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A netnography analysis of brand co-creation in online brand communities; Case study: Hiba

Mohammad Reza Jalilvand*, Mohammad Moein Ziadoust
Department of Business Management and Entrepreneurship, Faculty of Management and Accounting, Farabi Campus, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.
(*Corresponding author: rezajalilvand@ut.ac.ir, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0740-6778)

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Abstract

Background: Instagram, as one of the most popular social platforms, provides a suitable environment for interaction between brands and users. In this digital space, the concept of "brand co-creation," which refers to the active participation of users in the formation and enhancement of brand value, has gained particular significance.
Aims: This study aims to propose a brand co-creation framework within the online communities of brands active on Instagram.
Methodology: This study adopts a netnographic strategy to develop a framework of brand co-creation in online communities. In this regard, the Instagram page activities of the Hiba brand over the past year were analyzed. In addition, interviews were conducted with 12 followers of this page who had actively participated in co-creation activities.
Findings: The identified themes under the dimension of transparency in brand co-creation include: valuable content, creative and distinctive content, educational and useful content, interactive and participatory content, storytelling content, customer orientation and trust-building, digital empathy, emotional and affective interactions, and behavioral and practical interactions. In the dimension of tools for brand co-creation, the identified elements include posts, likes, comments, liking comments, stories, direct messages, polls, sharing, and Instagram Lives. Furthermore, the themes extracted under the dimension of risk and benefit of brand co-creation consist of hidden burdens and gaps, both material and spiritual. Communication failures, communicative inefficiencies, lack of information, communication errors, trust cues, positive and effective responsiveness, authenticity and transparency, and purposeful communication are among the themes related to the transparency dimension.
Conclusion: Interactions in online brand communities are influenced by the content presented and the nature of communication. Brands must reinforce consumer trust by delivering valuable and creative content. Various tools such as likes, comments, and polls assist brands in engaging more collaboratively with consumers. Brand co-creation has both advantages and disadvantages, necessitating intelligent management to evolve into a successful strategy. Additionally, the clarity of interactions is affected by various factors that can influence consumer trust and satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Co-creation, as a fundamental concept in human communication and group activities, plays a highly significant role (Machala & Havíř, 2019; Dijk et al., 2014). This concept refers to the sharing of resources, experiences, and capabilities among different individuals with the goal of achieving a common objective (Israilov, 2017; Kamboj et al., 2018). Customers are transitioning from passive participants to active contributors; this process of value co-creation has been significantly enhanced by the development of the Internet and the rise of social media (Rashid et al., 2019). From a branding perspective, the concept of co-creation focuses on how the active participation of customers determines brand success (France et al., 2018; Iglesias et al., 2018; Okoeguale, 2023). Interest in customer brand co-creation within social media is currently receiving considerable attention from both academics and practitioners across various fields (Rubio et al., 2021). In the context of branding, co-creation refers to collaboration and the sharing of values and goals with other individuals and organizations in order to strengthen the brand or company. This approach is effective in fostering positive communication with audiences, increasing brand awareness, and adding value to the customer experience (Erhardt et al., 2019; Ind et al., 2017).

Online communities have emerged as dynamic and global spaces for communication between individuals and brands. Within this context, brand co-creation in online communities serves as a highly effective strategy for enhancing brand image and influence. Collaboration between brands and individuals in these communities leads to the creation of dynamic and diverse content streams. This content—including texts, images, and videos—is widely shared and holds strong appeal for audiences (Zhang et al., 2014). Such content sharing increases brand awareness and captures users' attention. Brand co-creation within online communities fosters more active engagement with audiences. Through direct communication and collaboration with individuals, the brand enhances its ability to understand audience needs and preferences. These interactions contribute to increased brand credibility and the establishment of enduring relationships with customers (Tajvidi et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2016; Zerkal & Holomb, 2018; Benmiled-Cherif et al., 2016).

In this study, Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) theory of value co-creation was employed as the theoretical lens to design a model for brand co-creation in online communities. According to the theory of value co-creation, this process consists of four dimensions (DART): (1) Dialogue, (2) Access, (3) Risk and Benefit, and (4) Transparency. Dialogue refers to interaction, deep engagement, and the ability and willingness to act from both parties. Interaction is not merely about expressing opinions or the company's willingness to listen to consumers; rather, it requires profound involvement, empathetic

understanding, and mutual readiness to take action. Access is designed to mediate and facilitate dialogue, enabling the company to specify when, where, and how consumers can engage in the co-creation process. Risk and benefit refer to the potential dangers or opportunities that are inherently present in the process of co-creation for both businesses and consumers. Transparency pertains to the provision of accurate and genuine information regarding a business's operations to consumers (Nogueira-plezoni & Baldanza, 2019).

This study focuses on designing a netnographic model of brand co-creation in online communities. Although previous research has been conducted on other forms of co-creation—such as value co-creation (Lin et al., 2018; Chapman & Dilmperi, 2022)—the central theme of the present study is specifically brand co-creation. While there have been studies addressing brand co-creation (France et al., 2018; Sarkar & Banerjee, 2021), those investigations were conducted within offline or physical communities. In contrast, the current research focuses explicitly on brand co-creation within online communities. Brand co-creation has also been examined using quantitative methods (Tajvidi et al., 2020) as well as qualitative approaches (Le et al., 2022).

In sum, there several research gaps in brand cocreation in online communities. First, most existing studies emphasize *dialogue* (e.g., comments, likes) and *access* (brand visibility) on Instagram (Wang et al., 2016), but *transparency* (e.g., disclosure of brand motives, authenticity) and *risk-benefits* (e.g., data privacy, content ownership) are rarely explored. There's a gap in understanding how these underexamined DART elements function in Instagram-based brand co-creation. Second, Instagram is a visual-first platform, yet few studies analyze how users co-create *symbolic value* through images, stories, reels, and branded aesthetics. There's an opportunity to explore how visual content becomes a medium of *value co-creation* and identity expression between brands and consumers. Third, influencers often act as intermediaries in brand co-creation, but their role within the DART framework—especially in facilitating *dialogue*, shaping *access*, and influencing perceived *risks and benefits*—is not well-theorized. More research is needed on how influencers co-create or even control brand value on behalf of their communities. Forth, Instagram's algorithm determines what content is seen or hidden, which directly impacts *access* and *dialogue*. However, few studies investigate how the algorithmic curation of content shapes the co-creation process, who gets to participate, and how that affects perceived value from both users' and brands' perspectives (Zerkal & Holomb, 2018). Finally, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) emphasized the shift in power toward consumers. However, there's limited empirical work examining how consumers actually perceive and exercise that power in co-creation processes within digital communities (Tajvidi et al., 2020). A netnographic approach could uncover how value is actively negotiated between brand

and consumer, especially when tensions arise. To the best of our knowledge, no study has provided a framework of brand co-creation in online communities using a netnographic approach. Accordingly, in light of the theoretical components of brand co-creation proposed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and the existing research gap, the present study seeks to address the following research questions:

Research question 1. How do businesses and consumers interact and engage in dialogue within online brand communities?

Research question 2. What tools are used by businesses and consumers in online brand communities to facilitate brand co-creation?

Research question 3. What are the risks and benefits of brand co-creation in online brand communities for businesses and consumers?

Research question 4. How clear and transparent are the information exchanges and interactions between businesses and consumers in online brand communities?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Value co-creation

High-quality interactions that enable a customer to create unique experiences with a company are the key to unlocking new sources of competitive advantage. Value must be co-created jointly by the company and the consumer.

