



International Conference on Industry Sciences and Computer Science Innovation

# Gaming times four: How does customer participation shape consumer brand identification during the new product creation process

## A conceptual model proposal

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### Abstract

Consumer participation in the new product development is an old concept, but one that has only recently started to appear more among companies in the gaming industry. This paper proposes a conceptual model focused on understanding what effect consumer's participation has on Consumer Brand Identification (CBI) through perceived brand attractiveness - conducting a mediating, and brand innovativeness - a moderating role. A research model is constructed together with the possible hypotheses and research design. Also, possible outcomes, future research opportunities and limitations are provided for those who are interested in researching the effect that the consumer's participation has on CBI in different cultural setups.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the scientific committee of the International Conference on Industry Sciences and Computer Sciences Innovation

**Keywords:** Consumer Participation; Gaming Industry; Consumer Brand Identification; Brand Innovativeness; Brand Attractiveness; Innovation; Brands; Co-Creation.

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## 1. Introduction

Being a very diversified and fragmented market, the world of video games has no clear monopolist, so the companies are constantly fighting for their spot “under the sun” [1]. With sales projected to grow and the market to beat the 200 Billion USD mark by 2023 businesses are already looking for investment possibilities, optimization, a chance to improve their position and to offer attractive and competitive products in the long term. Though the tide is slowly shifting, for most companies the development process is still very internal, meaning firms take little initiative towards public engagement [2]. This is still quite an old and limited view, so a look towards the bigger picture is needed. A combination of customer value co-creation and innovation is a way to move forward [3]. In theory, it connects a modern approach towards product development that revolves around customer experience-based feedback [4], [5]. The goal is to satisfy the buyer's needs in order to increase retention, so why not to include the user in the creation process itself? In other words, the client is co-creating additional value on which the company could profit off - designing a game for himself, selling it to the audience, giving future capitalization clues and strengthening the public image of the company [6]-[8].

Given the benefit of the doubt, such a strategy might be the way to go in the long-term for video game developers, who want to have a competitive advantage over their challengers. Needless to say, creating a positive effect in multiple departments simultaneously - financial, marketing, PR, etc. - benefiting the ecosystem as a whole and therefore making the approach worth the investment.

Considering this potential interaction between the consumer (understood here as also an input of the product to be developed) and the company, this study will serve as a basis to explore how the consumer participation affects consumer brand identification through the prism of brand attractiveness and innovativeness during the new product development process in the gaming industry. Specifically, the research will focus on how consumer participation in the new product creation cycle is impacting consumer brand identification and how such factors like brand attractiveness and innovativeness respectively mediate or moderate the process due to the type of development approach (participation vs. no participation).

This paper that begins with this introduction to the entire scope of our research is followed by a systematic review of the existing literature on the main topics to be addressed. In the 3rd section, the proposed hypotheses together with the conceptual model developed to test them are presented; also, in the third section the design and methodology suggested to guide the future research is discussed. In the final section, the achieved conclusions are listed, and an allusion is made to the potential future work to be carried out.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Gaming Industry

According to the Oxford dictionary [9], a video game is defined as “A game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program on a monitor or other display.”. For decades it was thought that video games are useful for entertainment purposes only. However, many researches have proven that, entertainment-focused or not, they can have multiple benefits and are used widely in business, military, schools, and healthcare [10]-[19].

Additionally, video games were proven to enhance skills related to attention as well as probabilistic inferences, task switching, working memory, and reasoning [20], [21]. Also, video games can have a positive impact on one's beliefs about himself in turn increasing confidence and adding motivation, and have benefits on social skills such as cooperation, support, and helping behaviors [21].

The popularity of video games has been rising on a yearly basis, while recent pandemics have accelerated the growth even more immensely - from around 2.03 billion players in 2015, to the expected 2.9 billion players by the end of 2021, averaging 5.6% yearly growth with estimates of 3.32 billion players by 2024 [22], [23]. The gaming market has also been expanding with a record 177.8 billion in 2020, capitalizing around 175.8 billion in 2021 and with expected average growth of 8.7% till 2024 [23], surpassing movie and music markets combined [24]. The market is very fragmented, as there are a lot of companies in the industry with a big share of them doing well [25].

