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4.1 The Rhetoric of Marketing Co-creation

Abstract: Co-creation, the idea that brands should work with consumers and other stakeholders as equal partners in order to collaboratively generate ideas about what they produce and how they should market it, appears to be currently enjoying an enthusiastic reception amongst marketing academics and practitioners. This chapter looks critically at the evolution of the idea of co-creation in marketing thought and practice by closely reading the texts that have provided the foundational thinking behind the perspective as well as investigating the way in which practitioners talk about its adoption and implementation. This exploration highlights serious tensions between traditional marketing's desire for control over consumers and co-creation's apparent surrender of control to them. Yet, these tensions are shown to be largely rhetorical in nature, serving to strategically position a 'new' egalitarian marketing that relies just as much upon the traditional marketing control-orientation as the old approach it has 'Othered'. Co-creation, therefore, can be viewed as a form of disinformation that aids marketing in misdirecting attention away from its moribund state and resulting crisis of relevancy.

The idea of co-creation is currently enjoying an ascendancy. Marketing practitioners have become obsessed with enlisting the creative efforts of consumers to provide content for their advertising campaigns and social network channels (Andrejevic 2011; Campbell et al. 2011; Fisher, Smith 2011; Kozinets et al. 2008). Consumer-generated reviews on Amazon.com, IMDB.com, Yelp.com, and eBay.com provide trust, insight, entertainment, and guidance that add significant value to these enterprises while 'crowdfunding' sites such as Kickstarter.com and Patreon.com aim to bring consumers more deeply inside the brand creation process than ever before. Such apparent collaborations between brands and consumers seem to be in marked contrast to the more traditional marketing dynamic of dictating value to consumers – laying your wares out in front of them and then persuading them to buy.

At the same time as marketing practice has been integrating consumer work into the brand creation process, academic marketing has been providing the theoretical foundations for the ascendancy of consumer creativity in contemporary business. Two academic discourse streams in particular can be seen to be the flash points for such research. Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (Prahalad, Ramaswamy 2004) study of the "Future of Competition" is subtitled "Co-Creating

Unique Value with Customers" and the DART model that they advance outlines the "basic building blocks of co-creation" between consumer and company. More directly in the academic marketing camp, Vargo and Lusch (Vargo, Lusch 2004) introduce the Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic), a summation of perspectives that they argue have been evolving in marketing research over the previous decades. One of these perspectives revolves around the idea of the co-creation of value and it is given a significant place in their eight "foundational premises" of S-D Logic (2004, p. 6). The influence that Vargo and Lusch's view of the evolution of marketing discourse has had is considerable, generating a large amount of conferences, papers, journal special editions, and citations. That their formulation of the S-D Logic paradigm places such emphasis on the co-creation of value is a striking example of academic marketing proto-theory seemingly moving in tandem with marketing practice.

In this chapter I wish to interrogate the way in which the idea of co-creation has taken root in the discourses of marketing practitioners and marketing academics. I will argue that the discursive construction of 'co-creation' is a rhetorical strategy employed by both practitioners and academics in response to the empowerment of online, constantly-communicating, networked consumers which has threatened the effectiveness and identity of traditional marketing management approaches to consumer control. I hope to show that what is positioned as egalitarian, inclusive, and revolutionary is still deeply entangled in the control-oriented paradigm of traditional marketing. Consequently, the literature and practice around co-creation can be seen as a form of disinformation, designed to reassure clients and consumers that marketing has changed, evolved, stepped-up to the challenge of interactive, networked communication while in fact helping to disguise the fact that nothing much has changed at all. Cleverly, the central persuasive strategy that this campaign of disinformation rests upon is the characterization of traditional marketing communication methods as manipulative disinformation. As I will show, this 'Othering' serves to distract attention away from the continuing control orientation that is at the heart of contemporary marketing.

I will begin by outlining the roots of co-creation in the marketing literature, leading on to a more detailed investigation of Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) DART model of business strategy and Vargo and Lusch's (2004) definition of the Service-Dominant Logic perspective to marketing. Next, I will examine the ways in which marketing practitioners are discussing co-creation tactics, demonstrating the ways in which the profession of marketing has used co-creation and co-production strategies as rhetorical gambits to give the appearance of egalitarian acceptance of consumer empowerment and entitlement whilst in fact constructing campaigns and communications policies which continue to be

focused around the hunt for control over consumers. Finally, I will conclude with a consideration of the inherent paradox in marketing's instrumentalisation of consumer co-creation.

