase participants' aspirations to join in future new product development projects (Füller et al., 2009).

In the co-creation context, the Internet helps consumers solve a task, such as generating innovative product concepts, make them feel empowered and enjoy the experience of participation, determining to a large extent their perception of empowerment and the pleasure they experience (Füller et al., 2009). As a result, customers may be even more innovative (Spreitzer, 1997) and eager to devote effort and patience in order to make a worthwhile contribution (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990). Therefore, an online tool that increases consumer perceived competence and their sense of active participation can be considered as an empowered technology (Shankar et al., 2006). Thus, seen under the Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo et Lush, 2004), the Internet is one of the consumers' operant resources; the consumer can use it to co-create value. Several researchers emphasize the importance of considering the Internet as an empowerment tool for consumers, giving them more freedom and control (Alba et al., 1997; Harrison et al., 2006; Pires et al., 2006; Pitt et al., 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006; Morrongiello, 2014).

In sum, the marketing literature suggests that there is a nexus between customer engagement in value co-creation and empowerment (Galvano and Dalli, 2014: 650). However, we have seen that the concept of empowerment has two meanings: the first refers to the sense of power delegation or the fact of giving someone the authority or power to do something, the second refers to the sense of gaining power or making oneself stronger and more confident. These two meanings have given rise to two different conceptualizations: empowerment can thus be seen as a facilitating motivational process (Conger and Kanungo, 1988), or a process by which individuals gain control over their lives (Spreitzer, 1995a). Therefore, the marketing literature emphasizes two different streams of research: the first stream suggests that psychological empowerment can promote engagement (O'Hern and Rindfleisch, 2010; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), while the second stream states that customer engagement in interactions with a product or a given task, or by submitting or voting for ideas have a positive and meaningful effect on perceived empowerment (Füller et al., 2009; Fuchs and Schreier, 2011).

2.5 The Mediating Role of Customer Engagement

Many authors use the notion of empowerment to refer to the participation, contribution and involvement of the customer with the company through interactions with the objective of co-constructing products or services (Fayn et al., 2019, 121). The use of the term empowerment in this context highlights the conception of a consumer actor, who has some power, putting it into practice through interactions with the company, whether individually or with other peers in the consumer community. Hollebeek (2011) suggests that these interactions begin with personal and individual engagement in the form of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investments by customers toward a product or brand. This approach highlights the intrinsic dimensions of empowerment, which are the consumer's knowledge, learning abilities and self-

determination. As for the company, it can interfere in these interactions and cooperate by co-creating solutions (Fayn et al., 2019, p.121). This joint, constructive and engaging exchange between the company and consumers is rooted in the Service-Dominant logic apprehended by Vargo and Lusch (2004).

Fayn et al. (2019) point out that among the new buying motivations, marketing has incorporated dimensions revealed by empowerment such as engagement, consumer willingness to participate in the development of offerings, and increasing knowledge. According to the authors, consumer empowerment therefore represents a topic of interest for companies that are opening up to product co-creation (Fayn et al., 2019). Companies that are willing to look through the eyes of their customers give themselves the possibility to provide better services and thereby become better organizations. Palmer et al. (2014) suggest that to achieve this goal, marketing must accept a loss of control, become more flexible, and more humble. Fayn et al. (2019) add that the company must also consider the possibility that collaboration with the customer will get out of hand and prepare for the consequences of this loss of control.

According to Acar and Puntoni (2016), brands convinced of the importance of customer empowerment must design initiatives to achieve that potential. Consequently, the authors propose a framework that categorizes empowerment initiatives according to brands' engagement objectives that include two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the role that customers perform in the targeted company's marketing strategy: customers can either engage by developing and creating something for the company (e.g., a promotional slogan; a new product), or by selecting an option that will be used by the company (e.g., selecting a spot TV display or choosing a product to be developed). The second dimension corresponds to the nature of the engagement the company seeks; that is, whether the company strives for broad engagement wherein strategies will rely on enhancing the number and variety of consumers engaged with the company (e.g., requesting a large number of consumers to take few minutes voting on new product designs) or deep engagement in which measures will be aimed at increasing the level of customer engagement (e.g., requesting a small number of customers to spend several hours in the creation of a new product design). Acar and Puntoni (2016) highlight the trade-off existing between these two objectives: broader engagement indicates a lower level of engagement, whereas deeper engagement entails that the brand tends to reach a relatively narrow consumer base.

