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Cosplays, Free hugs and Video Games... Influences of C2C Co-creation on Service Experience in Thematic Events

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Thematic events provide value for stakeholders (fans, other visitors, managers, exhibitors etc.) through interactions and exchanges. However little research details how companies can take advantage of the interactions between visitors, as well as the consequences of customer-to-customer value creation on the service experience.

To address these issues, two qualitative studies are conducted with managers of three top French thematic events coupled with 53 semi-directive interviews with visitors of the Japan Expo.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study provides a better understanding of the C2C co-creation in hedonic service settings with fan communities. As for managerial implications, this article can guide managers in their efforts to improve service experience for thematic events.

Key words: Co-creation – Customer-to-Customer- Fan communities – Services

Introduction

Succeeding in a competitive world is more and more complex for companies because of the wide range of products and services offerings. It depends a lot on the ways companies are creative. Co-creating new services with customers can offer competitive advantage (Alam, 2002). According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004, p. 8), co-creation is way to “partition some of the work done by the firm and pass it on to their customers,” in order to create products, services, or experiences. Co-creation may influence service experience and lead to positive word-of-mouth, improvement of brand image, satisfaction and loyalty feelings etc. towards companies. The co-created value enables to improve and thus facilitate new service development (NSD) (Edvardsson et al., 2011).

Although scholars recognize the positive impacts of certain factors of service environments (i.e. Bitner, 1990; Kotler, 1973) such as the presence of other customers (Grove and Fisk, 1997; McGrath and Otnes, 1995), little research details how companies can take advantage of the co-creation between customers, and also the consequences of these customer-to-customer interactions on service experience.

This study centres around these research questions by addressing the field of thematic events. A qualitative study is conducted with managers of three top French thematic events coupled with 53 semi-directive interviews with visitors of the Japan Expo.

The aim of the research is to address C2C co-creation in thematic events through a deeper understanding of the visitors’ portrait and motivations, and of their interactions during the event and their outcomes on the service experience.

Accordingly, the next part describes the theoretical foundations of the research, before detailing the method for the two qualitative studies. We conclude with a set of theoretical and managerial contributions followed by the limits and research avenues.

Literature review

Cooperating with partners, and specifically with customers, can offer attractive opportunities to create new products and services that suit customers' requirements, provide value for all involved stakeholders and drive firms' success (Coviello and Joseph, 2012; Ramani and Kumar, 2008). This participation called "co-creation" by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) appoints the collaboration between customers and companies through interactions. It results in improved knowledge about customer needs and enhance the co-created value for all engaged actors (Grönroos, 2011).

The conceptual basis of co-creation takes root in the works of Vargo and Lusch (2004; 2008) with the Service-dominant logic (SD-logic). According to this paradigm, value is not just created by the company and its partners (Goods-dominant logic); it is always co-created by the organization and its customers through interactions and exchanges (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). With customers' involvement, companies can develop new services that better fulfil their expectations. According to the SD-logic, "the value is always co-created" (Bettencourt et al., 2014, p.56) and "the customer is always a co-creator of value" (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Interactions with customers are not limited to economic relationships but encompass all activities in a value chain (Heide and John, 1990).

However, some researches argue that SD-logic only emphasizes the creation of value between the company and its customers (Heinonen et al, 2013; Rihova et al., 2013; Schembri, 2006; Voima et al., 2010). The company provides resources and proposes customers to participate while keeping the responsibility and management of the co-creation process. Therefore, the Customer-dominant logic (CD-logic) paradigm underlines the active role of customers' interactions to create value for all stakeholders (Heinonen et al, 2013; Grönroos and Voima, 2013). Companies must go beyond a B2C focus and should explore co-creation relationships through "Customer-to-Customer co-creation" (C2C co-creation).