1 The Roots of Co-creation in Marketing Theory

Academic engagement with the ideas behind the co-creation of value can be said to originate in the broader recognition emerging from the relationship and service marketing schools that consumers should be treated as long-term partners in mutually-beneficial relationships rather than targets of manipulative disinformation for short-term gain (Grönroos 1994; Svensson, Grönroos 2008; Ravald, Grönroos 1996). Part of this perspective includes a call for a move towards dialogic theories of marketing communication which emphasise exploratory conversation between equals rather than monological persuasive strategies (Grönroos 2000; Ballantyne 2004; Varey 2000).

Against this background, we can locate the initial investigations of the idea of the co-creation of value in two principal sources; the work of Peppers and Rogers (1993) and Normann and Ramirez (1993). Both sets of authors argue that "collaboration" with customers (in the case of Peppers & Rogers) or "coproduction" with them (in the case of Normann and Ramirez) is an essential tool of value creation for modern firms. Both also argue that constructions of value can no longer be imposed upon the customer. Instead, the goal of the firm "is not to create value for customers but to mobilize customers to create their own value from the company's various offerings" (Normann, Ramírez 1993, p. 69). Additionally, both argue that their perspectives emerged from a realization that the old product-oriented value chain paradigms were unequal to describing the reality of vocal, empowered, and demanding consumers who see themselves as the center of the value creation process. Indeed, Ramirez (1999), in a slightly later solo study, argues that the coproduction of value framework has in fact been available to us intellectually "for some 300 years" (1999, pp. 49–50), but only recently has technology "liberate[d] us from the constraints of the industrial mode of value creation and its conceptualizations" allowing us to "consider value creation as synchronic and interactive, not linear and transitive" (1999, p. 50). In this sense, although both Peppers and Rogers (1993) and Normann and Ramirez (1993) outlined their approaches before the full commercialisation of the Internet, it is clear that the interactivity which is fundamental to the hypermedia computer-mediated environment of the Web would be a pivotal enabling technology in the widespread uptake of the idea of the collaborative coproduction of value.

Just before the millennium, Kambil et al. (1999) came up with the name that would stick. Their paper, published in the house journal of consultancy firm Accenture, uses a series of persuasive examples from manufacturers such as IKEA, Fiat, Dell, and Red Hat to demonstrate how firms were "partnering with their customers to *co-create* value" (p. 38). In straightforward terms, the authors describe how "seeing customers as partners in the creation of value widens the horizons of companies entering the eEconomy", providing ways for firms to expand their "intellectual property and relationship assets" via customer involvement as well as potentially providing "lock in" of customers into their products or services (p. 43). Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2000) paper in the *Harvard Business Review* also describes customers as "cocreators of value" as part of their overview of how companies should begin to see customers "as a source of competence" (p. 81), which "is a function of the knowledge and skills they possess, their willingness to learn and experiment, and their ability to engage in an active dialogue" (p. 80). Finally, Thomke and von Hippel (2002) provide a slightly different spin (while using a similar set of examples) in another *Harvard Business Review* article that illustrates how some companies were managing to collapse the traditionally cumbersome and time-consuming R&D process by casting customers as innovators, abandoning "their efforts to understand exactly what products their customers want" and instead equipping them "with tools to design and develop their own products" (p. 5).

The studies above serve as the bedrock for the two pieces of work that have really cemented the co-creation of value at the foundations of contemporary academic marketing approaches to value – Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) book-length study of the DART model, and Vargo and Lusch's (2004) article introducing the Service-Dominant Logic.

2 The DART Perspective

Prahalad and Ramaswamy's exposition of the DART model ("dialogue, access, risk assessment, and transparency", (2004, p. 23)) is a strong argument for the centrality of co-creation in any "search for new strategic capital" (2004, xi). They state that the role of the customer has changed "from isolated to connected, from unaware to informed, from passive to active" (2004, p. 2). The language here is telling – an isolated customer is a vulnerable one, an unaware customer is one who will believe your disinformation because they know no better, and a passive customer is easily manipulated, simply lead. Prahalad and Ramaswamy are reminding their readers of the good old days when their customers were ripe for the picking while at the same time calling their attention

