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## **A Conceptual Analysis of Labels Referring to Brand Co-Creation**

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**Abstract** As research on brand co-creation is rapidly increasing, it is time to take a look at its theoretical grounding; the current conceptual language. This chapter examines the conceptual state of brand co-creation research by focusing on i) the definitions of the concepts and ii) the descriptions of the terms used to refer to brand co-creation. The aim is to reveal and clarify any conceptual confusions and to disentangle the concept combinations used. We apply Conceptual Analysis Method, which is also further developed in the process. As an outcome, the chapter offers conceptual maps of the five most used concepts. The maps illuminate the complexity of the phenomenon and aid future research to bolster multi-vocal theory development.

**Key words:** Conceptual Maps, Conceptual Analysis Method, Brand value co-creation, Branding co-creation, Brand meaning co-creation, Consumer-brand engagement

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the definitions of the concepts and descriptions of the terms used to refer to brand co-creation. Brand co-creation is an emerging field of research, thus, it is apt to conduct a conceptual analysis on the theoretical language used, and to reveal and clarify instances of conceptual confusion. Our aim is restricted to illustrating the issues, we will not suggest *the* definition to be used, nor suggest an integrated form. The current chapter opens up the current conceptual language on brand co-creation so that scholars can make informed decisions on what concepts to use based on the aspects the concepts reveal about the complex phenomenon.

Concepts are scholars' tools of the trade; unless we use concepts and explain what they refer to, it is impossible to create, develop, or test a theory (Bagozzi, 1984; Suddaby, 2010; Griffin & Barczak, 2020). As Vargo and Koskela-Huotari (2020, p. 2) put it, "all scholarly articles are, necessarily, conceptual". Concepts carry basic assumptions on what the world is about and how to study it; they are also abstract, reflexive, and bound in time. A new conceptualisation allows us to 'see' and understand a new aspect or view of the world in which we live and thus advance our knowledge of the world (MacInnis, 2011). The reflexive nature of concepts means that alongside world views, concepts influence both researchers' and practitioners' understanding of phenomena and the future behaviour of those working with such concepts (Giddens, 1987). Hence, the notion that concepts are critical tools is not limited to the work of researchers, concepts are also important for practitioners (MacInnis, 2011). However, ontological assumptions differ at any point in time and change over time, as is reflected, for example, in the works of Blumer and of Bartels. Blumer (1954, p. 7) treats concepts in social science as sensitising; "*offering the researcher a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances*" and Bartels (1970, pp. 5–6) views *a clearly defined concept* as the first step in theory development.

We take a middle road here, and support multivocality; that involves each researcher following her/his ontological perspective and attempting to offer their audience clear definitions or descriptions of how they and those they studied understand the key concepts in a piece of research. A phenomenon may be conceptualised differently in different domains and by different participants in the study, but it is important that readers can understand how the concept is used. Unless the use is consistent, the field may use several different labels for a similar phenomenon (synonymy), or a single concept or term for different phenomena (homonymy) (Sartori, 2009, p. 111). Ambiguity in defining and using concepts (Tähtinen & Havila, 2019) makes it difficult to compare and build upon existing research.

Conceptual confusion hinders the development of knowledge in the field, so we start with the bedrock of research, the key concepts, and their meanings. Following MacKenzie (2003), we begin the journey assuming that some authors in this field underestimate the importance of presenting explicit definitions. Viewed separately, the concepts of *brand* and *co-creation* do not differ from most concepts in marketing; both are currently defined in multiple ways and from multiple angles (for branding, see, Brown, 2005; De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998 and for co-creation see Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018). Combining the concepts into 'brand co-creation' could thus either increase or decrease conceptual ambiguity. This chapter aims to disclose the extent of conceptual ambiguity in the field of 'brand co-creation' and to deconstruct the concept combinations used to bolster theory development.

The task will be executed by using the Conceptual Analysis Method (CAM) developed by Tähtinen and Havila (2019) and inspired by Sartori (2009) to scrutinise the definitions and terms used in articles on brand co-creation.