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) stated that *Dialogue*, *Access*, *Risk and Benefit*, and *Transparency* (DART) form the foundation of interaction between the consumer and the firm. These building blocks of customer–company interaction create strong positions that challenge traditional managers on issues such as risk disclosure, transparency of financial statements, open access, and dialogue with consumers and communities. Markets can be conceived as sets of dialogues between the customer and the company. Dialogue signifies interaction, deep engagement, and the ability and willingness to act on both sides. Dialogue should center on issues that are compelling to both the consumer and the company, and it should be governed by clearly defined rules of engagement (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Most importantly, dialogue, access, and transparency can lead to a clearer assessment of the benefits and risks of a solution or decision by the consumer (ibid).

2.2. Brand co-creation

The brand co-creation theory hypothesizes that consumers are no longer content with being passive purchasers of brands; rather, they demand active participation in creating brand experiences (Ind et al., 2012). Consequently, customers now play a powerful role in determining the success of modern brands. Due to its early stage of development,

customer brand co-creation theory remains limited. Strategic management studies on co-creation advance the conceptualization of co-creation. A review of the co-creation literature reveals that the dominant approach emphasizes co-creation's impact on brand value. The paradigm shift in service logic guides this approach and serves as the foundation for many co-creation theories (ibid). A deeper analysis of the literature indicates the existence of specialized approaches to co-creation that frame theory around other aspects, such as user-generated advertising, new product development, social media, and word-of-mouth. Thus, the customer plays a crucial role in co-creating brand value. To advance the theory of customer brand co-creation, elements such as brand interaction, self-congruence with the brand, category involvement, brand value, and brand knowledge are integrated into the co-creation context. These concepts provide a basis for developing research propositions and enhancing understanding of co-creation's impact (ibid).

Research shows that customers who perceive brands as expressions of their self-identity have stronger relationships with the brand, more positive brand attitudes, and greater brand loyalty. There is also evidence that self-brand connection directly influences loyalty behavior. This strong brand connection and the desire to express pride in the brand are relevant in the co-creation context, where customer willingness to engage in co-creation behaviors is expected to increase. Customers engage in co-creation to express their identity and strong alignment with the brand and to participate in something they perceive as valuable. Co-creation behavior reinforces individual identity expression and brand pride. Therefore, it is proposed that when customers connect with a brand through high brand self-congruence, co-creation behavior can serve as a tool for self-expression. Consequently, customers require higher levels of brand self-congruence to demonstrate their affinity for the brand through brand co-creation (ibid).

Participation and self-awareness are recognized as necessary conditions for co-creation. However, it is also evident that the level of interest and personal connection a customer feels toward a brand category can enhance their engagement with brands. Customers with high category involvement view the category as a meaningful part of their lives. These individuals possess more knowledge and become opinion leaders within their categories. Their high involvement leads them to pay greater attention to the brand category, perceive higher category value, and behave differently from those who are less involved. Although there is no direct evidence linking category involvement to co-creation behavior, a logical connection can be inferred. Customers highly involved in a category are expected to behave differently, including being more active in their co-creation behaviors. Therefore, category involvement is anticipated to be a precursor to brand co-creation by customers (ibid).

2.3. Related works

Hajli et al. (2017) assessed the role of brand co-creation in three online communities in Iran through 45 interviews conducted with members and senior managers of three brands within these communities. Content analysis revealed that customers' social interactions in online brand communities with their preferred brands contribute to the development of relationship quality and enhance customer brand loyalty. France et al. (2018), in a survey of customers from small businesses— including Australian fashion and household appliance retailers, hair salons, and cafes— found that customer co-creation behavior can be conceptualized as a valid construct composed of four distinct dimensions: development, feedback, advocacy, and helping. Moreover, each dimension maintained independence from the others while demonstrating significant interrelations that support the overall structure of customer co-creation behavior.

Sarkar & Banerjee (2021), through a systematic literature review, concluded that brand co-creation occurs via the participation of three key stakeholders: consumers, organizations, and suppliers. According to these researchers, supplier involvement, when effectively managed, can reduce the time and costs associated with product and brand development and may also facilitate access to newer technologies and improved quality. Tajvidi et al. (2020), aiming to deepen the understanding of brand value co-creation, employed socio-technical theory to construct a model of brand co-creation incorporating key antecedents—social commerce information sharing, social support, and relationship quality—with privacy concerns acting as a moderating variable. Through an empirical study, they found that social commerce information sharing, social support, and relationship quality directly and/or indirectly influence brand co-creation, while privacy concerns moderate the effect of social commerce information sharing on brand co-creation.

Sohaib and Han (2023) explored the interaction between social media and brand co-creation. Their results indicated that co-creation positively impacts brand loyalty and brand trust. Skandalis (2023), based on a netnographic study and in-depth interviews within the online community of Greek football managers, examined the specific role of reality and imagination in the creation and maintenance of brand value. Inspired by Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory, this study demonstrated how value creation occurs between reality and fantasy and is manifested through the complex interaction of real and fantasy-based resources, predominantly situated in a transitional space.

Wang et al. (2023), utilizing Amazon's platform to collect 246 valid samples worldwide representing general members of online brand communities, found that co-creation experience and brand engagement are core value experiences that can increase the intention to continue participation in online brand communities. Additionally, social media

costs and the recognition of online brand communities through facilitating technology-based and shared interactions for resource integration and service exchange between brand community members and the brand are beneficial in valuing these experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1. Case selection

The case selected for this study was the Hiba brand, which was established in 2019 by the Bagherzadeh sisters through the creation of an account on the social media platform Instagram. Hiba specializing in fashion and apparel. It operates a digital storefront where customers across Iran can browse and purchase a wide variety of clothing and accessories— including women's and men's outfits, shoes, bags, and other fashion items— directly through its website. The brand focuses on offering trendy, stylish pieces with options for easy online ordering, customer support, and flexible return/exchange policies, aiming to blend quality, variety, and convenience in the local e-commerce fashion market. Currently, it operates as one of the prominent brands in the apparel sector. This brand has not engaged in any physical-world advertising and has primarily focused on interacting with consumers within online communities. At present, the brand's Instagram account has 1,211,734 followers. On average, over the past 30 days, 431,306 accounts have interacted with this brand's Instagram page, and during the same period, a total of 1,496,899 interactions with the brand's shared content have been recorded.

