

# Customer Participation: The time is ripe for a theoretically broader understanding

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# **Customer Participation: The time is ripe for a theoretically broader understanding**

## **Abstract**

**Aim of this paper is to explore the customer participation (CP) phenomenon from distinct theoretical perspectives, using integrative literature review methodology. Conceptual frameworks and empirical research have been used from service, branding, social media, relationship marketing, management, retail and even marketing psychology literature. Categories such as subject, facilitator, potential aims, methods, motivations and influencing factors of CP were identified. Main conclusion of this study was that research on CP is still fragmented, and integrational attempts are not sufficient enough, while a more comprehensive framework could lead to deeper understanding of the phenomenon.**

**Keywords:** *customer participation; co-creation; co-production*

## **1. Introduction**

The phenomena of democratization of economic processes, a “power shift” from producer to consumer, empowerment and value co-creation could be easily observed by a candid perceiver during these last few decades (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004). However, while much theoretic and empiric work has been done, all trying to make sense of this new economic paradigm, a really comprehensive understanding is still lacking. There have been some attempts of course (Dong & Sivakumar, 2017; Ranjan & Read, 2016), these are, however, either simplifying too much or are too exclusive with the purpose of fitting into a given business science theoretical framework. The aim with this paper is not to answer this problem, but to somewhat open up the discourse, put together some of the elements that seem to have substantial role in this mechanism, all that with a focus on customer participation (CP), which arguably, especially needs clarification.

Current lines of research on CP are fragmented among service, branding, social media, relationship marketing, management, retail and even marketing psychology literature. As a consequence, conceptualization of CP varies considerably in range, scope, nature of customer involvement and outcome – resulting in the term “customer participation” being used in a highly variable manner, as noted by Mustak, Jaakkola and Aino (2013). Following the literature review work of Mustak et al. (2013), in this paper I use the term CP as a “customer’s activities or provisions of tangible or intangible resources related to the development or creation of offerings”, which is a sufficiently broad but also theoretically adequate definition.

Regarding the relevance of CP there can be no doubt, now more than ever. As Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) point out, there is a shifting focus toward a more consumer-centered market, and as social media became so essential, this pattern has multiplied due to social media’s central trait of having user participation at its core (Pires, Stanton and Rita, 2006). It can even be argued that over time, offline manifestations of CP will be diminished, and social media becomes the almost exclusive setting of CP, through which firms can instigate it using Consumer Engagement, or other means like online brand communities (Brodie, Ilic, Juric and Hollebeek, 2013). We can only guess what gates will be opened by the new trends such as the crypto-ecosystem, the community driven retail stock trading, or the rise of the metaverse, but one thing is sure, understanding customer participation is essential in facing the challenges of the future.

In the following, this paper will try to take a deep look at some of the primary factors of the CP phenomenon with the aim of opening up the now predominantly closed down theoretical conversation, linking together scientific results of different schools and also pointing to the direction of understanding CP as a more comprehensive mechanism. All this with the use of integrative literature review method (Torraco, 2005). These results in the future can be a basis for definitional clarity, but also for deeper understanding. The structure of the paper will look as follows: First, a description of the used literature review process, then a presentation of CP’s definitional elements, including the main moderating factors, third, an overview of aggregational attempts to date with a critical outlook, and finally closing with the conclusions, limitations and discussion.

## **2. Research Methodology**

As mentioned above, in this paper I am using integrative literature review, inspired by the proposition made by Torraco (2005). In the process of accumulating the used research body, first a keyword search was conducted through Google Scholar, with the quality control of taking