Taking into consideration the gaming industry's current capitalization and expected growth, fragmentation of the market as well as increasing appliance diversification, an expansion in the number of companies entering the market is inevitable. New coming companies will have to apply practices that have proven to work in order to stand out and be successful. For instance, video gaming companies should consider consumers as co-creators in the new product development, as this practice has been around for a long time, but has been appearing more and more lately and was proven to help with the new product's success [26], [27]. Having the consumer as a partner rather than a target was also proven to be helpful in other ways, including creating a better fit of the product, having higher perceived brand innovativeness towards the company, and higher perceived brand attractiveness from the perspective of a consumer [28].

There are plenty of different motivating factors on why someone would be interested in participation in the first place. For example, need-driven consumers might simply be dissatisfied with what they got at the beginning or with the options available in the market [26], [29].

However, with all the given benefits of the co-creation process, video gaming companies still must be very selective of the audience that they would ask for participation in the product development. A mismatch, such as picking someone that is not very accustomed to the theme and the direction of the product or someone that has negative intentions, could lead to the development of an unwanted or very niche product [26].

## *2.2. Consumer Value Co-Creation in New Product Development: The Benefit of the Doubt*

Quite recently, the development process of new products or services was solely based on the interests of the company, rather than the end consumer. This kind of approach is not only considered to be thoughtless, but leads to various dangers such as poor product performance rates in the market, failure and even abandonment [29], [30].

Depending on the industry, from 30% to 90% of new product launches proved to be unsuccessful or failed to reach their target goals [31]. The majority of instances were the consequences of poor or non-existent customer feedback, information collection and analysis [29], [32]. The aforementioned gap in the development process often proved to be crucial for product success, since there was no direct data, gaps for incorrect assumptions about user needs arisen, which influenced product design, strategy and led to misguided decisions in general [29], [33].

Based on the concept of the product, some companies do perform primary research in the means of surveying or qualitative interviews [34], [35]. Though it is important to note that most of the companies that engage in this practice do not go back to their initial participants for feedback when a prototype product is created [32]. Their main indication - that the public have limited insight into the idea generation and product development processes. However, professional personnel and lead user collaboration in new product concept development produces a greater level of innovativeness and has much better sales potential compared to traditional development concepts [29], [36]. For example, if compared on the overall quality index scale, general user ideas score much higher than professionals in terms of novelty and customer benefit [30].

Companies that involve customers into their product development process, when the product is still in its early stages, have a higher chance of pinning down the key design and function futures necessary for the consumer [29], [30]. Although, according to Fuller [26], Poetz and Schreier [37], involving the “right” people is crucial in order to develop significant and insightful input. Furthermore, both parties must understand their parameters and should be in sync with each other for a fruitful collaboration to ensure a product’s success in the market. Developers - expertise in design and manufacturing, consumers - feedback on features, usability and experience.

In addition, while the firms are limited to value propositions only, consumers are always the co-producers of merit [38]. Meaning that value creation arises only after the consumption of the service or product has happened, for example, a service provider without customers or an unsold item brings no value to the customer [39]. What is more, the value is being created through the relationships that happen between the consumer and the firm [40]. However, from a combined service-centric and marketing approach, value creation does not end after the manufacturing or buying process. Contrary, it continues throughout the life-time of the product as the customer learns, maintains, repairs the product and to a certain level communicates his experience [38].

Consumers should be seen as a resource rather than a threat by the companies. A practice of “consumer engineering”, a term introduced in the 1930’s by Earnest Calkins [41] to describe such phenomena, is rising in popularity among the firms, where customers work on answering the “what” question of functional requirements,

while the engineers are responsible for “how” to implement them [42]. In the end, both are working towards the same goal - producing a product that both sides (buyers and sellers) could benefit from, only from different perspectives.

### 2.3. Brand Innovativeness

Through a mutual agreement between researchers, brand innovativeness is considered to be an outcome of company activity [43], [44]. In general, the term conceptualizes depending on the perspective of the subject: either from firm production (goods and services) or the company itself. Accordingly, the first one is referred to as product innovativeness, second - firm innovativeness [45]. For some sort of brand innovativeness association to happen in consumers' minds, both traits need to be in place because one cannot work without the other.

A relatively new concept in academic literature, brand innovativeness, was first portrayed by Quellet [46], as a firm's ability from the consumers' perspective, to engage and support ideas, experimentation, and creative processes. Eisingerich and Rubera [47] state that brands that focus on consumer needs receive a peculiar repayment from their customers. In other words, people are willing to label the brand as innovative as long as it is able to continue providing up-to-date and functional solutions to emerging problems. However, the concept still struggles with some limitations [45]. Primarily, a concept of product originality and purpose is taken from the level of production. Furthermore, brand innovativeness is highly dependent on the firm's ability to satisfy its customer needs. In addition, consumers might still associate a brand with innovativeness even though they might not need or use their products. For example, a person might not need Tesla's self-driving car but would still consider it to be an innovation [45].