to the reality of the new, powerful, engaged consumer who they will not be able to treat in the usual way. The rhetorical gambit is clear: to convince the business reader of the necessity of your solution you first need to get them worried and to do this you paint a picture of the consumer as out of their control. As Prahalad and Ramaswamy make clear, businesses have traditionally been able to manage the consumer. So, they are "accustomed to restricting the flow of information to consumers" (2004, p. 2), used to being free to "vary the price or quality of products from one location to another" (2004, p. 3). Their marketing communication has been premised upon the "traditional top-down pattern" where "claimed benefits" affected demand rather than customer word-of-mouth. Yet, now we have consumers who can talk to each other, research products across national and linguistic borders, and "as they network, they embolden each other to act and speak out" (2004, p. 4). The language is alarmist because that is how the authors seek to control the attention of their time-poor audience who have heard the call for change many times before. It is also alarmist because the authors know that the strategies they will outline are really very uncomfortable for the traditional manager, used to doing their jobs with "little or no interference from customers" (2004, p. 5). If they are to persuade businesses to adopt such difficult changes in managerial attitudes and practices then the danger of not changing needs to be made as vivid as possible.

The move to "an individual-centered co-creation of value between consumers and companies" (2004, p. 12) demands that firms stop seeing value as something that is dictated to consumers. Prahalad and Ramaswamy's DART model codifies the essential building blocks that a firm needs in order to successfully adopt the new co-creation of value paradigm. Each one of the elements reflects the radically new power structure unfolding in the contemporary market. Instead of customizing "to suit the company's supply chain", the firm must satisfy "a consumer's unique desires and preferences" (2004, p. 89). Instead of locating quality in "what the firm has to offer" the enterprise must realize that quality is established in "consumer-company interactions and co-creation experiences" (2004, p. 50). Instead of talking *at* consumers, firms must see communication as a "shared learning" process "between two *equal* problem solvers" (2004, p. 23). Instead of hiding risks to customers the enterprise needs to be full and honest with consumers, allowing them to judge for themselves the "trade-off between risks and benefits" (2004, p. 27).

Such radical changes in paradigm are called for because of the "new realities" facing businesses today (2004, p. 241). These are not, in other words, theoretical or idealistic concerns – for the authors, "perhaps the single most important shift that companies and managers must make is to recognize the *centrality of the individual*" (2004, p. 237). The modern business network can no longer be

viewed as a matrix of institutionalised interests, segments and aggregations, but is instead a "nodal network" of individuals (2004, p. 238). Prahalad and Ramaswamy's exposition of co-creation is, throughout, couched in revolutionary terms. Indeed, it finishes with a vision of co-creation ultimately ushering in "the emergence of a truly democratic global society in which human rights, needs, and values are predominant – not the demands of institutions" (2004, p. 238). Businesses can share in the co-creation of such a future if they attend carefully to the principals of the DART model.

Prahalad and Ramaswamy present the co-creation of value as a necessity for the evolving business. Throughout their work, in tables, diagrams and exposition, they constantly contrast aspects of the "traditional theory of the firm" with those of the new, "emerging reality" (2004, p. 238). As already seen, they present traditional strategies as manipulative, controlling, and based upon an assumed inequality. Yet, while presented using negative and critical language, this is not enough to make the reader recognise the inadvisability of such practices. Instead, Prahalad and Ramaswamy need to make it clear that this approach to dealing with customers will no longer work. So, the argument is not initially an ethical one at all – it is a practical one. Customers will no longer be manipulated, they can no longer be spoken at, and you will not be able to hide information from them. Co-creation of value is a strategic response to a re-balancing of power. While the final moments of their study find Prahalad and Ramaswamy in humanitarian, universalist visionary mode, the bulk of the book uses two principle forms of argumentation; inculcating fear in the manager-reader at the prospect of enlightened, powerful customers and then using a large number of examples of companies which have used co-creative practices to succeed. These case studies act as the carrot to the stick of the portrait of the evolved customer and are collected from across many different industries from cosmetics to automobiles and from farming equipment to fashion retail. The majority are not in-depth analytic studies, however, but quick descriptions of how the firm in question uses one aspect of one of the DART components to achieve some form of differentiation or disruption. The heaping up of such 'nutshell' narratives constructs the impression that everyone but the reader is already implementing this new approach. The visionary ending to Prahalad and Ramaswamy's book provides yet another argument for the necessity of the co-creative paradigm; not only is it the only way to connect with the evolved customer, and not only is it a strategy that has already been adopted by thought-leading successful firms, but it is also a recipe for how businesses can contribute to a freer, more democratic tomorrow. And how could any manager not want to be responsible for a freer and more democratic tomorrow? In a telling sentence from the book's final page, the authors state that co-creation can

"help to create a new basis for the social legitimacy of all large institutions in our society" (2004, p. 238).