into consideration only studies published in Q1 or Q2 ranked journals. The initial keywords were: “customer participation”, “consumer participation”, “customer involvement”, “co-creation”, “co-production”. Then later on as the research went on, the search scope was widened with the keywords: “brand community”, “brand + participation”, “service + participation”, “WOM”. Approximately 70 articles have been identified this way. After deciding on which ones to retain based on relevance derived from abstract reading, in depth processing of the remaining articles has begun. During this process, the following broader conceptual categories have emerged: brand and brand community, customer participation and involvement, innovation and new product development, social media, value creation, and finally, WOM and user generated content. Following this initial analysis of the topic, on the basis of the already processed literature corpus further inquiries were made into the various aspects revealed already. The methodology for this was snowball method through the reference lists of the already analyzed studies. In parallel to this, the frame of the current paper was built up, with literature being linked to the distinct concepts and structural elements. As by the time of writing, more than 100 relevant articles formed the literature collection, a compression process was needed. During this, some of the less relevant findings have been excluded, along with the consolidation of remaining ones. During the processing of literature, no major alterations from the original research intention were carried out, which was to gain a more comprehensive outlook on the CP phenomenon, with no regards to which marketing research schools of thought provide the inputs. Some modifications have occurred however, of which the main one was the growing emphasis during the research process on the S-D logic and its value-creation concept, which has become one of the key underlying aspects of this study.

### **3. Conceptual Building Blocks of Customer Participation**

Originally CP type behaviors were viewed as customer voluntary performance (Bettencourt, 1997). Another line of research looked at participation as customers’ involvement in service creation, which was viewed as them being “partial” employees of a kind (Mills & Morris, 1986). With the advent of Service-Dominant logic (S-D) however the entire value co-creation theme was given a different priority (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2006). The primary unit of exchange has become intangible (such as specialized competences or services) instead of the previous goods-focused view, the customer is always a co-creator of service, value is fundamentally determined when the customer interacts with the service, thus firms only make value propositions, and do not determine value themselves (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Given this, it is not too farfetched to assume that understanding customers’ participation in value co-creation is paramount for a deeper comprehension of both consumer behavior and nature of market transactions (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008). Another interesting theoretical building block of CP might be found in the relationship marketing tradition. With variables such as trust and commitment, communication and cooperation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and resulting in mutual interdependence and cooperation (Sheth & Parvatlyar, 1995), it is clear how easily relationship marketing can be linked to the CP phenomenon. Some research have particularly focused on the connection between relationships and CP, revealing a strong linkage (Ahn & Rho, 2016).

An important theme in the CP literature is linking it to different brand outcomes, such as service satisfaction, where a positive affect is well established (Gallan, Jarvis, Brown and Bitner, 2013). When examined together with different concepts, such as engagement and loyalty (Solem 2016), social identification or perceived value (Chen & Lin, 2019), a pronounced interconnectedness can be perceived, and either as a mediating factor or as a result, significant positive effects can be discovered. Another line of CP research makes the connection from participatory activities to repurchases, with satisfaction as mediator (Eisingerich, Auh, Merlo,

2014), or to social media visits and even up to profitability (Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman, Bezawada, 2012). Also, an interesting positive outcome of CP might be brand loyalty, with all of its benefits in retaining customers or effectively decreasing the impact of their price sensitivity (Hirschman, 1970), CP is essential in building loyalty, especially in the internet age (Solem, 2016), or through brand communities (Brodie et al., 2013). Interconnected with the above mechanisms (satisfaction and loyalty in particular) are strongly and positively linked with customers' commitment (Bettencourt, 1997). From a S-D perspective, CP seems to have a positive relationship on the creation of customer values (functional, emotional, relational and entitativity values) and in turn brand relationship performance outcomes (Carlson, 2019).

In the following, I will look into the main conceptual elements of CP, with the aim of getting a grasp on the phenomenon from different theoretical perspectives.

### *3.1. The subject*

Starting from the basics, it is important to name the subject of the participation, which in this case self-evidently is the customer, as CP is a primarily dyadic relationship between the firm and the customer, basically an interactive service delivery from the former's point of view (Bolton & Saxena-Iyer, 2009). In this case a highly relevant factor is the level of customer involvement, as personal relevance in psychological terms. Involvement as an attitude is closely linked with CP, as a behavior (Cermak, File and Prince, 1994), high level of involvement might lead to CP (Nardi, Jardim, Ladeira and Santini, 2020).