In the end, consumer perceived brand innovativeness is subjective. While it varies between the person, the company, or the context of the environment in general, one thing is common on all occasions - brand image stability over time through the prism of competence [48].

### 2.4. Brand Attractiveness and Consumer Brand Identification

Consumer Brand Identification (CBI) is a framework that explains how consumer-brand relationships emerge and develop [49], [50]. Perception, connection, and belongingness with the brand are the main definitions of CBI that the consumer associates psychologically. In a broader context, CBI consists of two categories (Brand Identity and Brand Encounters) which can influence CBI directly, or merge into a singular category - brand attractiveness - and perform an indirect effect [51]. See Figure 1.

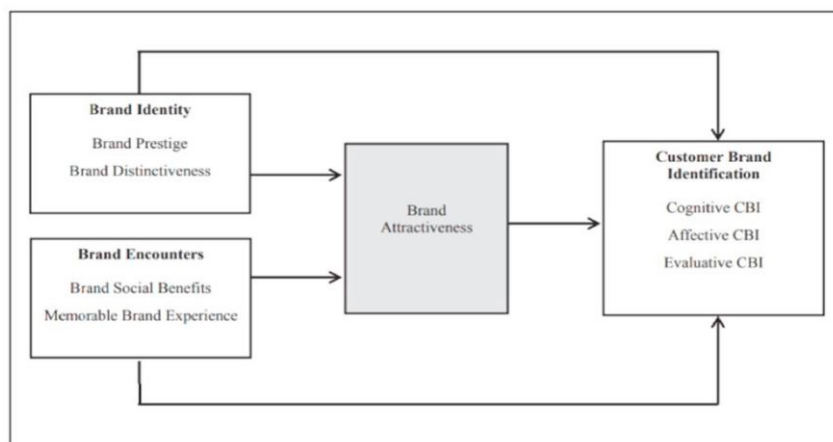


Fig. 1 CBI Conceptual Model [51].

Brand prestige and distinctiveness are the first two attributes reflected as direct influence characteristics. As a whole, they make up the brand identity block. The main goal of this element is to create and communicate an appealing brand personality to the public using various marketing and branding techniques and activities [51]. Brand

encounters, the second direct block, consists of factors relevant primarily to customer-brand interactions, such as brand social benefits and memorable experiences [52], [53]. Though it is important to note that while both parts of the model bring value to the table, the latter mentioned component is more relative to the businesses operating in the service industry compared to production due to more activities happening through human interactions. However, it is important to address the most important drawback of this approach - not all factors might be relevant to every consumer. A good example would be a prestigious airline brand of Emirate Airlines, or a distinctive one - Southwest Airlines. Their praised traits may not lead directly to consumer-brand identification, because, as mentioned previously, the brand has to be perceived as attractive for the customer [54].

This is where brand attractiveness comes into play. Perceived as the mediating part of the brand identification process, brand attractiveness is defined as a positive evaluation of a company's identity (arising from one or two factors mentioned previously - brand identity or brand encounters) which in addition helps consumers fulfil their self-definitional needs [49], [55]. However, the direct influencers, for example brand prestige, can be perceived differently across the customers and cause dissensions. Such a phenomenon occurs when the company is attractive for the customer and ultimately increases the self-evaluation furthermore increasing identification. In addition, a person is more likely to embody an identity of the brand as native if it seems attractive. Such qualities are in comparison to enhancing oneself as a person, meaning that people are more likely to identify themselves more with a brand (such as a game) that they find highly visible in the public [51]. Moreover, the effect is strengthened when the consumer sees the attributes of the company valued by other customers as well [56].

In the end, it is undeniable that favorable perceptions of the attractiveness of the company from the public lead to stronger CBI towards individuals. Nowadays, it has become something more than just an additional unit of value production - a modern way of business strategy approach [55]. Companies are steadily increasing investments in brand identity formation due to the added value it can bring. Moreover, long-term return of investment possibilities creates an ecosystem for this approach to thrive and continuation of such a trend is likely in the future [57].