The results of this examination reveal the ambiguity within the discussion and clarify the theoretical state by unravelling the current assigned meanings. The meanings scrutinised can be either dominant or rare and the focus of the investigation also encompasses the direct theoretical underpinnings of the concepts and terms used. The study shows that conceptual confusion could be clarified if each study defined the main concept of interest and avoided conceptual ambiguity. A total of ten different concepts are found and dissected, half of which feature quite regularly in research on brand co-creation. Of the five, two concepts stand out as the most applied, another two distinguish certain aspects of the brand as being co-created, and one adopts a consumer perspective. Disentangling the five most-used concepts to create conceptual maps illuminates several aspects of the phenomenon and its complexity. Some of the aspects are well studied while others remain rather opaque. The analysis will aid future

research to clarify conceptual choices, balance the focus of research, and direct it to less understood, but relevant aspects of the phenomenon.

The chapter is organised according to the steps of the CAM; we first describe the method and its execution and thereafter present the results of the analysis. The results section first discusses the conceptual status of the field, then outlines the dominant and rare meanings, the theoretical underpinnings of the concepts, and then presents conceptual maps. The chapter ends with a discussion of the findings and conclusions, which include suggestions to develop the CAM.

### **The application of CAM**

The CAM consists of five consecutive tasks of 1) collecting the definitions of the concepts and descriptions of the terms used in existing studies, 2) evaluating the conceptual status of the field, 3) categorising the meanings and boundaries of the concepts and terms, 4) tracing their theoretical roots, and 5) outlining conceptual maps (Tähtinen & Havila, 2019). The data collection for the concept review was conducted systematically applying predefined selection criteria (i.e. keywords and search terms, see Tähtinen & Havila, 2019). We used the Web of Science electronic database that covers established peer-reviewed journals (see Podsakoff et al., 2005). The aim was to collect a representative sample of the discussion instead of finding all publications on brand co-creation. The discussion subject is still new and appears in a range of journals; both general marketing journals and those dedicated to branding, general management, and tourism journals.

The data collection took place on May 5, 2020, using an advanced search of articles written in English, without restricting the timespan. We used the following search sentence: TI=(brand\* AND co-creation) changing the last word to cocreation (the two first combinations resulted in 86 hits), co-production & coproduction (1 hit), and co-development &

codevelopment (1 hit). The search produced 88 articles and books. The only hit on brand co-production was a book chapter on film co-production, so we decided to omit that. The only hit on brand co-development was also a book chapter, but unfortunately, we could not access the book. In addition, we failed to access three articles, resulting in a sample of 83 papers.

We applied the above-mentioned search criteria systematically but as CAM (Tähtinen & Havila, 2019) aims to provide a fairly simple and manageable method, the search was not comprehensive. However, it appears to be typical of conceptual analyses and systematic reviews that some widely cited, and thus relevant studies to the field, are not returned in the search hits (see e.g. Blomberg et al., 2017). Hence, we would advise readers to add their main references into the sample to be studied when applying CAM.

To limit the data to research focusing on brand co-creation/production/development, both authors read the abstracts of all 83 studies and categorised the articles into consideration pools of “yes”, “maybe” and “no” before reviewing the selections together. After discussion, our final data set consists of 47 studies focusing on brand co-creation. Examples of studies excluded are those on customer co-creation of *value* that did use the focal concept of the brand, although their empirical settings were brands or brand communities (e.g. Kunja & Acharyulu, 2018; Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Zhao, Tao, & Xiong, 2019).

At this point, after comparing the size of our sample to the example of 42 studies presented in Tähtinen and Havila (2019), we decided that a cohort of 47 studies represented a sufficient number to analyse the conceptual status of the brand co-creation discussion. Moreover, as the various streams (e.g. critical tradition, city/place branding, corporate branding) of the branding discussion were represented in the sample, we did not add studies from the *maybe* categories.

The vast majority of studies, 46, were published between 2010–2020, that of Boyle (2007) being the earliest. Further, as many as 41 articles were published in the period 2015–2020 indicating that research interest in brand co-creation has recently increased rapidly. Our sample

shows that a particularly influential study is that of Merz, He, and Vargo (2009) suggesting that branding research has entered a new era of *stakeholder focus*, which started with the emergence of research into brand communities such as that of Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) and McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002). Accordingly, the stakeholder focus era “*parallels and reflects the new evolving service-dominant logic in marketing*” (Merz et al., 2009, p. 338).