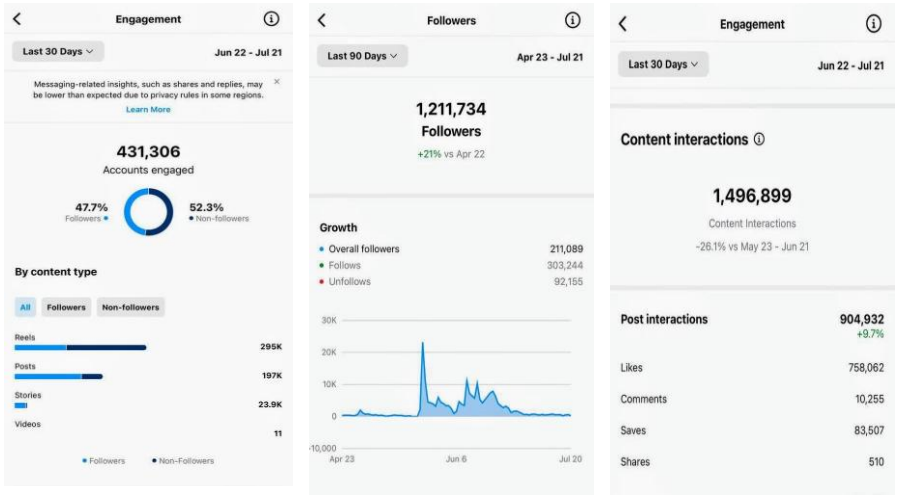

Figure 1. Characteristics of the Hiba brand Instagram page (Instagram's Report, 2024)

3.2. Data

The content analyzed on the Hiba brand's Instagram page included posts, likes, stories, comments, comment likes, polls, shares, Instagram

Live sessions, direct messages, and the interview transcripts of individuals who participated in co-creation activities. The participants in this study consisted of individuals who were followers of Hiba's Instagram page and had taken part in co-creation activities with the brand. These individuals were selected using a purposive judgmental sampling method. To collect data through interviews, direct messages were sent via Instagram's direct messaging feature to users who had interacted with the Hiba brand page. Subsequently, 25 individuals agreed to participate in the study. Of these, 20 people expressed their readiness for an interview, and ultimately, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Age of interviewee (Years)	Duration of following the Hiba page (Years)	Education level of interviewee	Gender of interviewee
33	4	PhD	Female
25	2	Master's degree	
27	3	Master's degree	
24	1	Master's degree	
26	1	Bachelor's degree	
27	3	Bachelor's degree	
28	3	Bachelor's degree	
29	2	Bachelor's degree	
37	4	Bachelor's degree	
27	3	High school diploma	
20	1	High school diploma	
18	1	High school diploma	

3.3. Analytical procedure

In netnography, sample selection is carried out efficiently and based on information collection, with a purposive and data-driven sampling process. In this section, there are two types of statistical populations: the Instagram page of the Hiba brand and its followers. The first target population (the Hiba brand Instagram page) involved examining the page's activities during the research period. The second target population (followers) consisted of individuals who are audience members of the Hiba Instagram page and who actively engage with its content.

In this study, the researcher monitored all activities of the users and owners of the Hiba brand's Instagram page over the course of one year. Nevertheless, it should be noted that netnography essentially relies on the observation of texts, and its unit of study is behaviors that manifest in textual form and are expressed through dialogic textual performances. Since one of the most important data collection tools in this study was observation, the nature of the research required that data collection continue until a clear pattern for understanding brand co-creation in online brand communities emerged. Therefore, observation

was discontinued once it was confirmed that no further data would contribute to achieving the research objectives.

According to Kozinets (2019), interviews may be conducted with individuals who have been observed during netnography or with those who participate in online spaces in various ways. In other words, interviews in online research are highly flexible in their execution. In this study, to collect data through interviews, messages were sent via Instagram Direct to users who engaged with the Hiba brand Instagram page. Subsequently, 25 individuals agreed to participate in the study. Of these, 20 people expressed their willingness to be interviewed, and ultimately, 12 complete interviews were conducted.

3.4. Reliability

In this study, two methods—double-coder testing and test-retest—were used to assess the reliability of the research. Three interviews were selected from among the conducted interviews, and each was coded by the researcher twice within a fifteen-day interval. The test-retest reliability of the conducted interviews was calculated to be 87.7%, which is considered an acceptable value.

Table 2. Test-retest reliability calculation

	Reliability (%)	Number of disagreements	Number of agreements	Total number of codes
1	86	10	31	72
2	90	6	27	60
3	87.5	10	35	80
	87.7	26	93	212

To examine the reliability of the interviews using the double-coder method, one of the master's degree students—whose thesis was also conducted using a qualitative approach and who possesses adequate proficiency in thematic analysis—was asked to collaborate with the researcher in this regard. Three interviews were coded by this individual. The reliability percentage for this section is 83%, which is considered an acceptable value.

Table 3. Test-retest reliability calculation

	Reliability (%)	Number of disagreements	Number of agreements	Total number of codes
1	77	17	29	75
2	88.8	7	28	63
3	84.6	12	33	78
	83	36	90	216

4. Findings

Question 1. Mechanisms of dialogue/interaction in online brand communities

In response to the first question, the thematic network was depicted as shown below. The storyline for each of the themes is as Figure 2.