3 The S-D Logic Perspective

Unlike Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) study, which is aimed at an audience of enlightened business readers, Vargo and Lusch's (2004) article for the *Journal of Marketing* is constructed for a more strictly academic readership. However, there are striking similarities in the rhetorical and argumentative strategies that both sets of authors use. This, in turn, suggests that the *value* of the co-creation of value concept might be being constructed from similar motivations across these two sources and audiences.

Vargo and Lusch's (2004) article has around 7390 citations indexed on Google Scholar at the time of writing. This is an astounding number of citations for a single article in the academic marketing field and gives an indication of the considerable influence the paper has had in (what is in academic terms) such a short time. Its reception amongst marketing academics has gone a long way to habituating this audience to the co-creation of value concept. As I have argued elsewhere (Miles 2014), Vargo and Lusch's article is a carefully constructed persuasive document. It falls into two major parts – an initial historical overview of the development of marketing theory and then an exposition of what the authors call the eight "foundational premises" of the new emerging logic that they identify in recent marketing research. The historical overview is, like any other historical overview, a carefully constructed narrative designed to lead the reader to a particular conclusion. This conclusion is that marketing has evolved over the years in distinct steps. This was important for the original audience of the 2004 paper because in the 1980s and 1990s marketing theory seemed to have devolved into a series of (sometimes adversarial) splinter groups with little sense of common purpose – any overall evolution of the discipline had appeared to stop. Emphasising the sequential movement from one paradigm of marketing to another in their historical overview constructs an expectation that marketing needs to continue in this way – it generates a feeling of inevitability. This prepares the way for the principal argument of the paper, namely that where we had before seen chaos and disagreement there was in fact, right beneath our noses, harmony and unity. Vargo and Lusch (2004) point out that the 1980s and 1990s in fact contain many voices saying the same things with different terminologies and, if only we were to stop and consider their common assumptions, we would find that there is an emerging "dominant logic" behind these voices, that can "unify

disparate literature streams in major areas such as customer and market orientation, services marketing, relationship marketing, quality management, value and supply chain management, resource management, and network analysis" (2004, p. 3). So, the emerging logic that the authors will delineate in the second half of the paper is presented as a salvation to the perception of late-twentieth century marketing as constituted by alarmingly "fragmented thought, questions about the future of marketing, calls for a paradigm shift, and controversies over services marketing being a distinct area of study" (2004, p. 1). Using the rhetorical framing of Darwinian evolution and Kuhnian paradigm shifts, Vargo and Lusch construct a narrative that appeals to marketing academics concerned at the moribund state of their discipline – the apparent discovery of the next stage of marketing evolution allows us to breathe a great sigh of relief. In this sense, Vargo and Lusch's Service-Dominant Logic is presented in a very similar manner to Prahalad and Ramaswamy's DART model – the audience is first reminded of how bad things have become for them and then they are handed their salvation. Let us now look at the place that co-creation plays within this new emerging logic.

The sixth "foundational premise" of the new logic is "the customer is always a coproducer" (2004, p. 10). Vargo and Lusch point out that "in using a product, the customer is continuing the marketing, consumption, and value-creation and delivery processes" (2004, p. 11). It is, therefore, unreasonable for the firm to act as if they construct and fix value – the value-in-use experienced (indeed, produced) by the user is just as, if not more, important. As they further note, "the customer becomes primarily an operant resource (coproducer) rather than an operand resource ('target') and can be involved in the entire value and service chain in acting upon operand resources" (2004, p. 11). Certainly the promotion of customers from targets to coproducers is a good example of the way in which marketing theorists have integrated the apparent empowerment of networked customers into new vocabularies of egalitarianism. On the other hand, the extension of the terminology of 'resources' to include the customer threatens to place them in a passive (done *to*) and manipulated position which is in opposition to such egalitarianism. The distinction between operant and operand resources is central to the S-D Logic framework. Operand resources are the focus of traditional marketing – they are resources "on which an operation or act is performed" (2004, p. 4). Operant resources are resources "that produce effects" (ibid.) and are the primary focus of the new service perspective in marketing. Examples of operant resources are knowledge and skills. Accordingly, Vargo and Lusch see both employees and customers as operant resources who will help the enterprise "to make better value propositions than its competitors" (2004, p. 5). There is a certain awkwardness in Vargo and Lusch