The next step in the CAM was to start evaluating the conceptual status of the field. This included a search for the key concepts, their definitions or descriptions from the articles and comparing those against each other. At this point, each author took half of the papers and ran the definition search with the help of a “find” navigation tool and using the CAM suggested key phrases (refer, defin, concept, conceptualis/ze, construct). If the search failed to find a definition, we looked for any descriptions of the concepts of co-create and co-creation. The process produced a table of all concepts (Table 1.1) and we next categorised the studies in ten tables focusing on the ten different concepts the studies utilise. Those ten tables form the basis for the further steps in the CAM analysis that were conducted by both authors. Those steps are the evaluating the conceptual status, categorising the meanings and boundaries of the concepts, and tracing the theoretical underpinnings of the conceptualisations, and finally constructing the conceptual maps (Tähtinen & Havila, 2019).

At this point, however, we would like to offer an update to CAM’s task of detecting conceptual ambiguity. Instead of using homonymy as CAM suggests, we will apply a more recent linguistics<sup>1</sup> approach where homonymy and polysemy are viewed as two categories of conceptual ambiguity, although their differences seem to be nuances. Nevertheless, in most definitions, polysemy is considered to represent a situation where a concept is used in (at least) two meanings, and homonymy applies when those two meanings are distinct and unrelated (Pethö, 2001; Klepousniotou, 2002). As the different meanings found in our sample are indeed

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

related, we considered it best to label the ambiguity as polysemy instead of homonymy. However, the task itself, namely evaluating the conceptual ambiguity remains unchanged.

## **Results of the analysis**

### *Conceptual status of the field; synonymy*

To evaluate the conceptual status of the field, in other words, whether the studies reveal synonymy (they employ more than one term to convey a single meaning) or polysemy (one term is used with more than one meaning), we studied the concepts used and how they were defined and/or described. Table 1.1 demonstrates the conceptual confusion in the field as it lists the ten different labels used to refer to the phenomenon, two of which stand out as the most widely used: ‘brand value co-creation’ (16 pcs) and ‘brand(ing) co-creation’ (13 pcs). The first article in our data, Boyle (2007) uses *brand co-creation*, and the concept remained in use through to the latest article reviewed that was published in 2020. The most-used concept in our data, *brand value co-creation*, has been in use since 2012. Several concepts first appeared quite recently, from 2016 onwards: ‘consumer–brand engagement’, ‘brand co-destruction’, ‘brand identity co-creation’, ‘brand image co-creation’, ‘brand strategy co-creation’, and ‘co-creation for brand innovation’. This usage pattern can imply that the field has progressed and is able to categorise different facets of brand co-creation, connected to the facets of brands themselves, the contexts, and the ontological preferences of the researchers.