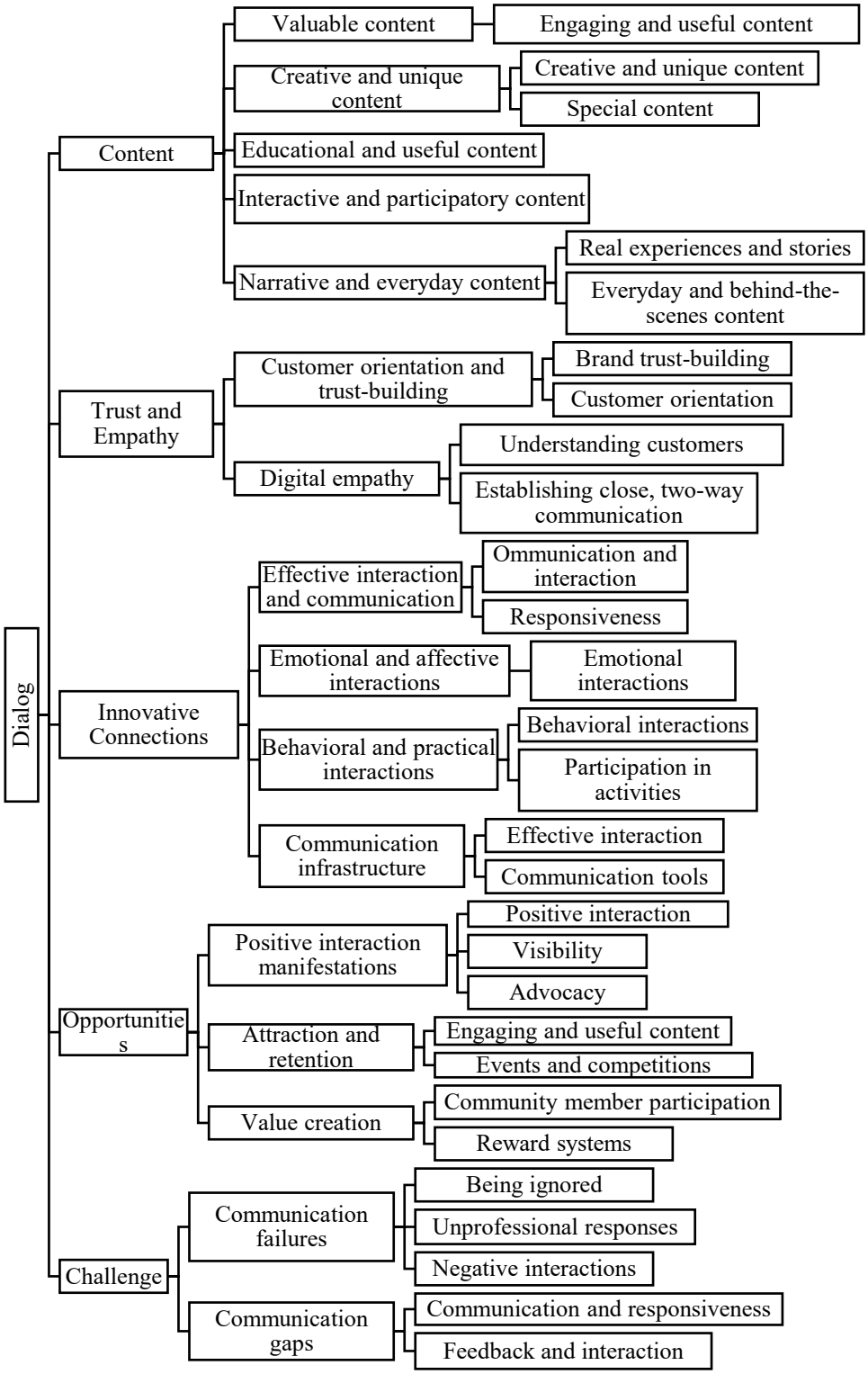

Figure 2. Themes related to the first research question

- **Content**

The theme of content consists of five concepts, including valuable content, creative and unique content, educational and useful content, interactive and participatory content, and narrative and everyday content. Valuable content itself is formed from the theme of engaging and useful content. Creative and unique content is composed of two organizing themes: creative and unique content, and special content. Educational and useful content is made up of fundamental themes related to learning and education. Interactive and participatory content includes fundamental themes that require user interaction and participation, such as contests and surveys. Narrative and everyday content consists of two organizing themes: real experiences and stories, and everyday and behind-the-scenes content. In today's digital world, content creation not only helps build brand identity but also plays a vital role in attracting audience attention and establishing communication with them. Producing engaging and effective content requires careful planning and awareness of audience needs. By combining various types of visual, educational, interactive content and real experiences, brands can gain greater power in connecting with their audiences and fostering their loyalty.

- **Trust and Empathy**

The theme of trust and empathy comprises two concepts: customer orientation and trust-building, and digital empathy. The theme of customer orientation and trust-building includes brand trust-building and customer orientation. The digital empathy theme is formed by two organizing sub-themes: understanding customers and establishing close, two-way communication. Trust and empathy in interactions can facilitate long-term relationships with customers and create deep loyalty. Brands that properly focus on this aspect will be able to convey their values to customers and provide a foundation for growth and advancement in a competitive market. Trust and empathy in interactions not only improve customer experience but also contribute to creating a positive and energetic organizational culture where all team members pursue customer satisfaction.

- **Innovative connections**

Innovative connections are formed by four concepts: effective interaction and communication, emotional and affective interactions, behavioral and practical interactions, and communication infrastructure. Effective interaction and communication itself consist of two organizing themes: responsiveness and interaction and communication. Emotional and affective interactions arise from the organizing theme of emotional interactions. Behavioral and practical interactions include two organizing themes: behavioral interactions and participation in activities. Effective interaction and communication

tools are components of the overarching theme of communication infrastructure. In today's world, especially within online communities, the manner in which brands and consumers interact and engage in dialogue has significantly changed, leading to innovative connections. These connections manifest through four overarching themes: effective interaction and communication, emotional and affective interactions, behavioral and practical interactions, and communication infrastructure. Each of these themes specifically and profoundly contributes to the formation of meaningful and effective relationships between brands and consumers. Brands that focus on these four themes will be able to establish deeper relationships with their customers and offer an engaging and meaningful experience in online communities. This approach not only fosters customer loyalty but also enhances the success of brands in highly competitive markets.

- **Opportunities**

Opportunities encompass three overarching themes: positive interaction manifestations, attraction and retention, and value creation. Positive interaction includes the organizing themes of positive interaction manifestations, visibility, and advocacy. Attraction and retention consist of the organizing themes of engaging and useful content, and events and competitions. Value creation is formed by the organizing themes of community member participation and reward systems. In today's fast-paced modern world, businesses and consumers increasingly interact and engage in dialogue within online communities. These interactions provide brands with excellent opportunities to strengthen their connections and increase customer engagement. The opportunities present in brand-consumer interactions in online communities clearly demonstrate the importance of establishing effective and meaningful communication. By focusing on positive interaction manifestations, customer attraction and retention, and value creation, brands can create unique experiences for their customers and succeed in today's competitive market. The ability to attract and retain customers through valuable and positive interactions will become a genuine competitive advantage.

- **Challenges**

Communication gaps and communication failures are the two constituent elements of interaction challenges. The overarching theme of communication failures consists of three concepts: being ignored, unprofessional responses, and negative interactions. Communication gaps are organized around the themes of communication, responsiveness, feedback, and interaction. Interaction and dialogue between brands and consumers in online communities face significant challenges. These challenges can primarily be analyzed from two main perspectives: communication gaps and communication failures. In

today's digital world, what defines successful communication between brands and consumers is not only the quality and speed of response to needs and inquiries but also the depth of these interactions and attention to customers' feelings, which are vital for the survival and growth of brands. By identifying and addressing existing challenges, brands can improve their interactions with customers and transform these into positive and desirable experiences.

Question 2. Tools (access) of brand co-creation in online communities

In response to the second question, the thematic network was illustrated as shown in the following figure. The storyline for each of the tools is as Figure 3.

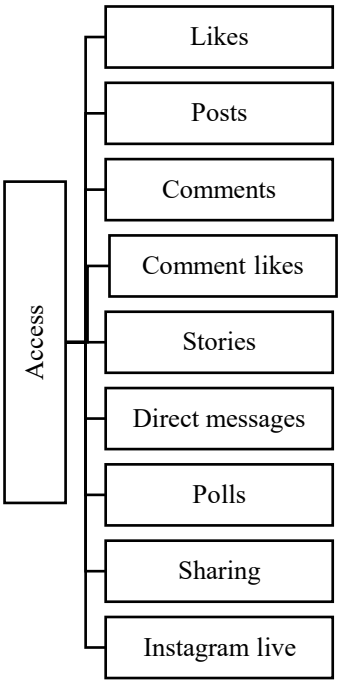

Figure 3. Concepts related to the second research question

- **Posts**

Instagram posts serve as one of the main tools for brand co-creation in online communities. These posts enable businesses and consumers to interact creatively and collaboratively. Businesses can share relevant content and invite participation, encouraging users to provide their opinions, ideas, and experiences. Conversely, consumers can contribute by posting comments, sharing content, and using relevant hashtags, thereby helping to shape and strengthen the brand. This reciprocal process allows brands to develop based on the real needs and desires of their audiences.

- **Likes**

Likes represent users' approval and acceptance of content. This tool helps businesses understand which types of content attract more attention and increase engagement and sales. Additionally, likes provide users with a sense of belonging and participation.

- **Comments**

Comments allow users to publicly share their opinions and experiences with others. Businesses utilize this feedback to receive direct responses from customers and implement improvements in their products and services. Responding to comments also positively influences brand credibility.

- **Comment likes**

Liking comments enables users to endorse others' opinions, signaling agreement or interest in specific viewpoints. This tool fosters an interactive environment and human connections among users and can lead to more extensive conversations.

- **Stories**

Stories allow brands to share live moments, behind-the-scenes content, and temporary posts. This tool helps create closer connections with consumers and boosts engagement. Due to their temporary nature, stories generate a sense of urgency and curiosity that motivates users to participate.

- **Direct messages**

Direct messages provide brands with the opportunity to establish more private communications with consumers. This tool is particularly useful for responding to customers' specific questions and needs and can enhance brand loyalty. Personalized communication makes users feel valued by the brand.

