

**Customer-to-customer Co-creation:
The Impacts of Fans' experience in the Context of Large Public Events**

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Abstract:

Many large thematic events are emerging in France. The exchanges generated can create value for all stakeholders (fans, organizers, exhibitors etc.) and play an important role on post-impact events. However, little research on co-creation have investigated the value of C2C (customer-to-customer) interactions and the potential impacts of some fans on other visitors.

To answer this question, we conduct an exploratory study with organizers of three main French thematic events, Paris Games Week, French Comic Con and Japan Expo.

From a theoretical perspective, this research proposes to extend knowledge of C2C co-creation. As for managerial implications, the research provides insights to improve practices on marketing and organizing strategies of these events.

Key Words: Co-creation - Customer-dominant logic; C2C; large public events; fan communities.

Introduction and Objectives

Large customized events such as fan conventions (Star Wars, Glee, Game of Thrones, etc.), participatory concerts (as Bandsquare), thematic exhibitions (Japan Expo, Paris Games Week, etc) are emerging in France. Exchanges generated can create value for all stakeholders and play an important role on post-impact events (positive word-of-mouth, improvement of brand image, new prospects / customers, loyalty to the event, etc.). All of this leads to increase customer' empowerment in the sense that organizations entrust more power, freedom and control to customers by an easier access to additional information on products and services (Hunter et al., 2006). The co-created value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000) enables to improve and facilitate new service development (NSD) and become a source of competitive advantage for organizations (Edvardsson et al., 2011). On top of that, the marketing literature has described 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). But how to take advantage of on this co-created value? What are the consequences of customer-to-customer interactions in a socially dense environment where co-creation takes place?

In this study, we propose to answer these questions by addressing the field of large thematic events that gather fan communities. The article is organized as follows. In the first part, we present the theoretical foundations of research with an emphasis on the customer-dominant logic paradigm and the importance of C2C co-creation. Then the research methodology will be specified. We conclude this study with a set of theoretical and managerial contributions and presents the limits and future research directions.

1. Conceptual Framework

Nowadays a growing number of companies decide to involve customers in the design of their product or service offerings. This participation called "co-creation" by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) appoints the collaboration between customers and companies through interactions. 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, there was a shift from a situation where customers were not included in the design of the offers and only companies provide value propositions (Goods-dominant logic) to a logic where the customer becomes a stakeholder in the creation of product and services offerings by taking part of the process.

The SD-logic has been widely criticized by some researchers (for example Heinonen et al, 2013; Schembri, 2006; Voima et al., 2010; Voima and Grönroos, 2011). According to them, this logic only emphasizes the creation of value between the company and its customers. The company provides resources and proposes customers to participate while keeping the responsibility and management of the co-creation process. However, individuals do not only share resources with the company but also with other people to co-create value (Richards and De Brito, 2013; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2010). Therefore, a new paradigm, the Customer-dominant logic (CD-logic) has recently been theorized. According to this approach, we should not only focus on the co-creation of value between service providers and customers (B2C relationships) but also on the co-creation between individuals who exceed their role as simple participants (Heinonen *et al*, 2013; Voima and Grönroos, 2013). Thus, the company must join the customers as a value facilitator (Grönroos, 2008). Organizations have to find new ways to involve customers in order to create an environment that facilitates and supports value co-creation with customers (Voima and Grönroos, 2013; Heinonen *et al*, 2013). Companies must go beyond a B2C focus and should explore co-creation relationships. Thus we talk about "C2C co-creation" where co-creation process takes place between the individuals involved in a social place.

A growing number of national events that promote meetings between professionals and amateurs around a common passion such as video games, manga or superhero culture, are appearing in France. Such events generate strong interactions between participants (Gummesson, 1999) encouraging the creation of a common sense that reinforces the common 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). Individuals become "resource integrators." The operant and operand resources exchanged (Arnould et al., 2006) enable to achieve personal goals such as membership in a social network or the improvement of knowledge (Baron and Harris, 2008) and collective goals like feeling part of a community or improving the quality life of the community (Baron and Warnaby, 2011).

In a context of large public events with fan communities, and to the best of our knowledge, it seems that no research has been conducted on the roles that participants may adopt and the potential impacts of the interactions on other participants who attend the event.

