

When Engagement Leads to Intensity:

An Exploratory Study on the Nature of Cocreation Intensity

Introduction

Services marketing has long recognized the important role played by the consumer within the service encounter as an active participant and collaborator (Schneider & Bowen, 1995). In today's rapidly developing markets the boundaries between the firm and consumer are increasingly blurred and closer, in-depth interactions make consumers an important resource of the firm (Chan et al., 2010; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). This evolving perspective on the exchange process and consumer role therein, is generally understood as cocreation, whose importance is underpinned by its status as a research priority for the Science of Service (Ostrom et al., 2010; 2015) and the Marketing Science Institute (MSI).

The need for empirical research on cocreation is highlighted by several authors (e.g., Grönroos & Voima, 2012); including a need to understand appropriate conditions for cocreation (Gustafsson, A. in Ostrom et al., 2010), and to develop appropriate management techniques (Bolton, R. in Ostrom et al., 2010). So far research has looked at the role of the consumer in the cocreation encounter (Bitner et al., 1997) and the activities consumers can take on during the cocreation process (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2012; Sweeney et al., 2015), but no known study has explored whether the consumers' activities are perceived as more or less intense and whether this intensity perception might help to explain why some consumers are willing to cocreate while others do not (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2012). Thus, our research questions are:

1) What is the nature of co-creation intensity?

2) Which factors influence customers' perception of co-creation intensity?

Theoretical Foundations

Since the late 1970's research into customer participation has been dominated by three streams which consider: an economic rationale of customer participation, (Mills & Morris, 1986); research on the use of management-like techniques (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003); and the motivation to participate (Meuter et al., 2000). Such is the predominance of these streams that new terms have entered the lexicon like co-producer, prosumer and working consumer. Consumers are seen as 'Directed Self-Producers' and as 'Collaborative Co-Producers' (Dujarier, 2014): crowd sourced generators of content at little or no cost. All these 'customer as worker' settings suggest an environment increasingly dependent on the endeavours of consumers, making them endogenous to the firm.

Cocreated encounters will place differential levels of demands on consumers and require various types of engagement behavior. Dependent on the cocreation context, the encounters are more or less 'intense' from the consumer's perspective. This is what we see as cocreation intensity. To explore we draw on literature on engagement of employees in their work. Based on role theory Kahn (1990) defines 'engagement at work' as the "harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, emotionally, and mentally during role performances" (p. 694). He conceptualized engagement as the employment and expression of one's preferred self in task behaviors, for example by becoming physically involved in tasks, cognitively vigilant or empathically connected to others (Schaufeli, 2013). We use the three-dimensional

engagement approach to explore the level of cocreation engagement and, ergo, level of intensity between a firm and customer.

Methodology

We chose in-depth interviews to capture the nature of cocreation intensity and conducted a qualitative interview study with consumers and services providers. We used purposeful sampling for choosing interviewees (Patton 2001) with the goal to form a most diverse sample based on the participants' age, gender and profession. In sum, we collected 15 interviews (each one lasted approximately 40 minutes): five interviews with consumers in which we inquire about their recent experiences with cocreation and ten interviews with provider employees including hoteliers, architects and banking industries. We asked the employees about their perspective on customers' feeling and perceptions during cocreation activities. The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions; they were audio-taped and subsequently translated into verbatim transcripts. We analyzed the interview data by applying a content analysis method that follows Miles and Hubermann's (1994) approach. Overall, we identified over 600 quotes that refer to perceptions and feelings of cocreation intensity. The quotations relate to four categories: 1) cognitive engagement, 2) emotional engagement, 3) time engagement, and 4) physical engagement.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that cocreation intensity is not a basic perception but instead relates to a consumer's perceived required engagement involving cognitive, physical, emotional and time resources. Whether a consumer perceives a cocreation activity

as highly intense or as low intense is dependent on which type of engagement behavior she or he is required to show as well as on the level of these engagements types and their quantities. Figure 1 shows the types of engagement that jointly form the perception of co-creation intensity.