- **Polls**

Polls are powerful tools for gathering information from consumers. Brands can identify customer needs and preferences through these instruments and make strategic decisions accordingly. This process demonstrates respect for customer opinions and strengthens their sense of involvement.

- **Sharing**

Content sharing allows users to exchange their experiences and opinions with others. This action helps expand the brand's reach and creates a community in which individuals exchange ideas and perspectives. Furthermore, shared content can enhance the brand's credibility.

- **Instagram live**

Through live streaming, brands can interact with their followers in real time and use their feedback to improve products and services. In online communities, businesses and consumers employ various tools to co-create brands and establish closer relationships with each other. These tools enable them to share opinions, feelings, and experiences, thus participating in the formation of brand identity. Overall, combining these tools and methods assists businesses in building close and meaningful relationships with their consumers and ultimately achieving greater success in the brand co-creation process.

Question 3. Risks and benefits of brand co-creation in online brand communities

In response to the third question, the thematic network was drawn as shown in the figure below. The storyline for each of the risks and benefits is as Figure 4.

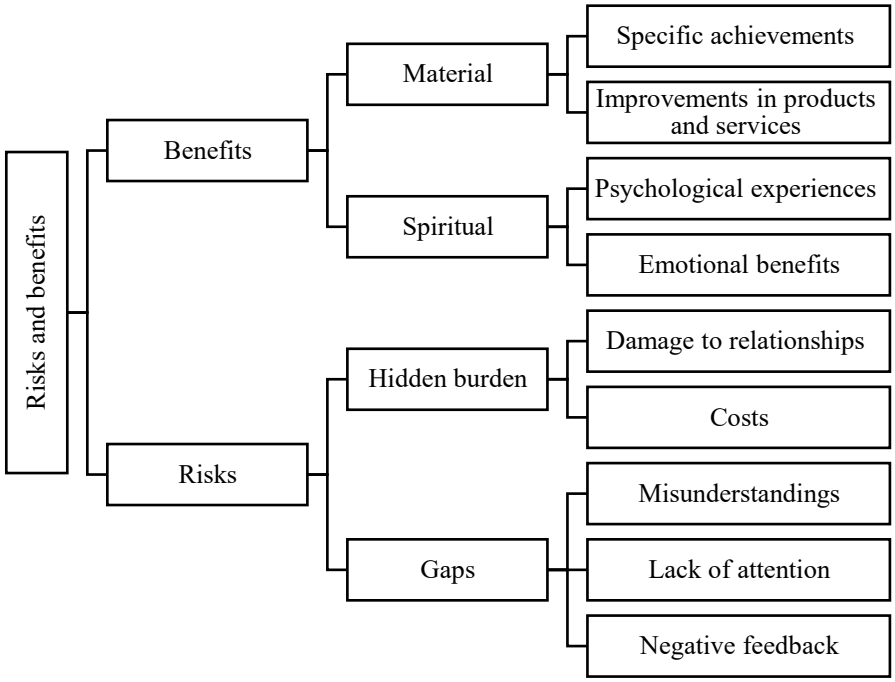

Figure 4. Themes related to the third research question

- **Benefits**

The overarching material theme is composed of two organizing themes: specific achievements and improvements in products and services. Similarly, the overarching spiritual theme consists of two organizing themes: psychological experiences and emotional benefits. Brand co-creation offers numerous advantages to both businesses and consumers. On one hand, businesses achieve tangible outcomes through continuous innovation and enhancement of products and services. On the other

hand, consumers develop a deep and meaningful relationship with the brand through positive psychological experiences and a sense of belonging. These interactions not only contribute to improved brand performance but also facilitate the value creation process for both parties. Therefore, brand co-creation is regarded as a key strategy in today's digital era.

- **Risks**

The overarching risk theme is formed by two constituent themes: hidden burden and gaps. The hidden burden comprises two themes: damage to relationships and costs. The gaps theme is created by three components: misunderstandings, lack of attention, and negative feedback. While brand co-creation in online communities presents tremendous opportunities for both businesses and consumers, it simultaneously entails risks that require careful attention. In the digital world, where communication is rapid and widespread, risks can quickly escalate. The risks associated with brand co-creation in online communities are numerous and complex. Hidden burdens and communication gaps can profoundly affect the relationship between brands and consumers. Hence, brands must carefully manage their co-creation activities and pay close attention to misunderstandings and negative feedback. Ultimately, although brand co-creation offers significant benefits, proper risk management is essential for achieving positive outcomes.

Question 4. How information and interactions are clarified and made transparent in online brand communities

In response to the fourth question, the identified themes are presented as illustrated below. The storyline for the mechanisms of clarity and transparency is as Figure 5.

- **Communication challenges**

Communication failures, communication inefficiencies, information deficiencies, and communication errors are the four overarching themes constituting communication challenges. Communication failures arise from two organizing themes: distrust and lack of coordination. Poor and incomplete responsiveness, delayed responses, and lack of response form the three organizing themes of communication inefficiency. The themes of incomplete information and ambiguity in pricing constitute the overarching theme of information deficiencies. Communication errors also stem from two organizing themes: inappropriate language and communication, and superficial responsiveness. In the digital age, connections between businesses and consumers increasingly occur through online communities. These communications can present both opportunities and challenges. Communication challenges in this context often manifest in ways that affect customer experience and brand

credibility. Accordingly, four key themes—communication failures, communication inefficiency, information deficiencies, and communication errors—can help us understand these challenges. Communication problems in today's online interaction processes can significantly influence business approaches and consumer perceptions. To gain customer trust and confidence, brands must focus on the quality of their communications. Transparency in information, rapid and effective responses to customer inquiries, and continuous efforts to improve communication quality are crucial for success in this domain.

