

Letting Customers Participate: Co-creating with Apparel Brands on Social Media

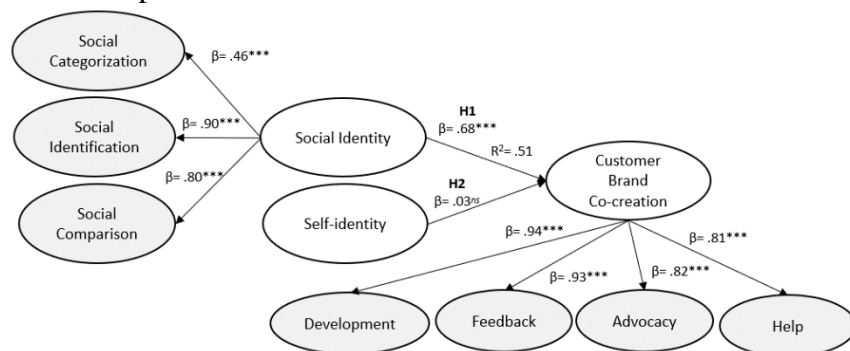
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Keywords: Co-creation, Branding, Theory Comparison

Introduction: Co-creation occurs when brands and customers collaborate to create or exchange something (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Brands use social media (SM) to encourage co-creation with followers at an emotional and cognitive level to manage customers' brand experiences (Alves et al., 2016; Tajvidi et al., 2021). With over 70% of the U.S. population having a social media account (Statista, 2021), most brands consider social media platforms essential communication channels to create and post content that sells experiences, showcases brand stories, promotes new products, or features third parties to influence consumption. Simultaneously, consumers turn to brands' social media accounts to express their opinions and expect brands (and their peer customers) to listen, hoping their feedback can spark dialogues and connect with brand communities in meaningful ways (Gomez, 2021). These social media behaviors (e.g., sharing brand experiences or knowledge and infusing their points of view) make customers co-creators of brand images and identities (Fujita et al., 2019). Although there are many articles about customer engagement on social media (Carlson et al., 2019; Fernandes & Remelhe, 2016; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014), and customer involvement driving co-creation (Cheung & To, 2021), there is a lack of literature on how the different stages of brand identity impact customers' co-creation behaviors on community platforms. Based on the social identity theory (SIT), this study aims to investigate the effect of customers' identities (i.e., social identity and self-identity) on their motivation to co-create with apparel brands on social media platforms and which one has a more substantial impact on co-creation behavior.

Literature Review: Previous studies found that individuals categorize themselves and others into groups in online environments (Wang et al., 2018). Furthermore, they associate themselves with groups that enhance their social identity through virtual interactions to increase their self-esteem (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). These virtual interactions can be pro-brand behaviors, such as commenting on brands' posts or co-creating brand content (Rabbaneh et al., 2020). The SIT defines group behavior and intergroup relations through three stages. The first stage is social categorization, where individuals categorize groups based on external and internal criteria through observation (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). The second stage is social identification, which refers to individuals modifying their behavior and attitudes to match their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Lastly, the third stage is social comparison which denotes individuals' attempts to compare their in-groups versus out-groups to increase their group membership validation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In addition, social media literature stresses the strong relationship between self-identities and social media usage. Gündüz (2017) argues that social media is an alternative social structure that allows digital identities to emerge. For instance, a positive reaction (e.g., a high number of likes) or positive feedback in a post comment section will give users the courage to modify their offline identities. Hence, we hypothesize **H1**: *Social* identity has a positive causal

relationship with customer brand co-creation behaviors. **H2:** *Self-identity* has a positive causal relationship with customer brand co-creation behaviors.



Methodology: An online questionnaire with 50 items was developed in Qualtrics. The survey included items from the brand identity scale from He et al. (2012), brand community identification from Algesheimer et al. (2005), intergroup brand

community comparison from Fielder & Sarstedt (2014), self-identification with brands by Jones and Kim (2011), customer brand co-creation behaviors from France et al. (2018). A 7-point Likert scale measured all questions. Demographic questions and social media habits questions were included in the survey. The study's target population was U.S. residents older than 18 years old who follow apparel brands on social media. The data collection process took two weeks through Prolific platform, and 400 respondents participated. After data cleaning, 353 observations remained in the sample, where 49.3% were female, 49% male, and 1.7% self-identified as another gender. Regarding age generations, 46.5% were Millennials, 23.8% were Gen-Zers, 22.7% were Gen-Xers, and 7.1% were Boomers. In addition, 52.1% of the sample spend up to 2.9 hours on social media a day, 47.9% spend three or more hours a day, and 53.37% follow three or more apparel brands on social media.

Results: An acceptable alpha coefficient of $>.70$ was the threshold for the inter-item correlations and the scale analysis. All items passed the threshold of >0.50 for adequate factor loading (Kline, 2015). The CFA showed acceptable results for good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.83$, CFI = .92, TLI = .91, SRMR = .05 and RMSEA = .07 [CI = .07; .08]), indicating that the measurement model fits the data well. In addition, the structural equation model (SEM) also showed an acceptable fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.91$, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, SRMR = .07 and RMSEA = .07 [CI = .07; .08]). The SEM path analysis suggested that social identity has a positive relationship with customer brand co-creation supporting H1 (Figure 1). However, self-identity has no significant relationship with customer brand co-creation (H2).

Discussion: The findings support that a strong social identity on social media motivates customers to participate in co-creation behaviors such as creating content mentioning brands, giving feedback to brands, recommending brands to their audience, and helping other customers with innovative or practical product usage. Furthermore, the CFA results indicated that social identification and social comparison play more significant roles than social categorization in establishing one's social identity. Therefore, customers identifying themselves as members of a brand community and who strongly validate that in-group membership are more willing to co-create with apparel brands. Nevertheless, results showed customers' self-identification with apparel brands does not persuade them to participate in co-creation. Thus, even if customers

perceive apparel brands as a reflection of their identity, it does not influence co-creation behaviors online.

Theoretical and Practical Implications: This study intends to shed light on an important aspect of the customer-brand relationship dynamic in the digital environment. Customers nowadays are not passive receivers of information; they are willing to collaborate with apparel brands in value creation on social media through their accounts, and becoming partners of the brands they love. These customer-led interactions can happen directly with a brand or indirectly through other customers in the brand community. The findings of this research give further insights to apparel brands on how to manage customer relationships on social media and increase the conversion rate from passive followers to customers. In addition, customers who actively participate in co-creation behaviors with brands develop a deeper brand relationship that could lead to loyalty or becoming brand ambassadors (Luo et al., 2015). Future research should expand the knowledge of co-creation behavior on social media and its outcomes to potentially increase engagement and loyalty.

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