continuing to use the very concept of resources, though. If employees and consumers are resources they are still resources *used by* the enterprise. While they might be formulated as resources that produce effects (on each other), these effects are themselves managed (and taken advantage of) by the enterprise. The enterprise takes on a strange flip-flopping level of agency in S-D Logic – it is both working *with* or alongside its operant resources but at the same time working *upon* them, trying to produce effects as a result of its successful management of them. This terminological inconsistency reflects a larger issue with the co-creation of value as it is formulated in Vargo and Lusch (2004). How can consumers ever be equal partners in a relationship with the firm when the practice of (service) marketing is directed at *managing* operant resources (which, of course, includes consumers)?

The service perspective portrays the firm as embedded in a complex network of partners all of whom need to be continually negotiated with and 'related' to as each one represents an operant resource for the firm. This complexity has to be managed and it is this, according to Vargo and Lusch, which represents the real utility of the marketer in the service-oriented enterprise. Marketing becomes the "predominant organizational philosophy" (2004, p. 13) in the firm. Yet, how exactly can the co-producing consumer be organised? The intention of egalitarianism is clear in such phrasings as the firm's mission being the "the application of competences for the benefit of the consumer" (2004, p. 14), its communication focus being "characterized by dialogue, asking and answering questions", and the service-centered view of marketing requiring "collaborating with and learning from customers" (2004, p. 6). However, behind this persuasive talk are clear indications of the consumer remaining the same old "target".

If the co-creation of value depends upon constant dialogue with consumers what happens when consumers do not want to talk to a firm? Vargo and Lusch (2004), along with most co-creation thinkers, tend to assume that consumers will want to engage in conversation with all the firms that want to talk with them. Indeed, in their description of the service-oriented approach they include a vision of the new marketer as a selling and "buying agent" who "on a long-term, relational basis" can "source, evaluate, and purchase the skills (either as intangibles or embedded in tangible matter) that the customer needs, wants, or desires" (2004, p. 13). This depiction rather implies that the firm is the more passive partner, acting as skilled intermediary for the (active) demands of the consumer. The further implication is that the consumer initiates contact with the firm when they need something, the firm remaining like some mute, Gothic butler until required. Yet, in their description of an idealized new service-centered marketing curriculum, they describe the revised study of marketing communications as covering "the means and mechanisms for initiating and

maintaining a continuing dialogue with the consumer and for enhancing the relationship by using tools such as branding" (2004, p. 14). So, clearly, the consumer is still a "target" in the sense of having to have dialogue *initiated upon* them. Persuasive gambits will be necessary to open conversations with consumers, to make the prospect of such conversations appear valuable to them, to maintain engagement in the face of competition. Now the firm is the active element in the partnership, constructing value propositions of such attractiveness and logic that the consumer will be persuaded to choose them as their co-creation partner. This scenario is, surely, not so very different from those familiar in traditional marketing communication. While an emphasis on one-to-one, networked communication in the new servicescape might very well mean that consumers can be approached within a one-to-one, conversational framework, nevertheless they will remain as targets for manipulative gambits which try to persuade them to adopt one firm as marketing agent over another.

4 Co-creation and the Search for Marketing Relevance

The co-creation of value is a vital strategic element in the overall theoretical framework of Service-Dominant Logic. It underlines the customer-centricity of the approach, instantiates the 'customer as operant resource' perspective, illustrates the primacy of dialogue for service marketing, and provides a clear response to the prospect of connected, empowered (even entitled) consumers. Just as the Service-Dominant Logic functions rhetorically as an inevitable, evolutionary, unifying answer to the fragmentation effecting marketing theory at the end of the twentieth century, so too is the co-creation of value functioning within it as an answer to the creative power that consumers already have.