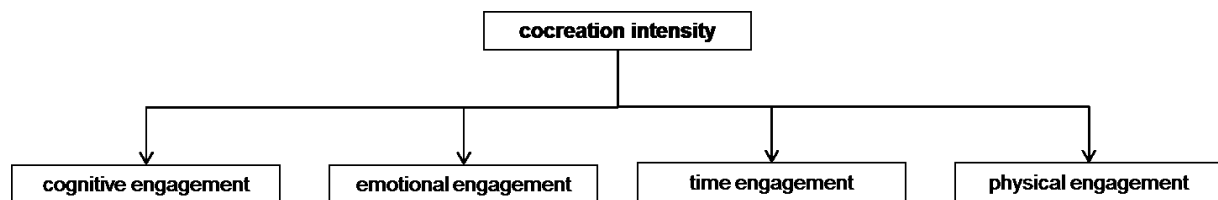


Figure 1: Facets of co-creation intensity

We found evidence of the various forms of engagement throughout both sets of interview. Cognitive engagement is the most frequently mentioned type of engagement that influences the intensity perception. It relates to activities such as thinking along, participating in conversations or problem solving together with the provider. A consumer described a medical examination situation as follows: “[...] during the exam it became quite obvious to me that I have to think along and have to ask the right questions to get my answers I cannot go to the doctor and shut off my brain.” A service provider employee underlines the importance of cognitive engagement as follows: “The customer needs to learn how to shop here because we are so different to traditional supermarkets.”

The interviewees mentioned that they have experienced services in which the consumers were required to emotionally engage in the cocreation. It relates to activities such as sharing emotions as a necessary process in the service and to basic emotions that arise during the cocreation. The interviewees mention positive emotions such as joy and negative emotions such as shame, anxiety, sadness or

anger. It is important to note that the level of perceived cocreation intensity arises when the consumer needs to suppress negative feelings. A consumer mentioned the increase in intensity: *"It was very exhausting for me ... again and again ...because I had to overcome my fears"*.

Both, consumers and employees, mentioned engagement behavior of the consumer that include investments of time. Time investments relate to arrival and departure times, waiting times, interaction times, search times or time period of personal contact. As such time investments relate to pre-consumption, consumption and post-consumption phases of a service. Consumers are not often fully aware of the amount of time they have to spent in the cocreation of a service, they often underestimate waiting times which are perceived as unfair and as a massive effort as a consumer states: *"Sometime you have to wait up to one and a half hours before they even start to treat you. This is a huge amount of time you have to invest. You do not anticipate this, but sadly, you cannot avoid these waiting times."* Service provider rarely thought about unpleasant waiting times, but considered consumers' time investments as beneficial for their own business model: *"[...] but when the customer does it online then it automatically uploads on to our system and we don't need to do anything with it at all so it is a massive, massive cost and time saving if nothing else."*

Physical engagement has been mentioned less frequently. It relates to activities such as seeking the service provider's office, engaging bodily power or giving access to body parts such as in medical exams. Surprisingly, consumers evaluated physical engagement mostly as not very burdensome as one consumer phrased it: *"You simply do collaborate, because it helps to save money, meanwhile you learn something new and you help the service employee, too ...this compensates all the physical effort"*.

Conclusion

Cocreation implies mutual dependency as if firms are only creators of propositional value (Lusch & Vargo, 2014) then the consumer is placed 'squarely within the process of on-going product and service co-creation, [where] the realization of actual use value is dependent upon consumers' added labor input' (Zwick et al., 2008). The blurring of the boundaries between firm and customer suggest that cocreation is both context- and intensity-specific. Service contexts vary in the requirements on consumer engagement, the intensity of the experience and, therefore, influence the consumer perception of the co-creation encounter. In this study, we explored the consumer's perspective on cocreation and show that the concept of cocreation intensity is a complex perception of a consumer's engagement involving cognitive, physical, emotional and time resources. Cocreation intensity may be evident where consumers cause problems within encounters due to lack of appropriate skills or limited knowledge about the firm and its services. Understanding cocreation intensity will help firms to adapt strategies when customers are involved in collaboration and cocreation. Applying knowledge on the drivers of intensity perception will eventually lead to more pleasurable service encounters. Customer centric firms will need to focus on supporting customers in their cocreation activities; mobilizing and training customers should reduce the intensity of encounters.

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