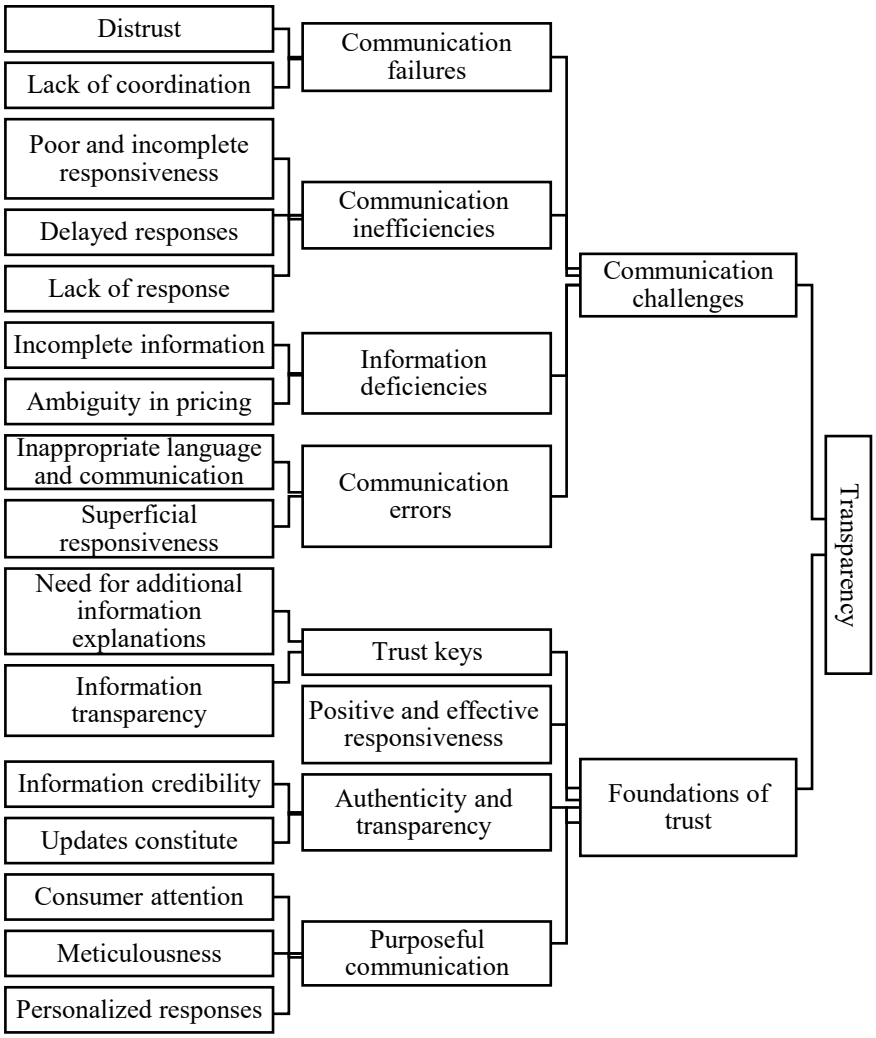

Figure 5. Themes related to the fourth research question

- **Foundations of trust**

Foundations of trust comprise four overarching themes: trust keys, positive and effective responsiveness, authenticity and transparency, and purposeful communication. The need for additional information

explanations and information transparency are components forming the trust keys. Purposeful communication is built upon three organizing themes: consumer attention, meticulousness, and personalized responses. Information credibility and updates constitute the theme of authenticity and transparency. In today's digital world, building and maintaining trust between businesses and consumers is critically important. This trust, especially in online communities, is shaped by four key themes: trust keys, positive and effective responsiveness, authenticity and transparency, and purposeful communication. The foundations of trust in online interactions are designed so that consumers can engage with brands and their products with minimal concerns. Trust keys, effective responsiveness, authenticity and transparency, and purposeful communication are factors that can reinforce this trust. Ultimately, businesses capable of establishing and maintaining these foundations have a greater chance of achieving customer loyalty and succeeding in today's competitive market.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to develop a netnographic framework of brand co-creation within online brand communities. The findings revealed that businesses and consumers in these online brand communities engage in interaction and dialogue through sharing valuable content, creative and unique content, educational and useful content, interactive and participatory content, narrative content, customer orientation and trust-building, digital empathy, emotional and affective interactions, as well as behavioral and practical engagements. Valuable content refers to information, suggestions, and material that fulfill the needs and desires of consumers, being useful and practical for them. This type of content enhances interactions and strengthens the relationship between the brand and its consumers. Creative and unique content is also considered a key element in attracting attention and establishing effective communication with consumers. Such content enables businesses to provide distinctive designs, images, and messages, thereby creating a different and engaging experience for consumers. This content not only strengthens interactions but also increases consumer visits and active participation. Educational and useful content plays an important role in the interactions between businesses and consumers. It helps consumers acquire the necessary information and knowledge to better use the brand's products and services, while also making users feel that the brand offers real value and assists them in solving problems or enhancing their knowledge. Through providing educational content, businesses can reinforce their advisory role and gain consumers' trust, which not only increases trust in the brand but also contributes to building a committed community of users. Interactive and participatory content allows consumers to take part in the creation and development process of brand content. This type

of content includes surveys, contests, and activities that encourage consumers to actively engage and interact with the brand. Such participation can foster a sense of belonging and increase consumer loyalty. Users in online brand communities seek opportunities to voice their opinions to the brand and play a role in shaping its future. This involvement not only strengthens the sense of community belonging but also enables brands to better understand users' needs and expectations. Narrative content, through the use of compelling stories and storytelling, creates an emotional and affective experience for consumers. This type of content fosters deeper and more meaningful connections between the brand and its consumers and can contribute to strengthening long-term relationships.

Customer orientation and trust-building are also recognized as two fundamental factors in the success of interactions between brands and consumers in online brand communities. Brands that pay special attention to their customers and strive to earn their trust generally experience more positive interactions. This trust-building can be achieved through the provision of high-quality services, responding to customers' needs, and offering transparent information. Furthermore, digital empathy refers to the ability of businesses to understand and respond to the emotions and needs of consumers in the online environment. This empathy can strengthen human relationships in the digital space and contribute to the creation of positive and constructive interactions. Digital empathy has emerged as a novel concept in online interactions, representing mutual understanding and effective communication between brands and consumers. Research findings indicate that digital empathy can lead to the formation of positive and effective interactions and ultimately provide a better user experience. On the other hand, emotional and affective interactions encompass communications based on feelings and emotions, such as supporting the brand or expressing affection for its products. This type of interaction fosters deeper and more enduring bonds between brands and consumers. Emotional and affective interactions between brands and users have been identified as one of the main factors in building loyalty and trust. These results demonstrate that users seek connections that go beyond superficial interactions and, in some way, address their emotional and affective needs. Finally, behavioral and practical interactions refer to engagements that lead to specific actions, such as purchasing products, participating in surveys, or providing feedback to the brand. These types of interactions enable brands to strengthen their relationships with consumers through direct and practical measures. Interactions between businesses and consumers in online brand communities are heavily influenced by the content provided, the nature of the interactions, and communication infrastructures, making them highly complex and multidimensional. Although challenges such as communication gaps and failures exist, brands that can create positive

connections through delivering valuable, creative, and educational content, fostering effective interactions, and reinforcing consumer trust can achieve sustainable success and growth. Success in online brand communities requires a comprehensive and synergistic approach that encompasses all of these elements.

The tools and means of access within online brand communities for brand co-creation included posts, likes, comments, comment likes, stories, direct messages, polls, shares, and Instagram live sessions. Among these, the "like" function serves as one of the simplest yet most effective tools for brand co-creation, representing users' everyday interactions and quick approvals of brand content. Each like can be considered a signal from the consumer indicating that the content is appealing and relevant to them. This simple yet influential act enables brands to refine and optimize their content based on the feedback they receive. Within online brand communities, comments and comment likes are also key tools used for brand co-creation. Comments allow users to share their opinions, suggestions, and experiences, thereby engaging directly with both brands and other users. Liking comments serves as a social metric indicating endorsement and support for others' viewpoints, which can help shape a consensus around particular topics and enhance positive engagement within the brand community. Stories are powerful tools for brand co-creation, allowing businesses and consumers to share short-lived yet impactful content. Such content may include opinions, experiences, behind-the-scenes moments, and special occasions that contribute to the authenticity and transparency of brand communications. Stories also offer increased opportunities for creative and time-sensitive interactions between brands and consumers. Direct messaging serves as a private and direct communication channel, playing a significant role in building and strengthening closer and more personalized relationships between brands and consumers. This tool enables consumers to directly and privately raise their concerns or questions with brands, which can lead to improved customer satisfaction and greater trust in the brand. Polls are also important tools that help brands directly gather consumer opinions and perspectives and incorporate them into the decision-making and product or service development processes.