As marketing's relevance has begun to be increasingly questioned in the faculty lounge and the boardroom (Anderson 1994; Clark et al. 2014; Katsikeas et al. 2004; Kerin 2005; Park et al. 2012; Sheth, Sisodiam 2005), so academic marketing has had to seek signs of such relevance and embed them within its formulation. By adopting into the firm's strategy something that consumers have already been doing (discussing, loving, hating, adapting and re-purposing products and services) the service perspective's formulation of the co-creation of value can be seen as actively responding to the change in the balance of power (and in the location of value). Yet, it can also be seen as constructing a pose wherein consumers are 'allowed and encouraged' by the firm to co-create value. The truth is that they have *always* co-created value – marketing is simply now

theorising how a firm can take advantage of this (by treating the consumer as a resource working for the health of the enterprise).

The possibility here is that Service-Dominant Logic uses the co-creation of value as a way of re-asserting control over the consumer, using terminological re-direction to valorise the firm's management of the co-creation process as a service response which at the same time claims ownership over the management of the process. The 'new marketer' cannot organise and manage co-creation for the benefit of the firm (even though that might be rhetorically defined as for the benefit of the consumer) without falling into the trap of managing the consumer as a target.

In the final part of this chapter I will look at a number of examples of marketing practitioner discourse around the practice of co-creation in contemporary interactive marketing communication and examine the way in which practitioners' 'professional talk' reflects similar tensions and strategies to those that I have outlined above in the academic literature.

5 Marketing Practitioners and the Discourse of Co-creation

Marketing practitioners and marketing academics might not necessarily listen to each other, let alone see eye-to-eye on a wide range of topics. While many of the top marketing journals, for example, profess themselves to be concerned with issues of relevance for practitioners there is little evidence that the majority of marketing practitioners ever read those journals. After all, the marketing profession has its own professional or trade press in such publications (and their related websites and blogs) as *Advertising Age*, *Ad Week*, *Brand Republic*, and *Direct Marketing News* in the USA and *Campaign* and *Marketing Week* in the UK, for example. While research from academic marketing journals does sometimes find its way into the pages of the trade press even a cursory review reveals that the bulk of the latter's content relates to the dissemination of practitioner news and practitioner wisdom and experience. In the end, though, the foundational academic writing on the co-creation of value relies for much of its argumentative weight upon examples of successful co-creation strategies in business. The marketing practitioner trade press does the same thing, holding up cases of co-creation as examples of best practice that all can learn from.

A *Brand Republic* piece by Matthew Gidley (2012), then Director of Strategy and Insight at agency Momentum UK, exemplifies the typical trade press discourse on co-creation. It starts off with the bad news ("The consumer is bored")

designed to provide the persuasive context for its message. We have seen similar gambits in Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and Vargo and Lusch (2004) – remind the reader that their jobs are on the line, that the consumer is out of control and dissatisfied. As Gidley puts it, "in Adland, brands are having to work harder than ever to engage this modern consumer" (2012). The cause of this is to be found in "modern technology", which has given consumers the ability to be "the heroes of their own story" and to reach out by themselves to "many different audiences". They have become empowered, in other words, and seek more "empowerment to participate and empowerment to make better choices". Gidley states that the only way to get "true buy-in" from such consumers is with co-creation, which he describes as "one of the most fashionable ideas to enter our repertoire for a long time". Despite its powerful hold on marketing practitioners, Gidley argues that the idea of co-creation is often misunderstood and misapplied. It cannot be simply equated with "crowdsourcing" but instead has to focus on "harnessing the right people, whether they are consumers, partners or specialists, to create the right social currency". Gidley's point here is interesting. It prioritises expertise, not just in the sense that it suggests brands might need to use specialists to co-create with, but more generally in the sense that a brand needs expertise (i.e. the expertise of the marketing agency) to 'harness' the correct resources in the most effective way possible. The approach is deeply redolent of Vargo and Lusch's (2004) conception of consumers (and partners) as resources that need to be organised. For Gidley, "crowdsourcing" is meant to clearly imply a disorganised, unmanaged, almost anarchic opening of the gates to the mob. True co-creation, on the other hand, needs to be done with the "right people".