We start from the definition of Chung et al. (2008) who defines fanaticism as : *“extraordinary devotion to an object, where “devotion” as conceptualised by Pichler and Hemetsberger (2007), consists of passion, intimacy, and dedication, and “extraordinary” implies going beyond the ordinary, usual, or average level (Taylor 1991). 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)”*. According to the authors, there are four characteristics for depicting a fan: 1) Internal implication; 2) External involvement; 3) The desire to interact with others and 4) the wish to acquire source-related materials. Chung *et al.* (2008) provide four other characteristics that depict fans: 1) the extraordinary loyalty and devotion, 2) the extreme enthusiasm, 3) the inertial involvement and behavior and 4) the consumption as an “end to itself”.

Thus, we make the assumption that there are different types of fans, not just subject to strong "devotion" to their passion. Their interactions may have C2C impacts on other people.

Then we propose to start from these definitions to characterize the fans who attend French major public events. Indeed, it seems that no research has been addressed on C2C co-creation in this kind of context. The identification of these C2C interactions may enable the organizers to improve the experience of the event for all fan communities. Moreover, according to Peñaloza and Venkatesh (2006), service marketing has to improve its understanding of resource integration process in a C2C perspective thereby identifying the benefits for actors.

2. Research method

2.1. Context of the research

This study is part of a major two-year research project.

Since little research has been conducted on the impact of inter-individual relationships and as thematic exhibitions targeting fans have received little attention in the marketing literature to the best of our knowledge, an exploratory qualitative study was appropriate to start the research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003).

We choose to study the *Japan Expo*, *The Paris Games Week* and *Comic Con France*. Indeed, it seems important to work on national exhibitions focused on one main theme. All three are considered as references for targeted fan communities. Table 1 below describes these three events and the research interests.

Event	Number of visitors*	Research interests
Paris Games Week (video game world)	307, 000*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1st French exhibition dedicated to video games - Second leisure industry in France behind the book industry - In 2013, 50% of the French population play video games against 20% in 1999 (GfK / REC, « The French and the video games »)¹
Comic Con (pop culture, comics and superheroes).	30, 000 visitors*	Desire of the organizers to create an autonomous event for the Comic Con detached from the Japan Expo due to the ever-growing global success (150,000 visitors for the Comic Con in San Diego in 2014).
Japan Expo (Japanese culture and leisure)	247, 473	Largest European leisure event on Japanese culture.

*Until now, it was part of the French Japan Expo. In 2015, Comic Con became independent, thus explaining the relatively low number of visitors.

Table 1. The events under study

2.2. Data collection

The study is based on semi-directive interviews with event organizers of the three events described above.

¹ www.essentiel-jeu-video.fr/media/pdf/EJV_03_FR.pdf (accessed April 25, 2016)

The interview guide is structured in three parts according to our literature review (see Appendix). After defining the event, respondents have to determine the profile of visitors. Then, they are asked to describe situations where individuals are interacting during the events. Finally, the organizers identify the positive or negative impacts that may occur on individuals' experiences.

The three interviews (one organizer per event) of a length between 45 to 60 minutes were conducted by Skype, recorded, transcribed and then coded and finally analyzed. The coding is established in two stages (Ryan and Bernard, 2003): codes were identified following the literature review (creation of a dictionary of themes, Miles and Huberman, 1994) and other codes have emerged during the reading (Allard-Poési, 2003).

We also collected information on social networks and TV documents. They were studied in a netnographic perspective (Kozinets, 2009). Television interviews of people from the organizing team and fans from previous editions, comments posted on social networks (Facebook²), and data on the websites of the three events³ were also taken into consideration for our study.

The results of our research are illustrated with verbatim indicated in quotes and italics. The French comments have been translated in English. We put in parenthesis the event from which the respondent belongs to: PGW (Paris Games Week), CC (Comic Con) and JE (Japan Expo).

3. Findings

3.1. Profiles of visitors

For the three events, profiles of visitors are substantially the same. We find a majority of fans within the meaning of Chung et al. (2008) and Thorne and Bruner (2006), which are young people, usually aged 15-35 years who have a passion or a real devotion to their object of fascination that can be video games, comics, pop culture, Manga and/or Japanese culture.