A growing number of large thematic events are appearing in France. Such events generate strong interactions between participants, thus generating the creation of a common sense that strengthen shared experience (Getz, 2007). These events are real community platforms where fruitful exchanges occur between stakeholders thus creating a suitable climate for value co-creation (Crowther and Donlan, 2011). Feelings of connectedness among users of services (and more particularly hedonic services) can lead to increase individual customer satisfaction with the service through co-creation (Drengner et al., 2012; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Thus interactions between fans who demonstrate high involvement in the service and visitors may have impacts on service experience. We start from the definition of Chung et al. (2008) who defines fanaticism as: "extraordinary devotion to an object. The "object" refers to "the object of fascination", which can include a brand, product, person (e.g. celebrity), television show, or other consumption activities (e.g. sports) (Thorne and Bruner 2006)".

Service settings are the better place to promote C2C interactions because of verbal and physical interactions between customers (Martin and Pranter, 1989). C2C value co-creation for reference groups has received little attention in a context of large public events with fan communities. The study of Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2011) conducted with an online football fan community, indicates that consumers co-create value by themselves as they adopt the roles of providers and beneficiaries of value during their experience through win-win relationships. Drengner et al. (2012) show that in the case of collective hedonic services, feelings of connectedness among users (called "value creation space by Crowther and Donlan, 2011) have significant impacts on brand loyalty towards the service. The study of Rihova et al. (2013) conducted in tourism industries, shows that C2C co-creation enables tourists to engage in activities for self-development and to connect to other people.

Further to the previous developments, the present research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of C2C co-creation in service settings, and more precisely, in large thematic events where interactions are numerous. The identification of these C2C interactions may enable the organizing team to improve the experience of the event for all fan communities and visitors. In the following section, the explorative qualitative research method is developed.

Method

As fans communities are particularly active in the video game and manga industries, we choose to study the *Japan Expo*, *The Paris Games Week* and *Comic Con France* events. All three are considered as references for targeted fan communities in France.

Semi-directive interviews are conducted with event managers of the three events cited above. The interview guide is structured in three parts where we sought to identify 1) profile of visitors, 2) situations where individuals interact during the event and 3) positive/negative outcomes on service experience. All the three interviews were recorded and transcribed, providing a substantial level of detail and insight. They lasted about 50 minutes on average.

We completed the study with semi-directive interviews with 52 visitors of the Japan Expo. We also relied on an interview guide with questions on fans' profiles, on their main motivations/ behaviors during their service experience and on their service satisfaction.

To analyze the verbatim data, we used content analysis (Bardin, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1994). We also relied on data triangulation for internal validity (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984), which enables to collect various, complementary data about the research object. TV documents on last editions, comments posted on social networks (Facebook¹), and data on the websites of the three events² were studied in a netnographic perspective (Kozinets, 2009).

To illustrate the results, we provide verbatim extracts, translated into English in a way that preserved the meaning and scope of the original French expressions. We put in parenthesis the event from which the respondent belongs to: PGW (Paris Games Week), CC (Comic Con), JE (Japan Expo) and V (visitors of the Japan Expo). In the following part, the results are presented.

Results

Firstly, we find a majority of young visitors, mostly aged 15-35 years (three people out of 52 over 35) who have a passion or a real devotion to their object of fascination towards video games, comics, pop culture, Manga and/or Japanese culture: "*As we love manga, it is logical to come here*" (V).

They usually belong to virtual fan communities and take advantage of the event to meet physically: "*This is with the people with whom you play to World of Warcraft that you meet in the event*" (PGW); "*I am a big fan of Korean dolls Pullips*" (V).

Social networks like Facebook enable fans to keep their passion alive between the event editions. Thus the event becomes the place to meet for the members of the communities: "*I come to meet people I know in the virtual world*" (V).

