

# Is Co-Creative Brand Building a Risky Business? A systematic literature review

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Cite as:

Wobnik Dennis (2026), Is Co-Creative Brand Building a Risky Business? A systematic literature review.  
*Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy, 55th, (133581)*

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



# **Is Co-Creative Brand Building a Risky Business? A systematic literature review**

## **Abstract:**

Co-creative brand building has become a key focus in recent branding research, emphasising the dynamic nature of brands as co-constructed entities involving multiple stakeholders. This conference paper examines the inherent risks of co-creative brand building by conducting a systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesise insights from various research fields. The SLR, conducted according to PRISMA guidelines, reviews literature from three scientific databases, yielding a refined collection of 142 peer-reviewed articles. The analysis highlights key risk categories, including stakeholder conflict and alignment, complexity and operational gaps, and trust and authenticity issues. The findings emphasise the dominance of challenges stemming from stakeholder conflict in co-creation processes, especially in complex settings such as place branding. Additionally, the study considers the influence of digital environments in intensifying risk factors. These insights provide a foundation for developing frameworks to mitigate risks and improve the effectiveness of co-creative brand building.

*Keywords: Co-Creation, Brand Building, Risks*

*Track: Product and Brand Management*

## **1. Introduction**

The philosophy of co-creative brand building, or brand value co-creation, has attracted significant scientific attention in the last couple of years. Brands are no longer seen as fixed constructs built and managed top-down, but as co-created with their stakeholders (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). While co-creation can be seen as beneficial (Ind et al., 2013), various risks must be considered, especially in a digital environment (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). The increasing interconnectedness in digital environments has expanded opportunities for brands to engage with their stakeholders, highlighting the importance of understanding the dynamics of co-creative processes in brand development. Additionally, evolving consumer expectations require brands to adapt by fostering authentic dialogues and collaborations, which can inherently involve complex stakeholder relationships and diverse objectives. Especially the interference of non-collaborative behaviour of stakeholders can dilute brand meaning and influence the aspired successful outcome of co-creation (Kristal et al., 2018). This conference paper focuses on the risks associated with co-creation in a branding context. It provides an overview of risks and challenges described across different fields of the current branding literature.

## **2. Research Question**

The main research question to be answered with this paper is: Q1: What are the main risks associated with co-creative brand building mentioned in the current literature?

## **3. Methodological Approach**

To answer the research question and achieve the aim of this paper, a SLR is conducted. This method offers the advantage of providing an unbiased overview of current research. Its purpose is to minimise pre-selection and to examine the heterogeneity of the research field (Nightingale, 2009). In doing so, it helps to ensure that the dataset is not drawn solely from a single sub-discipline of marketing research, but rather is determined exclusively by the research topic and research question. Although bias and pre-selection are reduced through this approach, they cannot be entirely ruled out (Pati & Lorusso, 2018). To ensure transparency in selecting the literature and maintain reproducibility for other researchers, it is advisable to follow the PRISMA flow diagram, which was developed explicitly for reporting SLRs (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA flow diagram specifies that all identified sources  $n = x$  are to be documented from the initial database search through to the final selection for inclusion in the

SLR (Page et al., 2021). The implementation of the SLR in this paper follows the seven steps outlined by Mohamed Shaffril et al. (2021): (1) Description of the research context, (2) Formulation of the research questions, (3) Description of search strategies, (4) Qualitative evaluation of the literature, (5) Data extraction, (6) Presentation of the results of the literature analysis, and (7) Discussion.

#### 4. Systematic Literature Review

To answer the main research question, the articles will be qualitatively evaluated, working with the following sub-questions: SQ1: What risks are described in the given literature? SQ2: How are these risks discussed in the given literature? To get a broad overview of the data, the two largest scientific databases, Web of Science and Scopus, were used to identify related articles. To also implement more business-related data, EBSCO will be added as a third database. Following the PRISMA model and to be reproducible, the search string used for each database is shared here:

Web of Science: *TS= (("brand building" OR "brand management" OR "brand development" OR branding OR "brand strategy" OR "brand establishment" OR "brand creation") NEAR/10 ("co-creation" OR "value co-creation" OR "customer co-creation" OR "collaboration")) AND (risk\* OR challenge\* OR limitation\* OR drawback\* OR concern\*)*

Scopus: *TITLE-ABS-KEY ( ( "brand building" OR "brand management" OR "brand development" OR branding OR "brand strategy" OR "brand establishment" OR "brand creation" ) W/10 ( "co-creation" OR "value co-creation" OR "customer co-creation" OR "collaboration" ) AND ( risk\* OR challenge\* OR limitation\* OR drawback\* OR concern\* ) ) AND PUBYEAR > 2014 AND PUBYEAR < 2026*

EBSCO: *XB ("brand building" OR "brand management" OR "brand development" OR branding OR "brand strategy" OR "brand establishment" OR "brand creation") AND ( "co-creation" OR "value co-creation" OR "customer co-creation" OR "collaboration" ) AND ( risk\* OR challenge\* OR limitation\* OR drawback\* OR concern\*)*