They usually belong to communities of fans with the same passion. These members of virtual communities are taking advantage of the event to meet physically: *"This is with the people with whom you play to World of Warcraft that you meet at the event"* (PGW). Social networks like Facebook allow these communities to keep their passion alive between two editions. Thus the event becomes the place to meet and exchange for the members of the communities.

Alongside these inveterate fans, we find the companions (parents, friends, colleagues...), the "new" addicts, the curious, the amateurs (who cannot be considered as fans): *"Children, parents who do not play, people who have worked in the world of video games, ultra-hardcore fans of Japanese RPG⁴, casual or experienced gamers who are not necessarily identified as fans in a universe "* (PGW).

The motivations for attending these events we found in the interviews overlap and join the proposals of Fahmy (2009):

- The content of the programming: meetings, signings sessions, conferences etc. with famous artists, *"it is the occasion to meet the stars we want to see and we never see in Paris"*(CC).

² <https://www.facebook.com/comicconfrance/?fref=ts> (accessed 25 April, 2016)

<https://www.facebook.com/ParisGamesWeek/?fref=ts> (accessed 25 April, 2016)

<https://www.facebook.com/japanexpo/?fref=ts> (accessed 25 April, 2016)

³ <http://www.japan-expo-paris.com/fr/> (accessed 25 April, 2016)

<http://www.comic-con-paris.com> (accessed 25 April, 2016)

<http://www.parisgamesweek.com> (accessed 25 April, 2016)

⁴ Role Playing Game.

- Membership in the community: meeting with other fans, exchanges etc. *"they meet between buddies, between internet buddies that is to say they will meet once a year"*(JE).
- The discoveries of new things (recent releases, tests, previews of games, new editions etc.) *"They will come for the community but then it is the discovery of new things"*(CC).
- Purchases of innovative products (goodies⁵, patches (additional content sets), costumes, books, jewelries, etc.) : *"When you ask people why they come, the first reasons for returning oddly is to buy ... this is the commercial part of the fair that is frequently said as one of the first reasons for coming "*(JE).
- The brand's event: *"we know that there are fans of the brand and of the event as we have sold almost 5,000 tickets even before unveiling the programming, so we know we have brand fans"*(CC).

3.2. Interactions between fans

As we saw previously, meeting other fans is a major driver for coming to the event. It is even ultimately the main purpose of the event. One of organizers of the Japan Expo also explains that most community events are born thanks to the willingness of members of virtual communities to meet: *"although events can be repurchased by large structures, it often disseminated from fans who decide to create a special event. If you take large events like Comic Con in San Diego or Comic con in New York owned by REED⁶ all of them were originally done by comic book fans"* (JE).

To determine how the value is co-created by fans, we explore their motivations to visit these events, and the value co-created through the exchanges.

3.2.1. The event : the place to be for meeting and exchanging knowledge

Fans 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 them, to have fun "*(JE).

But these exchanges are also an important source of learning. For example, they enable a gamer to discover the right way to conquer new levels, to get more points or to understand the tips and tricks of each level.

Fans will learn from each other (as described in the research of Baron and Harris, 2008), the psychology of their characters, the explanations of scenarios, the habits of their favorite designer etc. Interactions with other enthusiasts also enable the discovery of new activities, new artists, new games or new universes... The skills, new resources are put forward here, and confirm the study of Pongsakornrungrasit and Schroeder (2011). On top of that, fans have the chance to confront each other, to assess their level and skills during competitions and tournaments. Therefore fans will have to outperform and develop the willingness to make progress.

Another major element that lead to greater interactions and value creation between visitors of these events deal with "cosplayers". Cosplay is a neologism from "costume" and "playing". The goal of cosplaying is to dress up, to "customize", to look like a character from video games, manga, cartoon, singer to the smallest details.

⁵ Film, video games, sitcoms merchandize like mugs, figurines, cuddly toys, etc.

⁶ World's leading event's organizer.