Alongside these fans, we find the companions (parents, friends, colleagues...), the "new" addicts, the curious, and the amateurs (who cannot be considered as fans). They come to support their friends or family members in their passion.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/comicconfrance/?fref=ts> (accessed November 11, 2016)

<https://www.facebook.com/ParisGamesWeek/?fref=ts> (accessed November 11, 2016)

<https://www.facebook.com/japanexpo/?fref=ts> (accessed November 11, 2016)

² <http://www.japan-expo-paris.com/fr/> (accessed November 11, 2016)

<http://www.comic-con-paris.com> (accessed November 11, 2016)

<http://www.parisgamesweek.com> (accessed November 11, 2016)

Secondly, visitors have different motivations to come. Meeting other community members is a major driver to come to the event. It is even ultimately the main purpose. They come to exchange information about their favorite artists, movies, characters, games, TV shows, and comics. It is a place of great friendliness, *"You know, one of the primary motivation to come is to take part in the community, this is a moment of friendship, and it is a reason to take part in the festival. People are here to meet, to have fun"* (JE); *"It is great to be with people who share the same passion"* (V); *"Is it nice to visit the Japan Expo with friends"* (V). They also come for the programming. The managers have regular exchanges with the fans to build the program; they organize meetings before the event because *"It is important that fans meet the managers of the festival ... a team that is like them (...) who is able to talk with them about comics authors, TV shows, cinema"*(CC). They also propose new content not to weary the visitors too much.

"Our role is to be the drivers of great novelty, people may not be aware of everything and suddenly, we open new dimensions" (JE).

C2C exchanges are an important source of learning. For example, a gamer may discover the right way to conquer new levels, to get more points or to understand the tips and tricks of each level. Thus people learn from each other. Developing new skills confirm the study of Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2011): *"The show provides a general education for my future ambitions"* (V); *"For me, the Japan Expo is the place to meet, to make personal enrichment"* (V).

Thirdly, cosplayers are an important driver to create interactions and value for the service experience. Contraction of "costume" and "playing", cosplaying aims to dress up, to "customize", and to look like a character from video games, manga, cartoon, or a singer. There is a certain pride to show the cosplay: *"For us cosplayer are the most ultimate fan, of course, because they give a part of themselves"* (JE).

The cosplayers are a "spontaneous animation" on these events. Cosplayers like to be praised, recognized and questioned. They provide a lot of information on their character and passion, *"Once the cosplayers are in the living room, there are fantastic interactions with everyone"* (PGW); *"We can consider them as Oeuvres of art"* (V); *"They enable to give a frame to the show, to create interactions. For me, I admire them very much"* (V).

Cosplayers also play an important role in the communities, because they will be able to "recruit" new members: *"they will recruit neophytes"* (JE); *"I am a member of a cosplay association, we train communities with friends"* (V).

Fourthly, the event is also a way to take part of the life of a community. The event is the way for fans to develop a common dynamic that enhances their personal experience, of their passion for video games, and their communities. *"Every year we are seeing this very interesting phenomenon. Visitors take ownership of the event"* (PGW); *"It provides wonderful memories, new meeting... We see the novelties..."* (V).

The event becomes the better place to establish a sense of community, particularly through regular publication of selfies³ on social networks. All of this creates a sense of togetherness. though free hugs for example: *"This appropriation actually goes through a lot of interactions, so we have a simple trick, free hugs that is to say, people walk around with a sign on which it is written FREE HUGS and anyone can come see you, takes you in his arms,..."* (PGW).

Fandom also causes interactions (Hills, 2012). Neologism of the words "fan" and "domain", fandom describe fans who are active in a particular area such as cosplayers, bloggers, YouTubers, fanfiction writers etc. *"Fandom is creative"* (JE) . They have a role of influencer

³ Photo taken with a mobile phone/a digital camera by a person who is also the photograph.

for the communities and hold great value, a kind of rallying point at the show: "(...) *For a video game publisher, it may depend on the type of game of course, but today it is much more interesting that Cyprien⁴ tries your game and put a video on YouTube than to make an advertising campaign on TF1⁵*" (PGW).

Conclusion

Theoretical and managerial implications

The results obtained in this exploratory study confirm that there may be a complementarity between the GD, SD-logic and CD-logics.