Web of Science and Scopus provide a proximity factor, set to 10 words between the branding keywords and co-creation keywords, to ensure context between branding and the co-creation discussed in the sources. The third part of the search string focuses on keywords related to risks to ensure all articles discuss co-creation risks in a branding context. The database search returned 144 results in Web of Science, 78 in Scopus, and 81 in EBSCO. In total, the first search retrieved 303 articles. Before applying qualitative inclusion and exclusion criteria, the corpus was formally checked for duplicates, and the timeframe was set to 2015–2025 to

capture the most recent publications in the research field. In this first round, 129 sources were extracted from the corpus, of which most were duplicates. That means 174 remained in the SLR. The number of sources should provide a broad enough overview of the young research field of co-creative brand building (Kraus et al., 2020).

The qualitative evaluation of the data was carried out in accordance with the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were: (1) Peer-reviewed journal articles, (2) English or German language, (3) Strong co-creation context in branding, and (4) the article discusses risk, challenges or limitations linked to co-creative brand building.

Exclusion criteria were defined as follows: (A) Low academic quality of journal, methodology or rigour, (B) Co-creation without any branding context, (C) The topic of the article covers mainly product co-creation, (D) Article does not have a challenge or risk dimension. The author checked the remaining 174 article titles and abstracts. Twenty-two articles did not meet the criteria of the qualitative evaluation and were extracted from the data set. In studies with larger personnel capacities, the evaluation is conducted by two researchers, who discuss their different results (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2021). To at least double-check the evaluation, the inclusion and exclusion criteria have also been set up in Elicit, and the 174 sources were uploaded. By not only checking the titles and abstracts but also the full articles, Elicit proposed excluding 32 sources (including the 22 proposed by the author) from the dataset. The 10 remaining sources have been checked and did not meet the inclusion criteria (4), *the article discusses risk, challenges or limitations linked to co-creative brand management*. Therefore, they have also been removed. After the qualitative evaluation phase, 142 data sets remained in the corpus.

To extract the relevant data to answer the research questions, all sources were coded and analysed. To gain an unbiased understanding of the discussed risks in the research field, the qualitative analysis was inductive, with no predefined topics or clusters. After coding, the first data extraction yields the SRL's initial findings. The most discussed risks and challenges of co-creative brand management can be separated into the following categories:

| Rank | Risk/Challenge Category                   | Codes |
|------|-------------------------------------------|-------|
| 1    | Generalizability & Research Limitations   | 122   |
| 2    | Stakeholder Conflict & Alignment          | 110   |
| 3    | Complexity & Operational/Theoretical Gaps | 64    |
| 4    | Trust & Authenticity Concerns             | 51    |
| 5    | Brand Dilution, Loss of Brand Control     | 32    |
| 6    | Financial & Resource Constraints          | 17    |

|   |                         |   |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| 7 | Privacy & Data Concerns | 9 |
|---|-------------------------|---|

Table 1. Topic categories and mentions of risks

## 5. Findings

Although it is an interesting result that *Generalizability and Research Limitations* has the highest number of mentions. It indicates that more quantitative, cross-disciplinary research is needed in co-creative brand building to develop an overarching theory and clarify the connections. This article will not focus on this cluster, as it will not contribute to the content regarding the risks mentioned in co-creative branding management. The count is also driven by researchers' critical self-reflection on their own work.

*Stakeholder Conflict and Alignment* is by far the most-discussed topic in the branding literature regarding co-creation approaches. It is described as one of the biggest challenges, and a multi-stakeholder perspective in co-creation still lacks scientific attention (Furrier et al., 2025). The challenge becomes very clear when looking at the discipline of destination and place branding with a variety of public and private stakeholder groups with different interests and power levels to be managed and aligned in the co-creation process (Botschen et al., 2017; Hanna & Rowley, 2015; Stoica et al., 2021). This is also true for corporates with a social entrepreneurship orientation (Lückenbach et al., 2023). There is not only a challenge in engaging different stakeholder groups to co-create (Schmidt & Redler, 2018), but also in aligning results with stakeholder perceptions and the intended branding strategy (Åsberg & Ugglå, 2019; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Poorly managed co-creation processes involving multiple stakeholders can end in co-destruction, co-resistance, or co-dilution (Alves & Rodrigues, 2023). Last but not least, measuring the success of co-creation for various stakeholder groups can be challenging, especially when key performance indicators were not developed co-creatively with stakeholders (Iglesias & Ind, 2020).