Many cosplayers make a point of honor to create their own costume. There is a certain pride to show one's disguise, to walk on the show (*"in cosplay it is fun to see people blown away who recognize the character, it is really gratifying"*⁷ (Samara fan of the game Mass Effect) and to play the role of the character: *"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: *"which makes much of the atmosphere of the festival. 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). They will also discuss how they designed their disguise and exchanged ideas for their next show or contests. Cosplayers also play an important role in the communities, because they will be able to "recruit" new members: *"they will recruit neophytes"* (JE).

3.2.2. Event ownership

"Every year we are seeing this very interesting phenomenon. Visitors take ownership of the event" (PGW). When they attend the event, fans have the feeling they are in their communities, they develop a common dynamic that enhances their personal experience of the event, of their passion for video games, and their communities. The event becomes the better place to establish a sense of community and to show oneself, particularly through regular publication of selfies⁸ on social networks. Fans are proud to participate. They create common memories that they can exchange after the event and during the next editions.

The fans do not hesitate to provoke interactions between them, in particular through free hugs: *"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, thinks like this..."* (PGW).

Fandom also causes interactions (Hill, 2012). Fandom is a neologism of the words "fan" and "domain" to describe fans who are active in a particular area such as cosplayers, bloggers, YouTubers, the fanfiction writers etc. *"Fandom is super creative"* (JE). They have a role of influencer 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 Cyprien⁹ tries your game and put a video on YouTube than to make an advertising campaign on TF1¹⁰"* (PGW).

4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical and managerial implications

4.1.1. Theoretical implications

According to the study, co-creation occurs not only between providers and customers (B2C relationships) but also between individuals. Indeed, fans co-create with a *self-interest* (to acquire skills and knowledge, to enhance the visiting experience, to get items on their favorite character etc.) but also in the *community interest* (to let people/neophytes know their favorite

⁷ http://videos.lexpress.fr/culture/video-comic-con-de-paris-le-rendez-vous-de-la-pop-culture_1729586.html (accessed 25 April, 2016).

⁸ Photo taken with a mobile phone/a digital camera by a person who is also the photograph.

⁹ French blogger, podcaster, YouTuber, comedian who has the largest number of "views" on the French YouTube in 2015.

¹⁰ Private national French TV channel that is the most popular domestic network.

game, to support a community, etc.). So they participate in the life of the event; it is the role of fandom, cosplayers and free hugs for example. Here we find the principles of the CD-logic. Fans naturally develop interactions and thus co-create without "guides" and constraints. There is no particular expectations.

Therefore these results confirm the interest related to customer-dominant logic in this type of context. Indeed, interactions between fans and non-fans can improve the experience of "consumption" of the event, increase the value generated for the fans and therefore, the satisfaction towards the thematic event. We can also suggest the complementarity between the GD and SD-logics. First, the organizers underline the fact that their role is to provide new unknown content to visitors so as to create a surprise. This observation resonates with the Goods dominant logic that is to say an almost unilateral relationship between companies and customers that do not participate in the actual value proposition. Indeed, the organizers have specific skills to create value for their event (resource-based view): *"Our role is to be vector of novelty, people may not be aware of everything and suddenly, we open new dimensions"*(JE). It could also be relevant to include blue ocean logic (Kim and Mauborgne, 2008) which advocates to create new products and services needs without any expressed demand (Kotler et al., 2014). For example, an organizer of the Japan Expo said that some years ago, they had integrated wrestling to the exhibition after a trip to Japan. Today, the fans would not imagine the Japan Expo without wrestling.

On the other hand, the organizers set up meetings with the fans to collect suggestions on the programming and on the choice of exhibitors. For example, the Comic Con team organizes regular meetings with fans before the event to talk with them, *"they are constant source of ideas, and they are questioned anyway, it is important for us to know"*(CC). 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).

Of course, these co-creation situations are not independent of the context. Events seem to be a value facilitator to co-create. Therefore, it can be considered as a community platform conducive to the creation of value as emphasized by Crowther and Donlan (2011). Indeed, the organizers create a positive environment for interactions, projecting visitors (here the fans) in a unique experience where imagination (*"create an event that hopefully meets fantasy"*(CC)) and fantasy reign. Fans feel closer to their real-world community. This result is consistent with the studies of Grönroos and Voima (2013) and Heinonen *et al.* (2013). According to them, companies must provide the customers with good conditions to create value.