First, the managers indicate that they have exchange a lot with people to build the program. It is important for providing new content to visitors for each edition. This observation resonates with the G-D- logic that is to say an almost unilateral relationship between companies and customers. Here the managers have specific skills to create value for the event.

Secondly, the managers set up meetings between fans to collect ideas for future editions. For example, the Comic Con team organizes regular meetings with fans before the event to talk with them. Co-creation takes place in the sense of the SD-logic where customers (here the fans) are involved in the creation of the offering (here the event).

Thirdly, fans naturally develop interactions and thus co-create value. There is no particular expectations, only to interact, to learn and discover new things. Here are found the principles of the CD-logic where value is created through people interactions.

The results also show that interactions between fans (such as cosplayers) enable to improve the experience of less experienced visitors. They can improve the experience of "consumption" of the event, increase the value generated for the fans and therefore, the satisfaction towards the thematic event.

Moreover, fans convey information about the show itself (animations, conferences, exhibitors ...) and they can encourage other people to visit areas they had not identified as key until now. The event can be considered as a community platform conducive to the creation of value as emphasized by Crowther and Donlan (2011). Indeed, the managers create a positive environment for interactions, projecting visitors (here the fans) in a unique experience where people feel closer, and thus develop their creativity and enhance the community membership.

As we indicated previously, the managers have regular exchanges with the fans; they organize meetings before the event. Thus the managers should play a most evident role of facilitator of interactions between communities and fans. They already start to do it for the celebrities and fans by providing meeting spaces: "*we have created a place at the Paris Games Week called the "Social Corner" in which we welcome them (note : the celebrities)*" (PGW). Then we could imagine new solutions to create interactions between members of a community, such as mobile applications to detect community affinities for example, or to geolocalize specific exhibitors or items. This could help improving the service experience and reducing feelings of anxiety caused by overcrowded corners and shops.

As we mentioned previously, Cosplayers play a key role during the event. TV reports, photos or interviews of cosplayers often occur. Therefore they have a very important role in the media scene. They can also be considered as ambassadors. They enable to provide value to the event, thus leading to give a positive (brand) image. Thus these ambassadors could play a more evident role ahead of the event, during the organization, as a role of prescriber for example.

⁴ French blogger, podcaster, YouTuber, comedian who has the largest number of "views" on the French YouTube in 2015.

⁵ Private national French TV channel that is the most popular domestic network.

Finally, the result on event ownership shows the importance of the event for the fan community. Looking for event appropriation leads to some sadness at the end of the edition and develops a desire to come back to the event. Fans communicate a lot on their experience through social networks where they post pictures, selfies, and videos. All of these source of satisfaction can be relayed by the managers themselves.

Limits and research avenues

The first limit of the research lies in the choice of the events. We focused only on public events on pop culture and video games. It could be interesting to address other thematic events and compare the results on the creation of value between fans throughout the event. Another limit deals with the fans regarded here as "consumers". The economic transaction is not a priority for these events even if the purchase of goodies is also a good reason to come, and the managers need to attract a lot of visitors so as to make the event enough profitable to start again.

The research focused on the managers and visitors so as to understand C2C interactions. It could be relevant to interview exhibitors to complete the understanding on the value created through fans 'interactions on the event.

Finally, in the literature review part, we provide the definition of a fan. However, we do not compare the characteristics of a fan with a simple visitor. This limit also provides opportunities for research.

These exploratory studies showed the importance to consider C2C co-creation for businesses. As we indicate previously, establishing the profile of a typical fan could be made in order to deepen the understanding of fans mechanisms. Quantitative research are also needed to generalize our findings and design co-creation models about C2C interactions. This could enable to provide more customized events, thus leading to increase satisfaction and loyalty towards those thematic events. Another research avenues that emerged from our interviews would be to observe these C2C co-creation in the festivals. Similarly, this study could also serve as a start to observe such mechanisms in the contexts of B2B events, more particularly in the professional exhibitions and trade fairs.

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