Risk assessment, as part of brand management, is mentioned as a factor that increases complexity for stakeholders in the co-creation process (Oklevik et al., 2024). It is even more complex for services, which have to be taken into account in light of the rise of the service-dominant logic by Vargo & Lush (2016). *Complexity & Operational/ Theoretical Gaps* are described as difficulties in implementing co-creation. The general challenge of managing a complex brand is often cited as an obstacle to enabling stakeholders to co-create (Giannopoulos et al., 2021; Vijaygopal et al., 2023; Zelenskaya & Elkanova, 2021). The first column of the table suggests a lack of generalisation and gaps in the current literature, which

is further emphasised by the data. Without clear frameworks and inconsistent constructs, managing co-creation processes can be complex (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023; France et al., 2015; Giannopoulos et al., 2021).

*Trust and Authenticity Concerns* in the dataset refer to the risk of consumer backlash if co-creation efforts are perceived as *insincere*, *tokenistic*, or *greenwashing*. Maintaining credibility and consumer trust is critical, as any perceived lack of authenticity can rapidly lead to reputational damage (Chang & Berwanger, 2024; Lückenbach et al., 2023; Rosário & Dias, 2025).

*Brand Dilution* and the managerial *Loss of Brand Control* have been brought together under one topic, as dilution can be seen as a facet of loss-of-control. Dilution and co-destruction are mainly mentioned as general risks of co-creation due to different interests of stakeholders and their nature of being potentially anarchic (Alves & Rodrigues, 2023), or as an outcome of poorly managed co-creation processes (Alves & Rodrigues, 2023; Åsberg & Uggla, 2019; Chung & Byrom, 2021).

*Financial & Resource Constraints* make it hard to maintain engagement and to retain control throughout the co-creation process (Ranjbaran et al., 2022; Reynolds et al., 2023; Riley, 2020), both in the branding department and on the stakeholder's side (Hanna & Rowley, 2015).

*Privacy and Data Concerns* are prominent in a digital customer co-creation environment and involve the risk that customers will be unwilling to share personal information, thereby hindering co-creation (Tajvidi et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020).

## **6. Discussion**

There are three strings which are valuable for future research. Firstly, the existing data can be scanned to identify strategies for risk mitigation already described in the literature and linked to the risks. Secondly, the data reveal that the risks are not independent and that they interact or amplify one another. After the analysis and data extraction, the connections in Figure 1 can be assumed. For example, the use of social media platforms in the context of social commerce might raise concerns about data privacy, leading to a lack of trust in the brand. The other way around, a lack of trust in the brand could affect broader concerns about the use of customers' private data (Wang et al., 2020). The same lack of trust and authenticity could affect stakeholder groups with different interests, amplifying conflicts when co-creating

or measuring success (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). As described, the sources extracted for the SLR provide hints, but further research on the risks of co-creative brand building and their interrelationships is needed to investigate the exact interactions. Thirdly, there is some evidence that a digital environment, rather than creating new risks, might accelerate existing risks and transform co-creation from a managed process to an inherently volatile activity, requiring constant monitoring and rapid response capabilities and resources.

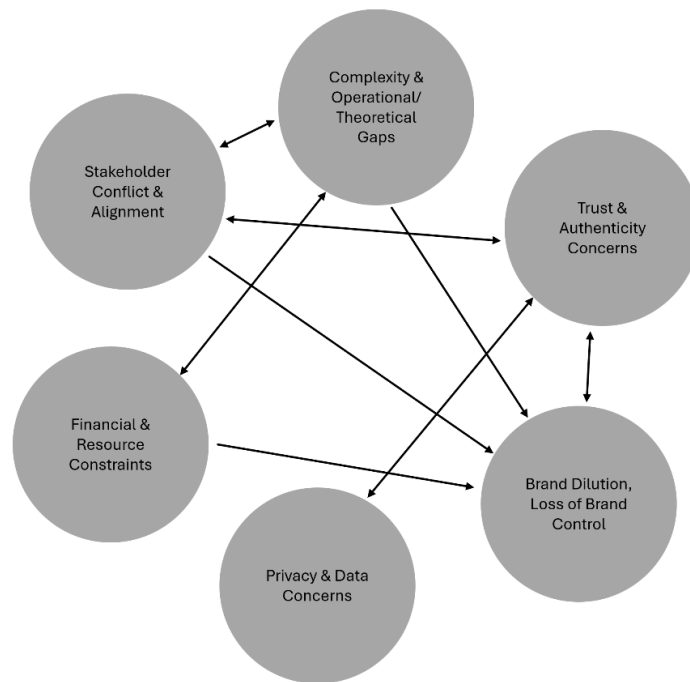


Figure 1. Effects and interactions between risks in co-creative brand management

Understanding the risks associated with co-creative brand building can help develop concepts or frameworks to mitigate them and make use of the advantages it offers. A limitation of this conference paper is that the dataset is built across different disciplines of brand management, thereby providing a broad overview of risks in co-creative brand building. However, different brands like destinations, place brands or corporates vary in their structures and their stakeholder network. This might influence the generalizability of the results. However, this was done to provide a general idea of the challenges and risks associated with co-creation in a branding context.



## 7. Literature

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