Consumer Co-Creations: Understanding Disappointment With Co-Created Products

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Close brand relationships and consumer co-creation opportunities are usually positive for consumers and companies. However, not all co-creation experiences are successful and positive. We explore the ‘dark’ side of consumer co-creation and the negative reactions, such as embarrassment and failure attribution, felt by consumers and how they can impact self-esteem.

Consumer participation in the co-creation of products is at an all-time high and has yielded a wide range of positive outcomes attributed to product customization (e.g. Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser 2010; Moreau and Herd 2010; Mochon, Norton, and Ariely 2012). While the positive effects of successful co-creation have been explored, attempts at co-creation and designing products are not infallible. We investigate how consumers react to disappointing co-created products by exploring consumer reactions following disappointing (or satisfying) co-created items as moderated by prior brand relationship and whether this can be attenuated.

The branding literature has established that consumers often form self-brand connections and that these brands are then incorporated into one’s self-concept (e.g. Escalas and Bettman 2003). Researchers have begun investigating how consumers with strong self-brand connections react to failures (Donovan et al. 2012; Cheng, White, and Chaplin 2011). Donovan et al. (2012) found consumers are more likely to forgive a brand when they have a strong self-brand connection prior to the failure. Cheng et al. (2011) explored how self-brand connections influence consumer reactions to negative information about brands they are close to, demonstrating that consumers do not want to accept this information because this would hurt the self as well as the product. Through two studies we examine how consumers react to co-created failures based upon prior self-brand connection.

Weiner, Russell, and Lerman (1978) proposed two types of emotional reactions following a critical incident. First, people experience general, undifferentiated responses of positivity versus negativity. Second, a more complex emotional reaction is experienced not only to the event, but also to the self-relevant implications of a positive or negative event. Thus, one is not just responding to the valence of the event, but to what that event is thought to imply about the self (Brown and Dutton 1995). Individuals’ responses to these emotions are more likely to be experienced along with internal attributes such as embarrassment, self-consciousness, and state self-esteem.

Our study examined whether control mediated the relationship between self-esteem, the influence of the failure, and the reaction of consumers. The study was designed to test the emotional reactions to a co-created product design (successful/unsatisfactory) and the prior relationship with the brand (close/distant). We operationalized this by having participants respond to a scenario that involved either a successful or an unsuccessful customized design of Nike shoes (N=90). A significant interaction of outcome and self-brand connection was observed on negative emotional reactions: shame (β = .25, SE = .11; t (86) = 2.31, p = .02) and embarrassment (β = .24, SE = .13; t (86) = 1.93, p = .05). Spotlight analysis of the continuous measures confirmed that those with prior close self-brand connections were more ashamed (MClose = 3.80 and MDistant = 2.90) and more embarrassed (MClose = 4.24 and MDistant = 3.32) by their customized failure in the unsuccessful scenario (p < .05) for both emotions. Study 1 demonstrates that close self-brand connections increase the negative emotions such as embarrassment and shame following a failed customization.

Study 2 examined the relationship between emotions and attributions in response to a failed co-created product. We wanted to understand how internal and external attributions would influence reactions to a failure based upon prior brand relationship and explore the impact of an inoculation condition. We focused on the negative aspect of an online customization consumption experience, and participants were randomly assigned to the normal or inoculation condition. In the inoculation condition, participants were informed that items may appear differently on their screen, due to color differences, brightness, etc. We measured self-brand connections, using the Inclusion of the Other in the Self (IOS) measure (Reimann and Aron 2011), attributions of locus and control, emotional responses of shame, embarrassment, self-consciousness, and state self-esteem.

We found that attributions of control mediated the relationship between IOS and shame with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (-.15 to -.001) and the interaction of IOS x locus of control demonstrated how attributions and brand relationship interact on feelings of shame (β = -.17, SE = .08; t (48) = -2.1, p = .04). If the failure was attributed to the self and there was a close brand-self connection, shame was highest (MClose = 4.60 versus MDistant = 2.62). However, when the failure was attributed to the brand, no significant effect was observed for shame (MClose = 2.09 versus MDistant = 2.35). Thus, attributions were influencing negative self-referencing emotions. However, when the inoculation was introduced, this effect completely disappeared (p = .70) and the mediation was also insignificant (95% confidence interval was -.03, .24). Next, we examined whether attributions and self-brand connections affected state self-esteem. We found a significant interaction of attribution x self-brand connection on state self-esteem (β = .07, SE = .04; t (48) = 2.02, p < .05). Again, when the inoculation was introduced the interaction was not significant (p = .48).

Next, two sequential mediations using PROCESS Model 6 (Hayes 2012) were performed to examine whether close relationships, internal attributions and emotions affected felt state self-esteem. We found significant mediation from IOS→attributions→emotions→self-esteem, with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (.001 to .056) (all other paths insignificant). Next, using multiple self-critical emotions estimated the mediation IOS→attributions→Shame→Self-consciousness→State self-esteem. We found a significant three mediator sequential mediation with a significant 95% confidence interval (.0005, .0358) and all other paths insignificant. Thus, the mediation analyses provided clear evidence of how disappointing co-created products can affect state self-esteem. Neither sequential mediation was significant when the inoculation was introduced.

Overall, our results provide novel and significant insights into a growing form of consumer-brand interactions. We documented new findings relating to self-brand connections, brand co-creations and
how attributions can influence self-esteem. Additionally, a managerial actionable inoculation was introduced that successfully attenuated the effects of attributions and self-brand connections. When the inoculation was introduced, all interactions and mediations disappeared, as expected. Those with close self-brand connections no longer attributed the failure to the self and, thus, did not experience a dip in self-esteem. They were able to attribute the failure to a technology failure instead.

REFERENCES