Based on different levels of involvement and other factors, and with the current prevalence of social media induced B-C-C dynamics, different tiers of customers might be identified. This is true especially in the case of online communities (Ho, 2015). While a power shift can be perceived towards consumers, firms can also utilize this mechanism with cunning marketing strategies (Labrecque, Esche, Mathwick, Novak, Hofacker, 2013), not least by harvesting consumer generated content, which can be hugely profitable.

### *3.2. The facilitator*

While it is a sound argument that in a CP relation, all participants (including customers) should be considered autonomous economic actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), as usually firms are the facilitators of the value co-creation process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), the argument in this paper is that they should be viewed as main actors, consequently referred to as "facilitators" in this paper and framework. With this in mind, it should be noted that in line with Kotler and Levy's (1969) line of thought about broadening the marketing concept, the term facilitator is not exclusive to only firms, as many other organizations can be also interpreted as such in the CP context.

Although with less importance in the literature, another quasi facilitator of the CP dynamics might be the employee, as an intermediate link between the firm and customer, whose performance, satisfaction, and commitment might be dependable on CP behavior (Yi, Nataraajan, Gong, 2011), while playing a substantial role in firm performance.

### *3.3. Potential aims of the facilitator when utilizing CP*

Organizations involving customers in service creation has longstanding literature, even to the degree of customers treated as partial employees (Keh & Teo, 2001). One particular way of utilizing their participation can be found through the creation of new market or innovation knowledge, or even in including customers in the entire new product development process

(NPD) for superior market performance (Chang & Taylor, 2016). On a less strategic level, simply letting customers design their own products or services could result in more positive design evaluations (Moreau & Herd, 2010). Remaining on this line of thought, CP could also increase perceived service quality (Dabholkar, 2015). But a direct negative correlation between CP and turnover intention is also well documented (Revilla-Camacho, Vega-Vázquez and Cossío-Silva, 2015). As already mentioned earlier, the phenomenon could at large part be attributed to CP's positive effect on brand loyalty (Solem, 2016). However, CP's positive economic benefits could be also found in reaching new customers, through arguably one of the most powerful CP behaviors, word-of-mouth or WOM. On the one hand, WOM has a huge effect in building new brand or product awareness (Mahajan, Muller and Kerin, 1984), and on the other, other customers see WOM as a more trustworthy source of information (Liu, 2006). Some research indicates that WOM works best with other forms of CP in the case of satisfied customer repurchases (Eisingerich et al., 2014).

### *3.4. Tools and methods available for the facilitator*

By evoking once again the S-D logic, following the premise that the firm only facilitates the value creation, it is imperative to look at available tools for inducing CP. In this regard the most obvious might be Customer Engagement (CE) and related brand characteristics, which processes can have relatively straightforward way of incorporating incentives for CP (Ashley & Tuten, 2014). Regarding the conceptual delimitation of the main CP processes however, there seems to be some controversy in the literature (Dong & Sivakumar, 2017). A more exclusive and operational approach is co-production, which mainly focuses on the customer's participation in the production and service delivery itself (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003). Following the S-D logic, co-production is opened up into a more comprehensive value co-creation process, with customers participating not just in the service delivery, but in almost every aspect of the value creation process – with this in mind the subject can be customer (payer), a consumer, a competence provider, a controller of quality, a co-producer, a co-marketer, a source of technological, marketing or organization innovation (Payne et al., 2008). There is one concept that is often not mentioned in traditional CP literature, and that is customer participation in brand communities. Which is a unique way of fostering customer involvement with given brand and product, while also persuading them to voluntarily participate in brand activities, and with the vast possibilities of social media brand communities (Hook, Baxter and Kulczynski, 2018), perhaps it is the easiest way for facilitators to take advantage of the CP process.