This tool gives consumers the sense that they are actively participating in the brand's core processes and that their opinions are acknowledged and valued—an aspect that contributes to increased engagement and brand co-creation. Moreover, content sharing is one of the most significant tools for brand co-creation, enabling consumers to share their preferred content with others. This act not only facilitates the broader dissemination of the brand's messages but also gives consumers the sense that they are contributing to the promotion and reinforcement of the brand. Such interactions foster greater brand loyalty and a deeper sense of attachment to the brand. Instagram Live

sessions represent an interactive and creative tool for brand co-creation, allowing brands and consumers to communicate with one another in real time. This tool enables brands to engage with their audiences directly and unmediated, responding to their questions, comments, and suggestions. Live sessions create opportunities for more immediate and profound interactions between brands and consumers. In summary, this study revealed that the various tools available in online brand communities—including likes, comments, stories, direct messages, polls, content sharing, and Instagram Live sessions—function as key elements in the brand co-creation process. These tools allow brands to interact more closely and collaboratively with their consumers and to strengthen relationships while fostering the creation of shared value.

Regarding the risks and benefits of engaging in brand co-creation within online brand communities, it was found that brand co-creation is accompanied by certain risks, categorized as hidden burden and gap. The hidden burden refers to overlooked costs and pressures that may be imposed on both businesses and consumers. These costs may include time, energy, and even emotional investment from consumers arising during the co-creation process. The gap, on the other hand, refers to potential discrepancies between consumer expectations and the ability of businesses to meet those expectations. This gap can lead to dissatisfaction and a decline in consumer trust toward the brand. If brands fail to respond promptly to users' needs and expectations, this gap may result in the loss of valuable connections and even damage the brand's image. On the other hand, brand co-creation in online communities offers significant material and non-material benefits for consumers. From a material perspective, consumers may receive discounts, rewards, and other tangible incentives as a result of their active participation in the co-creation process. From a non-material standpoint, brand co-creation fosters intangible values that enhance the relationship between the brand and its consumers. These values include a sense of belonging, satisfaction from being involved in the brand's core processes, and the development of a shared sense of ownership and success. Consumers who engage in the co-creation process feel that their voices are heard and that they play an active role in shaping the brand's products and services. These positive emotions can strengthen loyalty and increase commitment to the brand. The findings of this study demonstrated that brand co-creation in online communities involves various advantages and disadvantages that must be managed with care. Although the risks associated with hidden burden and expectation gaps may pose challenges for both businesses and consumers, the material and non-material benefits of this process suggest that, with intelligent management, brand co-creation can evolve into a successful and sustainable strategy.

Finally, from the perspective of clarity and transparency of information and interactions between businesses and consumers within

online brand communities, it was found that one of the main challenges in such communities is communicative breakdowns and inefficiencies. These problems arise when the messages conveyed by businesses are not properly received or understood by consumers, or when businesses fail to respond to consumers' needs and inquiries in a timely and accurate manner. Such breakdowns can lead to consumer dissatisfaction and a decline in trust toward the brand. Communication inefficiency also emerges when the information provided to consumers is incomplete or unclear, potentially causing confusion and reducing consumers' willingness to engage actively in the brand's online community. Information deficiencies and communicative errors are additional factors that can undermine the clarity and transparency of interactions. Information deficiency refers to the failure to provide all necessary details or to update information in a timely manner, which can result in a discrepancy between consumers' expectations and the brand's actual offerings.

Communicative errors may occur due to mistakes in message delivery, inconsistencies across communication channels, or misinterpretation of messages. These errors can damage the brand's credibility and lead to negative consumer experiences. In contrast to these communicative problems, trust cues and effective, positive responsiveness are key factors that can enhance the clarity and transparency of interactions between businesses and consumers. Trust cues consist of elements and actions that inspire consumer confidence, such as transparency in the presentation of information, honesty in communications, and keeping promises. Effective and positive responsiveness refers to the brand's ability to respond to consumer needs and inquiries promptly, accurately, and professionally. This type of responsiveness not only resolves issues but also contributes to greater consumer satisfaction and loyalty.

Authenticity and transparency are regarded as essential elements in establishing effective communication between businesses and consumers within online brand communities. Authenticity refers to honesty and commitment to the brand's values and promises. When consumers perceive that a brand is sincere and acts consistently with its communicated values, they are more likely to trust it. Transparency means presenting information fully and without concealment. Brands that operate transparently are better positioned to foster deeper and more enduring interactions with their consumers and to prevent misunderstandings and communicative breakdowns. Ultimately, purposeful communication is identified as a key strategy for enhancing the clarity and transparency of interactions. This type of communication is tailored to the specific needs and expectations of consumers and employs appropriate tools and methods for message delivery.

Purposeful communication can strengthen positive engagement and optimize communication processes. In summary, the clarity and

transparency of interactions between businesses and consumers within online brand communities are significantly influenced by various factors. On the one hand, communicative breakdowns, inefficiencies, and information deficiencies can erode consumer trust and satisfaction. On the other hand, the application of trust cues, effective and positive responsiveness, authenticity, transparency, and purposeful communication can markedly improve the quality of interactions and lead to greater consumer satisfaction and loyalty.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study contributes to value co-creation theory by extending Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) DART framework to the context of online brand communities through a netnographical approach. The findings demonstrate that the four dimensions of co-creation—Dialogue, Access, Risk–Benefit, and Transparency—are not solely firm-driven mechanisms but are largely enacted through community-level interactions. This shifts the theoretical understanding of value co-creation from a dyadic firm–consumer perspective toward a more decentralized and socially embedded process shaped by peer-to-peer engagement and digital platform affordances.

Furthermore, the study reconceptualizes key DART dimensions in digitally mediated environments. Dialogue emerges as multi-directional and continuously negotiated among community members, rather than as structured firm–customer communication. Access extends beyond informational resources to include experiential knowledge and social capital embedded within the community. Similarly, perceptions of risk and benefit are collectively constructed through shared experiences, while transparency functions as a co-created norm supported by both brands and community participants. These findings suggest that the DART elements operate as interrelated, dynamic practices rather than static managerial inputs in online brand communities.

Methodologically, this research advances co-creation theory by demonstrating the value of netnography in capturing the lived, processual nature of brand co-creation. By observing naturally occurring interactions, the study provides empirical depth to the DART framework and supports a community-centric model of brand co-creation. This theoretical repositioning underscores the need for future research to incorporate cultural, social, and technological dynamics when conceptualizing value co-creation in digital contexts.

5.2. Managerial implications

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be proposed to enhance and expand brand co-creation in online brand communities, particularly on the social media platform Instagram. First, to foster deeper engagement between customers and

the brand, it is essential to design activities that encourage active customer participation. These activities may include advertising campaigns, special events, social media contests and challenges, or even collaborative projects between the brand and its customers. The objective of such initiatives is to cultivate a sense of belonging and ownership among customers, making them feel that they play a significant role in the development and evolution of the brand. This approach can strengthen customer loyalty and integrate the brand into their daily lives.

Second, to facilitate the process of brand co-creation, brands should provide all the necessary tools that enable user participation. These tools may include functionalities such as liking, commenting, sending direct messages, and other interactive features available on Instagram. By offering these capabilities, brands can increase both the motivation and ability of users to engage in the creation of new values and innovations.

Third, offering rewards and incentives to customers who participate in the co-creation process can serve as a powerful motivator to enhance their engagement. These rewards may come in the form of special discounts, redeemable points for future purchases, free products, or even opportunities to be involved in the brand's key decision-making processes. Brands should design these incentives in a way that simultaneously strengthens both the material and emotional motivations of customers, making them feel valued and appreciated.