It seems strange that Gidley can state that consumer expectations of empowerment and participation are the drivers behind the need for co-creation strategies and yet then advise practitioners that to co-create effectively they need to find the "right people" (who might not even be the consumer) to 'harness' in a co-creation relationship. Indeed, this tension is heightened even further at the end of the piece when he reminds the reader that the great achievements of history, "from the momentous task of erecting Stonehenge to the challenges of the industrial revolution" (2012), have all been achieved through co-creation. Surely, this makes of co-creation something entirely meaningless? If the industrial revolution can be characterised as an example of co-creation what cannot? Perhaps Gidley means that these projects (or emerging structures) depended upon the co-ordination of many experts, specialists and managers, as well as faceless, unskilled workers. Certainly, we can say that the prospect of the 'crowd' being allowed into the firm's design, distribution and operational decision-making is not what Gidley understands as co-creation.

A *Marketing Week* article investigating the "secrets of commercial co-creation" (Allchin 2010) outlines the thoughts of Ben Hayman, then Deputy Manager of Promise agency. In a similar opening gambit to Gidley's, the article stresses the fashionability of the "ill-defined term", while noting that there is often "a lack of understanding about the realities of the approach". While Hayman's approach is more inclusive than Gidley's (he states that "we are all experts in something" and explicitly notes that consumers should not be treated as a resource) his approach to commercial co-creation is just as focused upon the need for management of the consumer as Gidley's. Commercial co-creation requires a "dedicated space" run by "focused, skilled and objective facilitators who are able to interpret, analyse and help to develop the information that is being developed during co-creation activities". The marketer becomes a "strong facilitator" who is able to empower the consumer by encouraging their creativity and their inclusion into the community of the brand. As Hayman says, "co-creation is about empowering consumers to contribute, providing a platform and then following up with them." This sounds very egalitarian until one recognises that the assumption here is that power is entirely in the hands of the marketer – the (chosen) consumer is given power by the facilitator, given a platform by the facilitator, and then kept within certain defined "parameters" by the facilitator.

The tension involved in practitioner understandings of the co-creation of value is perfectly summed up in a piece from WPP's online 'reading room', written by Andrew Welch (2014) from Young&Rubicam. Welch notes that co-creation can often mean "letting go to take control". So, the marketing practitioner allows, indeed encourages, a certain combination of the right outsiders inside the firm so that they can be given access to internal resources and led through just the right pathways to help produce insights and suggestions that can then be fed into the design team ("Don't present co-created ideas to a design team as a fait accompli – nothing will alienate the team faster"). Once again, this is a tightly 'harnessed' and 'facilitated' process – Welch expects marketers rather than consumers to build the community, and also expects them to manage the type of creation that it produces ("ask your co-creators to make people", he directs).

A repeated complaint here is that practitioners do not understand the *real* nature of the co-creation of value and instead rely upon ersatz versions such as crowdsourcing and consumer-generated advertising which fail to capture the visionary re-balancing of structures and controls that the paradigm promises. Indeed, such failure might also be leading to the early abandonment of the whole approach. Pete Blackshaw (2010), a co-founder of the Word-of-Mouth Marketing Association, notes in an article for *Advertising Age* that even the

agency excitement around such manqué forms of co-creation as consumer-generated advertising has rather chilled, being replaced with "a pivot back to the reality of brand control". Certainly, both practitioner and academic discourses around co-creation have found it difficult to disengage from rhetorics of control even when they might be appearing to celebrate the prospect of a more egalitarian balance of power between consumer and brands. So, while consumer-generated TV advertising might only have found a foothold in a few, celebrated places (such as Doritos's yearly 'Smash the Superbowl' competition), the use of consumer feedback, insight, and creative impulse certainly seems to be rampant across the digital landscape. Encouraging consumer communities to engage in an ongoing dialogue with you, whether that dialogue is made up of a flutter of images, 140-character signal bursts, or comments on a blog post, would superficially seem to be congruent with the conversational emphasis to co-creation found in the academic descriptions. Yet, even conversations and communities, it seems, need to be managed. As Richard Bates, European Consumer and Market Insight Director for Samsung, states, consumer community engagement needs to be carefully shepherded by a brand, "You have duty of care, otherwise as a resource it becomes overused and its value can ultimately decline" (Chahal 2015). The language here is, once again, suffused with assumptions of control over the consumer as a resource, and it is interesting that Bates effectively uses his communities as expanded focus groups and test kitchens rather than full-fledged partners in the creation of the brand. Indeed, the full surrender of control that the co-creation paradigm demands is perhaps innately antithetical to the marketing practitioner, whose job it is to manage engagement, organise communication, and navigate the creation and maintenance of brand identity.