In addition to these theoretical contributions to characterize C2C co-creation, we highlight the interest of observing fan communities. Indeed, this particular category of people have received little attention in the marketing literature. Our results identify a fifth category of fans that could be added to the classification of Chung *et al.* This new category could be entitled "proaction" and could include "fandom" and its influence on communities.

4.1.2. Managerial implications

The aim of the research was to apprehend knowledge of organizers about 1) the exchanges and value created between fans, 2) the "layouts" used to promote exchanges and 3) how this value was integrated into the event.

Interactions between the fans could be a major tool in the programming of future edition. Of course, this result is already practiced by the organizers who are asking fans for their preferences through social networks, satisfaction surveys, teasing organized between two editions etc. But collecting and observing instant reactions and exchanges between the fans during the event would provide ideas to improve future editions. For example, it could be interesting to go beyond satisfaction surveys and visitor profiling to go and meet individuals,

ask them what their positive feelings, emotions are, what they would like to find in the next edition, in order to collect immediate feedbacks on their experience in situ.

The results also show that interactions between fans allowed to improve the experience of neophytes. Indeed, 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.

Then the organizers should play a most obvious role of facilitator of interactions between communities and fans during the event. They already start to do it for the celebrities and fans by providing meeting spaces. Thus, we could imagine new solutions to create interactions between members of a community, such as mobile applications to detect community affinities for example.

As we mentioned previously, cosplayers play a key role during the event. TV reports, photos or interviews of cosplayers often occur; they are a cultural proof of existence of those events. Therefore they have a very important role in the media scene. They can also be considered as true ambassadors. They enable to provide value to the event, thus leading to give a positive (brand) image. It will also convince fans to customize in the next editions: *"there will be influencers, prescribers, they act as a relay of information essential for us"* (PGW). Thus these ambassadors could play a more important role ahead of the event, during the organization, as a role of prescriber for example. Encouraging meetings during the event between cosplayers and non-fans by explaining what a cosplayer is, the time dedicated to design a costume etc., create competition by giving goodies to the cosplayer who has the best costume related to a particular character, by finding as quickly as possible the characters represented by the cosplayers etc., could also be considered by the organizers.

Finally, the result related to event ownership shows the importance of the event for the fan communities. Looking for event ownership leads to feelings of 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 towards the event can be prolonged by the organizers themselves.

4.2. Limits and research agenda

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 on the event can be seen as a reason to come, and the organizers need to attract a lot of visitors so as to make the event enough profitable to start again.

This exploratory study showed the importance to consider C2C co-creation for businesses. As we indicated in the method, this work is in progress. We only interviewed members of the organizing team of the three major French events that gather fan communities so as to highlight the relevance of this research topic. We have not interacted directly with the fans yet. Thus, the second part of the study continues in July with the 2016 edition of the Japan Expo where interviews will be conducted with fans and other visitors. We will also conduct participant observations so as to improve our understanding of the value created during the event. We also plan to interview the exhibitors to identify their expectations towards the event, and how they co-create value with visitors.

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Appendix. The interview Guide

Introduction

- Can you describe the event you organize? Missions, objectives, number of visitors, activities? What denomination you give to it: thematic exhibition, convention, trade fair?
- What are the particularities of your event compared to other events? What are the key success of such an event?
- What are the goals / benefits for the sector? Do you have statistics about the customers' satisfaction? On other variables?

I. Profiles of visitors

- Who are the visitors? Why do they come to the event (motivations, goals...)?
- To your opinion, are there different categories of "fans" who go to (*name of the event*)?
- If so, what are these categories? Their characteristic?
- From your observations, what are the roles that fans may play towards the other visitors?

II. Situations of C2C co-creation

Definition of co-creation: it is the collaboration between customers and companies (here, visitors and organizers) through interactions with main purposes to improve the final offerings. The visitors become involved into the creation of the offers (here, the event).

- Can you describe some situations where fans interact with visitors to the event? Co-create/ exchange value ?
- What layouts do you provide to facilitate these interactions?
- What are the positive / negative impacts on the different categories of individuals identified? On the satisfaction towards the event ?