### *3.5. Motivation for the subject to participate*

Motivations for the subject to be involved in CP can vary but can also overlap. Perhaps the most obvious one is some kind of anticipated benefit, which can take many forms from social, through cognitive, hedonic, emotional or simply utilitarian (Nardi et al. 2020). Another compelling antecedent of CP might be the consumers' growing appetite for empowerment (Pires et al., 2006), as CP behavior can contribute to consumers feeling more empowered (Füller, Mühlbacher, Matzler and Jaweck, 2009). A closely linked concept is citizenship behavior, which can be a strong antecedent for the feedback, advocacy, helping and tolerance manifestations of CP related processes (Yi & Gong, 2013). One additional motivational force might be consumer identity, namely how much consumers' self-image compels them to participate (Chen & Lin, 2019).

### *3.6. Influencing factors*

As now we see the basic elements of the customer participation phenomenon, it is still important to review those different factors having influence on the outcome of CP. First, we might want to look at trust, which has been shown to have a strong effect, along with level of the customer's involvement (Nardi et al., 2020). Together with trust, another important mediator of CP is commitment (Vohra & Bhardwaj, 2019). As apparent from the S-D logic's preconceptions, consumers' individual value creation processes also have a huge impact on the CP phenomenon, as it determines how the subject of CP perceives the entire process (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). It might be self-evident, but individual background and traits can also have a substantial effect on how one perceives the value creation process, which of course refers to socio-economical characteristics as well. While not closely linked to CP by the marketing literature, based on prior results (Cambier & Poncin, 2020), it can be argued that transparency might also have some role. Not just individual factors matter however, broader cultural institutions can also have some significant impacts (Nardi et al., 2020).

## **4. Critical Review of Extant Integrative Work**

One of the more influential summarizing works of the CP phenomenon is a systematic review by Mustak et al. (2013), who used literature review to analyze the results of this fragmented research body on CP, with focus on value creation. An important conclusion was that currently there is still no unifying conceptualization of customer participation, and in the empirical studies, value outcomes have been studied in a piecemeal manner, mainly looking only on a limited outcomes at a time, which makes it hard to examine the collective value outcomes of CP and also the interactions and relationships among distinct variables or outcomes – which is a further substantiation of this paper's main argument. A recent meta-analysis (Nardi et al., 2020) however tried to integrate said empirical research, with interesting implications. In their model they defined the starting point of CP as the expected benefits of customers, broken down to cognitive, social integrative and hedonic advantages, with customer involvement as an important intermediary. The main outcomes are brand satisfaction, brand loyalty and brand performance. As moderating and mediating variables customer trust, theoretical moderator, methodological moderator, and cultural moderator were found. Theoretical moderator refers to different forms of CP, distinguished by a unified theoretical typology, e.g., co-creation, co-production and customer participation. Methodological moderator refers to the distinction between the type of brand outcome measured, e.g., objective metrics that can be measured in the short term, and subjective measures that are measuring more long-term effects, such as perceived quality and value. Cultural moderator refers to the degree of individualism in the country evaluated in the original study. Overall, this meta-analysis has important empirical and theoretical implications, however due to its overly integrative manner, it does not consider all of the variability in the used definitions neither in theoretical nor in empirical terms. Starting from expected benefits, as the category is so broad, it does not take into account that customer participation is part of a delicate value-creation process (Grönroos and Voima 2012) with distinct value perception categories linked to it, but also that it takes the theoretical typology of Dong and Sivakumar (2017) as given, without critical examination and tries to force the entire body of research studied into this framework – more on this below. Another issue of incompleteness might arise from the nature of the meta-analysis research design, as while it integrates the current state of the empirical knowledge, it cannot examine the different outcome categories in detail or in relation to each other.