Enabling customers to influence marketing decisions involves engagement through interactions between companies and customers. In some cases, this engagement involves thinking about what makes the brand's offering unique to customers; the case of value co-creation. Empowerment therefore means a deeper connection with the brand, in that in each interaction, these customers spend some time thinking about the brand and becoming more attached to it. Customers who are empowered through a co-creation activity develop positive attitudes towards the brand. Thus, the "Ikea effect" occurs, as these customers appreciate and like their designs more (Mochon et al., 2012). Similarly for customers who did not directly participate in the creation of the offering, but were involved in the decisions related to it (by voting for another customer's creation, for example), they tend to develop positive attitudes since they will eventually feel like they've already had an impact on the company and its offerings. Even observers, i.e., those who had no say in the process, may develop positive attitudes as they become increasingly indemnified toward the company that includes customers in its marketing campaigns, and which customers see as more customer-oriented and innovative (Dhal et al., 2015).

3. Hypotheses Development and Conceptual Framework

According to Jaakkola and Alexander (2014), empowerment is a key driver of customer engagement behavior, supported by the focal firm's provision of access and willingness to cede some control to the community. Fayn et al. (2019) believe that empowerment is used by authors to refer to the participation, contribution, and involvement of the customer with the company through interactions with the objective of co-constructing products or services. In this context, empowerment highlights the conception of a consumer actor, who has some power, putting it into practice through interactions with the company, either individually or with other peers from the consumer community. To this end, Hollebeek (2011) believes that these interactions begin with personal and individual engagement in the form of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investments of customers towards a product or brand. Furthermore, Fuchs et al., (2010), drawing on customer orientation literature, concludes that customer empowerment is positively and significantly related to perceived customer orientation. On this basis, customer empowerment will produce more favorable corporate attitudes and more favorable behavioral intentions such as purchases, loyalty, positive word of mouth, and brand engagement. Customer engagement in the co-production of offerings, according to Vargo and Lusch (2004), becomes a form of consumer empowerment, with the firm making resources available to customers. Subsequently, empowerment is positioned as an antecedent and prerequisite for customer engagement (Morrongiello et al., 2017), being characterized as a facilitating motivational construct (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Accordingly, the following hypothesis was formed:

Hypothesis 1: Customer psychological empowerment has a positive effect on customer engagement.

Customer engagement is crucial in the value co-creation process. Scholars have examined the relevance of customer engagement in customer value co-creation behaviors (Oyner and Korelina, 2016; Zhang et al., 2017). According to Chang-hua Yen et al. (2020), customer engagement is a personal psychological state (Brodie et al., 2011), although customer participation and customer citizenship behaviors are individual behavioral responses (Yi and Gong, 2013). Therefore according to Solem (2016), customer engagement is a fundamental driver of customer participation. Customers display greater degrees of customer engagement when they are engaged in a specific activity emotionally, cognitively, or intentionally. Furthermore, according to Vivek et al.(2014) customer engagement is the level of an individual's participation and interaction with a company's offering and activities undertaken by either the consumer or the company. Hence, customer engagement is significantly associated with customer participation behaviors.

According to Hollebeek and Macky (2019), customer behavioral engagement can result in customer citizenship behavior. Customers who demonstrate a high level of engagement are more likely to initiate interactions with the company by contributing through ideas and feedback and generating customer advocacy (Hsieh and Chang, 2016). For service brands, highly engaged customers are more inclined to refer and recommend the brand to others (Moliner et al., 2018). As customer citizenship behaviors consist of feed-back, advocacy, helping and tolerance (Revilla-camacho et al., 2015), Van doorn et al. (2010) indicated that customer engagement is the outcome of behavioral manifestations toward a brand or a company that extends beyond the purchase, such as word-of-mouth activity, recommendations, assisting other customers, or sharing reviews. Customer citizenship behaviors emerge as a result of customers increased familiarity with the innovative service product content and process as a consequence of their deeper engagement in the service experience process. Therefore, customer engagement has a positive influence on customer

citizenship behaviors. Based on the previous statements, the current research proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Customer engagement is positively associated with customers value co-creation behaviors.