**Table 1.1. Concepts and terms applied in brand co-creation articles**

| <b>Concept/term (and variations)</b>                                       | <b>Appears in // total number</b>   |
|--|---|
| <b>Brand value co-creation</b>   | Biraghi and Gambetti (2017); Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger, and De Oliveira (2020); Choi, Ko, and Kim (2016); Cova, Pace, and Skålén (2015); Foroudi, Yu, Gupta, and Foroudi (2019); Fujita, Harrigan, and Soutar (2017); Gambetti and Graffigna (2015); Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay, and Richard (2017); Iglesias, Ind, and Alfaro (2013); Juntunen, Juntunen, and Autere (2012); Merz, Zarantonello, and Grappi (2018); Mingione and Leoni (2020); Nguyen, Shirahada, and Kosaka (2016); Nobre and Ferreira (2017); Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016); Zhang and He (2014) // 16 |
| <b>Brand(ing) co-creation (without specifying any facets of the brand)</b> | Boyle (2007); Casais and Monteiro (2019); France, Grace, Iacono, and Carlini (2020); France, Grace, Merrilees, and Miller (2018); France, Merrilees, and Miller (2015); Hatch and Schultz (2010); Juntunen, Juntunen, and Autere (2012); Kamboj, Sarmah, Gupta, and Dwivedi (2018); Kaufmann, Correia Loureiro, and Manarioti (2016); Lucarelli (2019); Oliveira and Panyik (2015); Schmeltz and Kjeldsen (2019); Vallaster, von Wallpach, and Zenker (2018) // 13  |
| <b>Brand meaning co-creation</b>   | Bertschy, Muhlbacher, and Desbordes (2020); Dean, Arroyo-Gamez, Punjaisri, and Pich (2016); Fujita, Harrigan, and Soutar (2017); Gonzalez and Lester (2018); Rosenthal and Zamith Brito (2017); Stach (2019); Suomi, Luonila, and Tähtinen (2020); Tierney, Karpen, and Westberg (2016); Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) // 9   |
| <b>Consumer-brand engagement</b>   | Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger, and De Oliveira (2020); Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahy, and Richard (2017); Hsieh and Chang (2016); Kamboj, Sarmah, Gupta, and Dwivedi (2018); Lin, Yang, Ma, and Huang (2018); Mingione and Leoni (2020); Nobre and Ferreira (2017); Seifert and Kwon (2020) // 8   |
| <b>Brand identity co-creation</b>  | Black and Veloutsou (2017); Centeno and Wang (2017); Dean, Arroyo-Gamez, Punjaisri, and Pich (2016); Gonzalez and Lester (2018); Kennedy and Guzman (2016); Suomi, Luonila, and Tähtinen (2020) // 6  |
| <b>Brand image co-creation</b>   | Hughes, Bandoni and Pehlivan (2016), Törmälä and Saraniemi (2018) // 2  |
| <b>Brand value / meaning co-destruction</b>                                | Kristal, Baumgarth, and Henseler (2018); Rossolatos (2019) // 2   |
| <b>Co-creation for brand innovation</b>                                    | Hsieh and Chang (2016) //1  |
| <b>Brand co-producing</b>  | Juntunen, Juntunen, and Autere (2012) //1   |
| <b>Brand strategy co-creation</b>  | Vallaster and von Wallpach (2018) //1   |

Although ten different concepts were used, we found ten studies that used two or more of the concepts in the same study when defining or describing the phenomenon. As this is around 21% of the total 47 studies, we assessed that although the field contains synonymy, only some individual studies contain ambiguity owing to synonymy. However, some instances of synonymy seem likely to create quite severe doubts among readers as to which phenomenon the particular study focuses on. An example is the study of Hsieh and Chang (2016, p. 13) stating in its first sentence ‘*co-creation for brand innovation (referred to hereafter as brand co-creation)*’, but the remaining paper uses ‘brand co-creation’ without even mentioning the focus on brand *innovation*. Moreover, the study defines ‘brand co-creation engagement’ in the context of ‘*firm-sponsored co-creation, where co-creation is conducted on behalf of a firm*’. (Hsieh & Chang, 2016, p. 15). Such use of multiple concepts is inevitably puzzling.

#### *Conceptual status of the field; polysemy*

Our next step – the search for definitions to check if the field contains polysemy – produced only a few explicit definitions of all ten different concepts. Hence, the vast majority of the studies do not explicitly define the concept(s) used, but those that do, either build their own definition or refer to existing definition(s); but rarely the same ones. No single definition has been used extensively by researchers.

#### Brand value co-creation and polysemy

We start the evaluation of polysemy with the largest group of studies. From the studies using the brand value co-creation concept, we found that nine of the total of 16 offer a definition. However, Table 1.2 shows that four papers do not define *brand/ing* value co-creation, but instead address value co-creation as a more general concept. In addition, none of the nine papers shares a definition. The definitions do share similarities, but ‘*a similar meaning is not*

*the same meaning*' as Sartori (2009, p. 112) puts it. Moreover, Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016, p. 95), sharpen the concept into '*joint agencial experiencial [sic] creation of brand value*', replacing co-creation by joint creation.