6 Conclusion

The academic and practitioner discourses around the concept of the co-creation of value are reactions to similar threats. In the case of practitioners, digital platforms and online consumer communities have the potential to wrest control away from brands and make traditional marketing management models ineffective. For the marketing academy, the threat takes the form of irrelevance – whether that is situated in the dangerous lack of unity that faced the discipline in the 1980s and 90s or the increasing distrust of marketing at the boardroom level. For both discourse communities, the co-creation of value represents one component in a matrix of strategies designed to reinvigorate marketing by (re-)asserting control over an expanded realm of resources.

The service and relationship perspectives in academic marketing research have tended to support the idea that manipulative, asymmetrical, and control-oriented approaches to marketing management are generally counter-productive and inappropriate in an increasingly networked market. Calls for a marketing based upon mutually beneficial, constructive dialogue between brands and consumers have moved from the periphery in marketing theory towards the center. However, there has been little attention paid in these discourses to the very deep level at which assumptions of control over consumers inform the fundamental enterprise of marketing. These assumptions appear to be endemic to the marketing enterprise, reproducing themselves even within the ostensibly egalitarian discourses of co-creation. Marketing academics, even when very aware of the rhetorical power of word choice and framing, have difficulty with 'following-through' in discourses encouraging the surrendering of control and find themselves constructing persuasive narratives designed to offer hope in the face of adversity. Practitioners have similar problems with the ramifications of the co-creation of value – often adopting the construct as a rallying flag for an industry nervous about the loss of control to consumers and often betraying in their resulting 'professional talk' the continuing search for lines of control, organisation, and management of the consumer. As some practitioner voices have noted, the 'management' of co-creation is a difficult and time-consuming task even when the concept is understood clearly. It is, perhaps, not surprising that while the term remains popular in professional marketing discourse its practical adoption has been far from universal and its interpretation has become somewhat fluid.

More than anything, then, the co-creation of value works as a rhetorical rallying point for both academics and practitioners. Its egalitarian figuration, emphasising dialogue, mutual respect, the flattening of hierarchies, and transparency of operation serves to make a 'new' marketing which is discursively constructed to counter the old marketing management paradigm of consumer targeting and manipulation. However, that old marketing management paradigm continues to exert a powerful influence on both the language and reasoning of academics and practitioners. The visionary, almost millenarian, tone with which Prahalad and Ramaswamy close their presentation of the co-creation of value is perhaps the clearest indication of the status of the construct, offering up a salvatory hallucination of "a new basis for the social legitimacy of all large institutions in our society" (2004, p. 238), a bright, cleansed future for business as the handmaiden of truly participatory democracy.

I would argue that contemporary marketing (both academic and professional) is subject to the heavy demands of the "attention economy" (Lanham 2006, p. 7). Marketing theorists and agency marketing managers need to

compete for the attention of their various consumers. The co-creation of value is a discursive strategy aimed at positioning the discipline of marketing in front of audiences who are distracted by issues of consumer empowerment, changing communication habits, and fears of irrelevancy. As such, it is fundamentally paradoxical in its formulation: if all firms entered into co-creative relationships with their consumers, consumers would never have the time to do anything else other than create with firms, and so in order to apportion their attention effectively they would have to make decisions as to which firms they will enter into such time-consuming relationships with, and as a result those firms will have to engage in persuasive strategies in order to compete for that attention, but this is against the spirit of co-creation as it will lead us back to the 'old' marketing of manipulative communication games. Yet, while this paradoxical structuring is highly problematic when considering co-creation as a workable basis for a future marketing it is entirely inconsequential for the co-creation of value's role as a rhetorical construct. In this sense, much of the discourse around co-creation serves as disinformation – it distracts consumers and clients from the unchanging control-orientation of marketing practice and theory, misdirecting attention towards a supposed egalitarian epiphany in the discipline and constructing a frothy, feel-good, yet deeply paradoxical version of marketing which bears little resemblance to the manufacturing of interest and desire that is at the root of marketing's disciplinary identity. Seen in this light, co-creation itself becomes a 'traditional', short-term marketing strategy of disinformation, designed to stimulate waning demand for the discipline and its practitioners through an appeal to the fears and hopes of its consumers and clients.

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