Fourth, user-generated content is one of the most valuable resources for brands. By leveraging this content, brands can not only reduce content production costs but also establish a closer relationship with customers and build their trust. Incorporating real customer images, videos, feedback, and stories into advertising and marketing campaigns can help create a more authentic and trustworthy image of the brand. This, in turn, signals to other customers that the brand genuinely values and responds to their needs and desires.

Fifth, in order to maintain engagement and attract customer attention, brands must consistently update their information and content. These updates may include offering new content that aligns with current customer needs or modifying products and services based on customer feedback. This ongoing process helps the brand remain at the forefront of customer attention and gain a competitive advantage. In conclusion, the findings highlight that strategic management of participation tools, content, and customer relationships within Instagram communities can significantly enhance the success and sustainability of brand co-creation efforts.

Sixth, one of the fundamental principles in fostering brand co-creation, as well as building customer trust and loyalty, is clarity and transparency across all brand activities. Brands should provide transparent information regarding their production processes, supply

chains, environmental impacts, and social values. This level of transparency must ensure that customers feel the brand is honest with them and is equipping them with all the necessary information to make informed decisions. Furthermore, brands should avoid misleading advertisements or disseminating inaccurate information, in order to preserve the trust and respect of their customers.

Seventh, customer feedback—especially negative feedback—constitutes a valuable resource for improving products and services. Brands must actively collect, analyze, and incorporate such feedback into their decision-making processes. Establishing effective communication channels for receiving feedback and ensuring that customers feel their voices are heard can lead to increased customer satisfaction and an enhanced brand image. Brands must respond to negative feedback with transparency and prudence, thereby demonstrating a commitment to continuous improvement.

Eighth, organizing online events such as webinars, live sessions, and Q&A meetings focused on brand co-creation can enhance user engagement with the brand and create opportunities for direct communication between brands and their customers.

Ninth, brands can leverage the influence of relevant influencers within online communities to strengthen the brand co-creation process. Influencers can act as informal brand ambassadors and help attract greater user participation. Collaborating with influencers can assist brands in increasing brand awareness, reaching new audiences, and enhancing brand image. Brands should carefully select influencers whose values and objectives align with those of the brand and who are capable of establishing strong and credible connections with their followers.

Tenth, brands can encourage users to contribute new ideas and creative feedback by organizing contests, polls, and calls for suggestions. This initiative not only aids in the development of new products and services and enhances customer experience, but also fosters a sense of participation and belonging among users. Brands should incentivize users to remain engaged and continue sharing their opinions by offering tangible rewards and motivational incentives such as cash prizes, exclusive discounts, and opportunities to participate in decision-making processes.

Eleventh, brands can analyze user comments and feedback by employing social data analytics tools and use the insights gained to improve products and services and inform the development of marketing strategies.

Twelfth, offering educational courses and workshops to organizational staff on the importance of and methods for participating in brand co-creation within online communities can significantly enhance their performance and interactions with customers. These training programs may cover topics such as online community

management, effective customer communication, and the use of digital tools to boost engagement. By increasing employee awareness and capabilities, brands can establish more effective interactions with users and improve the overall brand co-creation process.

Thirteenth, brands can stimulate greater customer engagement and participation by launching loyalty programs based on involvement in brand co-creation. These programs may include offering reward points or exclusive discounts to customers who actively contribute to the development and enhancement of products. Additionally, brands can implement point-based and ranking systems to encourage users to participate more extensively in the co-creation process. Such programs can help strengthen the relationship between the brand and its customers and lead to increased customer loyalty.

Fourteenth, brands must recognize the importance of providing timely, accurate, and personalized responses to consumer inquiries and needs. This type of responsive engagement can contribute to building stronger relationships with customers and improving the overall customer experience. Brands can utilize automated tools such as chatbots, as well as dedicated customer support teams, to respond to user requests actively and efficiently, ensuring that each customer receives individualized attention. Fifteenth, one of the primary strategies through which brands can connect with their audiences and foster more effective interactions is the creation and dissemination of creative content. Such content may include videos, images, articles, infographics, podcasts, and brand stories, all presented in a unique and engaging manner. To succeed in this area, brands must begin with a thorough understanding of their target audience, including their needs and interests, and then produce content aligned with these preferences. Employing strong visual language, compelling storytelling, and innovative techniques—such as animations, special effects, and interactive elements—can significantly enhance content appeal. Sharing creative content not only helps increase brand awareness and attract new audiences but also positions the brand as a source of inspiration and innovation. Ultimately, this approach can strengthen customer loyalty and contribute to the formation of a vibrant community of brand advocates.

5.3. Limitations

This study faced several limitations. One major constraint was the filtering of the social media platform Instagram, which required the activation of virtual private networks (VPNs) each time the platform was accessed for data collection, resulting in significant time consumption. Moreover, the selected samples may not be entirely representative of the target population. For instance, if the focus is placed on specific brand communities, the findings may not be generalizable to other brand communities. Additionally, this research

utilized only Instagram as the source of data collection, which limits the generalizability of the results to other online communities. The netnographic method, due to its emphasis on observation and analysis of online activities, may not provide a comprehensive view of all dimensions of brand co-creation. Certain aspects of consumer behavior may not be fully observable in online environments. Furthermore, data analysis conducted through netnography and qualitative interviews may be influenced by the researcher's subjective interpretations and personal biases. The particular features of the Instagram platform—such as its content display algorithms and interaction capabilities—may exert unique effects on the brand co-creation process that are not easily generalizable to other platforms, as these features are specific to Instagram and not found on other social media. Additionally, data collection from online communities can pose challenges due to privacy concerns, restricted access to user information, and the constantly evolving nature of social media platforms. In this study, conducting online interviews was also fraught with numerous challenges, which may have affected the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the collected data. Finally, user participation in the brand co-creation process may be limited due to factors such as lack of motivation, time constraints, or insufficient access to appropriate tools. These limitations could influence both the quality and quantity of the data gathered.

5.4. Future directions

Based on the limitations identified in this study, several recommendations can be proposed for future research. Firstly, future researchers are encouraged to explore the concept of brand co-creation on other social media platforms that are not subject to content filtering, such as Rubika, TikTok, and others. The findings from these platforms could then be compared with those from filtered networks to better understand the effects of accessibility and censorship on brand co-creation processes.

Secondly, brand co-creation should be examined across different societies and cultures to enhance understanding of both the differences and similarities in co-creation approaches among diverse communities. Future studies could specifically investigate the influence of cultural and geographical variations on the process of brand co-creation within online communities. For example, consumer engagement in brand co-creation may differ significantly across countries due to cultural expectations, norms, and technological infrastructure.

Thirdly, investigating and comparing brand co-creation in various industries—such as technology, automotive, food, and others—can facilitate the identification of sector-specific patterns and shared practices. This comparative approach may lead to the emergence of new theoretical models. To improve the generalizability of results, future research would benefit from employing larger and more diverse

samples. Additionally, studying a range of brand communities with varying characteristics may deepen the understanding of brand co-creation dynamics.

Fourthly, comparing brand co-creation models across different social media platforms can offer a more comprehensive understanding of how platform-specific features influence brand-user interactions. Furthermore, future research could investigate the role of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and blockchain in enhancing brand co-creation within online communities.

Finally, future investigations should aim to identify the challenges and barriers encountered in the brand co-creation process. These may include technical difficulties, communication breakdowns, and cultural obstacles. By proposing strategies to overcome these issues, researchers can contribute to the refinement and optimization of brand co-creation frameworks in both theory and practice.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the author on reasonable request.

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