The relative marketing literature suggests that there is a link between customer engagement in co-creation and empowerment (Galvagno and Dalli, 2014: 650). Customer engagement in the co-production of offerings, according to Vargo and Lusch (2004), becomes a form of consumer empowerment, with the firm making resources available to customers. Thus, Fuchs and Schreier (2011) distinguish customer empowerment in two different contexts: new product creation (or at least idea creation) and new product selection. Consumers can therefore be empowered by submitting ideas (empowerment through creation) or by voting (empowerment through selection). Defined as a strategy used by companies to provide consumers a sense of control (Fuchs et al., 2010), psychological empowerment can therefore promote engagement (O'Hern and Rindfleisch, 2010; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) and consequently customers value co-creation by motivating consumers to take a more active part in the new product development process, enhancing their knowledge and skills, and connecting them with proactive communities of like-minded individuals (O'Hern and Rindfleisch, 2010). According to the customer engagement service system model provided by Jaakkola and Alexander (2014), customer engagement behavior is induced by companies, customers, or situational factors; thus, it influences value co-creation. Based on this perspective, customer psychological empowerment can promote customer engagement, which in turn affects customers value co-creation behaviors. Accordingly, the hypothesis was proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Customer engagement mediates the association between customer psychological empowerment and customer value co-creation behaviors.

In marketing, if a current trend of research underlines that psychological empowerment can promote engagement (O'Hern and Rindfleisch, 2010; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), Füller et al., (2009) have shown that, in a context of virtual co-creation, involvement in the product and in the task, thanks to tailored tools, has a positive and significant effect on perceived empowerment. In a related context, empowerment would be a consequence of customers' engagement in a virtual brand community (Brodie et al., 2013). Perceived empowerment is defined as consumers' perception influence over product design and decision-making (Spreitzer, 1995a). When consumers feel they have the ability and competence to complete the product development task allocated to them, and when they feel they have some influence over new product development decisions, they may feel empowered (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Participants may believe that they are actively contributing to the development of new items and that producers take them seriously. Furthermore, highly product-involved customers may regard themselves as experts (Bloch, 1986) with unique knowledge and insights. They may believe that their expertise, knowledge or opinion matter; that is has a significant impact. Hence we formulate:

Hypothesis 4: Customer value co-creation behaviors have a positive effect on perceived empowerment.

Since co-creation activities require specific qualifications, engaged customers should provide specific knowledge and adequate processing skills in terms of creativity (Amabile, 1996). Essential prerequisite for innovativeness, customers' creativity makes them a potentially external resource for a company's new product development (Füller et al., 2009). Conger and Kanungo, (1988) note that because empowerment is affected by personal traits

and characteristics, the association between product engagement and perceived empowerment fluctuates between creative and less creative customers. According to Füller et al. (2009) participation in product development has a significant impact on perceived empowerment among creative consumers, making their participation and contribution appear as more active and significant. However, for less creative consumers, the impact of participation becomes minor and insignificant. Even if they are strongly interested in a product category, it looks less important for this kind of consumers to contribute to new product creation and feel empowered. Thus we assume that customer creativity moderate perceived empowerment resulted from customers value co-creation behaviors. Accordingly we suggest the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Customer creativity has a significant effect on the link between customer value co-creation behaviors and perceived empowerment.

According to management literature, experiencing empowerment boosts people's motivation to repeat the task in which they felt empowered. Empowerment results in customers feeling enabled and competent of completing the task of product development allocated to them. They also believe they have a say in new product development decisions. Empowerment increases individuals' self-efficacy conviction, affects activity initiation, and enhances task performance persistence (Bandura, 1977). A sense of powerlessness, on the other hand, develops a lack of responsibility and demotivation (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). In the context of internet-based co-creation, Füller et al., (2009) postulate that consumers who perceive themselves as empowered are more likely to be positive and enthusiastic to participate and contribute in future virtual new product development projects than less-empowered consumers. Therefore we propose:

Hypothesis 6: Perceived empowerment has a positive effect on customers' intention of future participation in value co-creation.