The above-mentioned work of Dong and Sivakumar (2017) points out, rightly so, all the current controversies regarding definitional issues of the entire CP and relating literature, especially so with boundaries between terminology such as customer participation, engagement, customer innovation, co-production or co-creation. The argument on the three types of CP (mandatory, replaceable and voluntary) is even compelling, especially if we link it to a concept put through by Grönroos and Voima (2013) on different spheres of value creation – mainly based on the S-D line of literature. Also, the notion that different terms of the CP literature (co-production, co-creation and customer participation) should be called cumulatively customer participation might be also acceptable – with some reservations, on this see above in 3.4 section of this paper. However, the differentiation of CP, CE and customer innovation seems somewhat forced. In the authors' argument CP is benefiting only the customer and is associated with specific transactions, vis-à-vis CE is also benefitting the firm/brand and/or other customers and stretches beyond specific transactions. The issue with this distinction is that it basically interprets CE as just a different form of CP, while unnecessarily excluding some of the customer voluntary activities traditionally classified as CP, not CE. Additionally, there is an argument that engagement is a completely distinct mechanism, not an activity, but a psychological state, in interaction with other phenomena such as CP, but in distinction from them (Brodie et al. 2011). An interesting addition to this debate might be the marketing communication focus theoretical model developed by Nyiró et al. (2011) who conceptualized CE as an essentially firm initiated process, which then mediates or even facilitates the level of consumer involvement and then CP. This somewhat corresponds with Brodie et al. (2011).

## **5. Conclusion**

In accordance with the research goal set out in the introduction, this paper makes an attempt to take a look at the customer participation phenomenon through broader theoretical lens, while still remaining in the domain of marketing science. While doing so, the integrative literature review of works has happened from service, branding, social media, relationship marketing, management, retail, and marketing psychology lines of research on CP.

Main conclusion is that the CP literature is still fragmented, but with enough quantity of papers generated in the last decades that a truly unifying theoretical framework could be created. However, in order to do this, stepping outside of the mostly closed down conceptual bubbles of current discussion is needed. In this paper, high abstraction level conceptual building blocks of the CP phenomenon were identified. Customers were identified as subjects of CP, while firms as facilitators of CP. The category of facilitator must not necessarily refer to only firms however, it could be understood as wider range of organizations (profit oriented or not), in line with broader understanding of marketing. Potential aims of the facilitator to induce CP might include: CP's positive effect on market performance through involving the customer in new product development; positive design evaluations through service customization; perceived service quality; reducing turnover intention; brand loyalty; also WOM and through it increased brand or product awareness. Tools and methods for the facilitator to induce CP might include: customer engagement; co-production; co-creation; and the customer's participation in brand communities. Main motivations for the subject to participate: anticipated benefits, which can be social, cognitive, hedonic, emotional or utilitarian; empowerment; citizenship behavior; or identity induced reasons. Furthermore, many factors influence the outcome of the CP process, these include: trust; involvement level; commitment; individual value perception; individual background, including socio-economic characteristics; transparency; and the broader cultural institutions as well.



## 6. Discussion and Limitations

This paper makes an important contribution to the scientific literature on customer participation by utilizing many distinct lines of research and theoretical frameworks in an integrative manner. Most studies on CP concentrate on just a few outcomes or mediating / moderating factors. However, there is a need for such integrative work in order to formulate perhaps a more comprehensive model which could allow the inquiry into the interconnectedness among all the related actors and factors. Another course forward with this kind of integrative outlook might be the quest for a deeper understanding of the participation phenomenon itself. An explanation such as this could operate with higher abstraction level categories, which would allow it to be sufficient throughout a wide variety of empirical contexts, or even step out of the limits of marketing research and be utilized by different social science disciplines as well.

For this however, further research is needed into different other categories in addition to those examined in this study. These might include the potential conflicts, the invested values of the facilitator-subject dyad, the primary values derived by both the subject and the facilitator during the CP process (which can of course be linked to the goals and motivations discussed in this paper), preconditions and antecedents, potential byproducts of CP, and the wider environment or platform, through which CP can occur. When the mapping of these categories and their integration into the overview presented in this study happens, the formulation of a highly complex theoretical model becomes possible, which then in turn can be operationalized into empirical validation – through which further understanding, and fine-tuning could be achieved.

In accordance, main limitation of this study is that it is purely conceptual, due to current limits on scope, neither a theoretical model was proposed, nor empirical validation has happened. Also, while the methodology of integrative literature review served the purpose of this research perfectly, due to its higher emphasis on intuitive, perhaps subjective *modus operandi* of the researcher, there might be a need for a more systematic literature review, even if just as triangulation.

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