### 3. Proposed Hypotheses, Design and Methodology

#### 3.1. Hypotheses

As elaborated previously, the point of this research is to formulate the basis which would help to uncover whether the consumer participation in the new product development process, and some additional factors surrounding it, influences change in the attitude of the consumers towards brand identification. From the developed research model (Figure 2) and discussion around it, the following hypotheses have been settled:

**H1.** Consumer participation in the new product development process positively influences consumers' brand identification.

**H2.** Consumer participation in the new product development process positively influences consumers' perceived brand attractiveness.

**H3.** Perceived brand attractiveness positively mediates the effect of consumer involvement in the new product creation process towards consumers' brand identification.

**H4.** Perceived brand innovativeness directly moderates the relationship between independent and dependent variables

#### 3.2. Overview

The intended research design will be cross-sectional with an online quantitative survey as the main tool of gathering data. Internet mediums such as social media were preferred for the distribution of the survey for the high convenience and distribution pace.

Reviewed theoretical framework laid the foundation on which the conceptual research model has been constructed (Figure 2).

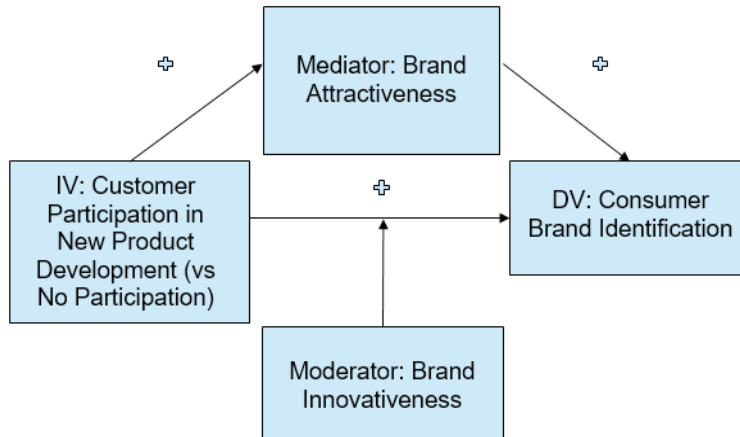


Fig. 2 Research Model. Developed by the Authors.

The main proposition in the blueprint indicates that customer participation in new product development (vs no participation) acts as an independent, two level, variable that has a corresponding positive impact towards the dependent variable - consumer brand identification. Referring to the literature, companies which engage consumers in their new product development processes appear to be more approachable to the general public. Moreover, they also seem to be more in-line with their values towards the customer, which ultimately leads towards higher brand identification.

In addition, brand attractiveness acts as a mediator in the relationship and has positive correlations between the two variables. Publications state that people who find the brand appealing are much more likely to also identify with it.

In the end, brand innovativeness is a follow-up moderator in the chain. In the literature context, consumers who see the brand as producing up-to-date and relevant solutions to their problems will also find it more attractive and vice-versa. Therefore, the approach and perception towards the dependent variable alter.

#### 4. Conclusions

Based on the previous exploration about the suggested research model components, a predicted interrelationship between them is highly anticipated [30], [46], [51] and it will act as a core system for fruitful consumer-brand relationship building [51].

The empirical research of the study is yet to be held. The expectation - to find the previously raised hypotheses positive and confirm the relevance of the research model. Furthermore, prove the significance of the role that the consumer's participation plays in the brand identification process, while also looking through the prism of brand attractiveness and innovativeness.

If the expectations hold true, some practical implications become possible in an industry which is always looking for ways to take advantage. First of all, enrolling customers in the new product creation process would prove to be worth the investment for the game-creating companies. A way to penetrate the CBI metrics which in the end would lead to higher brand attachment and sales. Furthermore, better insights and understanding of the brand attractiveness and innovativeness roles, that play a crucial part in the CBI process, would allow the companies to work on these traits more strategically and for the more advanced ones - build on their strengths. What is more, it is important to shine the light on the concept of mutual consumer-company work type which, in the end, can bring many benefits for both sides.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations. To begin with, a cross-sectional design yields predictive results rather than causality, so there will be no clear answer to the question why? Continuing, each population that the research is conducted on might have different cultural and behavioral outcomes, therefore the results should be accounted for when trying to apply the outcomes in practice. On the last note, self-evaluative surveys could lead to reactive effects

of measurement and decrease validity, meaning the results should be analyzed with caution. In addition, further research on the topic is highly welcomed and encouraged.

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