Activities that are playful and enjoyable provide value (Deci and Ryan, 1985), and participants who are motivated by enjoyment, according to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), engage in a rewarding and gratifying activity. Customers experienced enjoyment may improve their perception of active participation in product development (Shankar et al., 2006). Hence, consumers perceived empowerment may increase as a result of their experienced task enjoyment (Füller et al., 2009). We then suppose that:

Hypothesis 7: Perceived empowerment is significantly influenced by customers experienced task enjoyment.

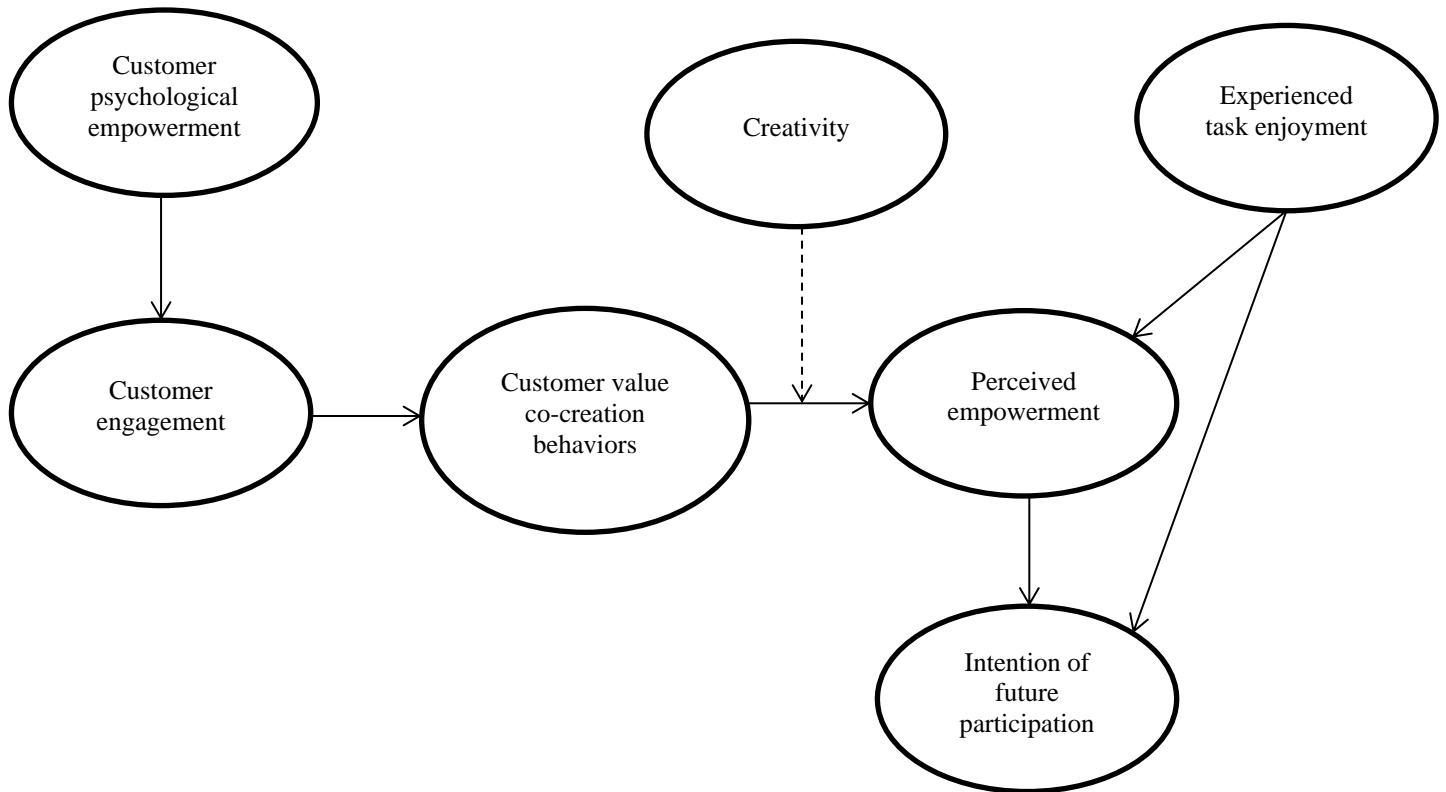
According to Bandura (1977), the initiation of an activity is determined by the customer's perceived empowerment and the associated enjoyment of a task. Enjoyable experiences provide high play value (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004) and a state of pleasure and joyfulness that people strive to sustain or re-experience (Belk et al., 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Thus, task enjoyment influences a person's disposition to repeat that work (Füller et al., 2009). Therefore, an enjoyable and empowering value co-creation experience is likely to deepen customer intention of future participation. We postulate:

Hypothesis 8: Experienced task enjoyment has a significant impact on customers' intention of future participation in value co-creation.

Our proposed framework (Figure 1) provides a thorough breakdown of the potential relationships among customer psychological empowerment as an antecedent, perceived empowerment and the intention of future participation as consequences to customer engagement in value co-creation. Customer engagement is regarded as a mediator between

customer psychological empowerment and customer value co-creation. Creativity of engaged customers moderate the association of value co-creation behaviors to perceived empowerment. And finally, experienced task enjoyment is considered as a mediator of perceived empowerment and intention of future participation.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework



Source: Authros

4. Conclusion

Value co-creation, allows the firm to create close ties with its customers, which increases their engagement and therefore value. Thus, practitioners and academics have increasingly recognized the potential benefits of value co-creation with customers and the openness of the firm to the outside world. Co-creation can open up a brand and allow it to innovate with customers and other stakeholders, while generating potential competitive advantage and other benefits. By taking part in value co-creation activities through several engagement behaviors, customers are then seen not only as validators of preconceived concepts, but also as co-creators who possess relevant knowledge, capacities, and input that can help develop key innovations. Putting into practice those resources through interactions with the company highlights the conception of an empowered customer. Consumer empowerment is thus a crucial element for companies that are opening up to value co-creation.

The purpose of the current paper was to propose an attempt to design a theoretical framework that needs to be studied in order to test the relevance of the research and validate the hypothesis advanced by the literature. This preliminary theoretical work outlines the relevance of considering customer empowerment in the value co-creation process, whether it refers to permission given by the company towards its customers or a reverse dynamic wherein the customer relies on his own expertise and capacities to claim an autonomous

position regarding the marketplace or even a psychological state based on the customer's cognitions about his role in the market.

In accordance to value co-creation literature, customer empowerment can manifest as a prerequisite to customers value co-creation behaviors by promoting customer engagement (O'Hern and Rindfleisch, 2010; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) and motivating customers to play an active role in value co-creation. Aware of their potential power, control, and capabilities of influence, customers serve as market moderators by developing a sense of responsibility through their engagement in value co-creation by providing participation and citizenship behaviors. This perspective considers the consumer's knowledge, learning capacities, and self-determination as intrinsic characteristics of empowerment.

Furthermore, empowerment can occur as a sequel to customer engagement in value co-creation, emerging as consumers perceived influence through their active participation and effective contribution to the development of the company's offerings. Hence creative customers feel that they are qualified, knowledgeable, experts, and therefore empowered, regarding that their contributions are taken seriously by the company. Thereby, perceived empowerment enhances customers' intentions to participate in future value co-creation activities, taking into account the enjoyment they experienced during their current engagement.

From a managerial standpoint, the proposed framework emphasizes value co-creation as an empowerment initiative that is quickly standing out as a powerful instrument for strengthening the connection between companies and their customers. Companies can successfully use it to establish a deeper interaction with customers in a variety of marketing activities, ranging from the development and creation of new products to the selection and placement of advertising messages. For these consequences to occur, firms must eventually be willing to consider the potential of customer empowerment and take initiatives to realize that potential. Furthermore, firms must also demonstrate that they actually value the contributions made by their customers and openly communicate and provide evidence about the usage of customer input.

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