**Table 1.2. Definitions of brand value co-creation**

| Article   | Definition of brand(ing) value co-creation   |
|---|--|
| <b>Foroudi, Yu, Gupta, and Foroudi (2019)</b>                     | <p>p. 219: Yi and Gong's (2013)<sup>2</sup> research identifies two types of customer value co-creation behaviour: customer participation behaviour and customer citizenship behaviour.</p> <p>p. 225: Value co-creation behaviour: Customer value co-creation behaviour literature has argued that customers are not only the receivers of marketing information, they can also respond to the information as value creators. It can also refer to their interactive behaviour online via the website, leading to further navigation, sharing or repurchase (Tarafdar and Zhang, 2008)</p> <p>p. 225: Customer participation behaviour: Customer participation behaviour refers to customers' in-role behaviour so that they co-create the products or the service together with the company (Yi and Gong, 2013).</p> <p>p. 225: Customer citizenship behaviour: Customer citizenship behaviour refers to customers' extra-role behaviour that leads to their extra effort to interact with the organisation to contribute to the organisation's performance (Yi and Gong, 2013).</p> |
| <b>Choi, Ko, and Kim (2016)</b>                                   | p. 5828: Value co-creation means that customer emotional, cognitive, and behavioral experiences are the basis of the value, impressions, recognition, and internalization they accord to the brand.  |
| <b>Fujita, Harrigan, and Soutar (2017)</b>                        | p. 150: The brand community literature, aligned with consumer culture theory, has long discussed the co-creation concept or 'consumer collectives' as the social processes that construct brand meanings and cultural capital (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).  |
| <b>Gambetti and Graffigna (2015)</b>                              | p. 157: In line with this concept of value, we contend that value co-creation, recently defined as the process by which value is co-generated, delivered and assessed in the simultaneous processes of production and consumption (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011), ...  |
| <b>Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay, and Richard (2017)</b> | p. 137..., co-creation is a process of engaging customers in creating value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) as customers are transformed from passive customers to active players (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).  |
| <b>Merz, Zarantonello, and Grappi (2018)</b>                      | p. 80: ... we define brand value co-creation as the process of creating perceived use value for a brand through network relationships and social interactions among all the actors in the ecosystem (Merz et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). ... Taken together, firms and customers contribute to a brand's value proposition, thereby co-creating brand value.  |

<sup>2</sup> The references used in the original definitions are not listed in the references of this study.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Mingione and Leoni (2020)</b>            | p. 76: ... brand value co-creation can be considered as the process of brand building through network relationships and social interactions in a multi-stakeholder ecosystem (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Ind & Coates, 2013; Merz et al., 2009), in a way that improves the brand perception as well as its performance (Zhang & He, 2014).   |
| <b>Nguyen, Shirahada, and Kosaka (2016)</b> | p. 43: Value co-creation branding is a process of value co-creation in both daily life and research activities based on real experiences in the research laboratories of both professors and students. They can then expand research laboratory brands through viral marketing and social media.  |
| <b>Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016)</b>           | p. 95: Joint agencial experiencial creation of brand value: Agency entails the capacity to act and actions that generate outcomes, by virtue of engagement by individuals that both reproduces and transforms structural environments in interactive response (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). ... we define “joint agencial experiencial creation” as a joint creation through agencial assemblages, oriented in its ‘virtual’ capacity toward the future, informed in its ‘repetition’ aspect by the past, summoned as ‘intensive’ actions in the present, to ‘actualize’ experiencial outcomes within the contingencies of exteriority of relations. ... [Footnote:] This definition captures joint creation as a process of becoming that is simultaneously a “joint agencial creation” and a “joint experiencial creation”. |

We conclude that the studies using brand value co-creation as their main concept do contain conceptual ambiguity caused by polysemy.

### Brand(ing) co-creation and polysemy

Table 1.3 presents definitions of brand(ing) co-creation, the second largest group of studies in our data. This category contains only studies that did not specify any facets of the co-created brand or branding (e.g. identity, image, value). Among the 13 articles on brand(ing) co-creation, seven offer explicit definition(s), each study, however, relies on a different definition.

**Table 1.3. Definitions of brand(ing) co-creation**

| Article   | Definition of brand(ing) co-creation   |
|---|--|
| <b>France, Grace, Iacono, and Carlini (2020)</b>        | p. 1: Customer brand co-creation behaviour is an active form of customer–brand interaction which provides value to the firm and, thus, becomes a useful focus of co-creation research.   |
| <b>France, Grace, Merrilees, and Miller (2018)</b>      | p. 335: Customer brand co-creation behaviour (CBCB): CBCB is appropriately defined as the voluntary, active and interactive customer actions associated with the customer-brand relationship.  |
| <b>France, Merrilees, and Miller (2015)</b>             | p. 852: Customer brand co-creation behaviours are the customer-led interactions between the customer and the brand.  |
| <b>Kamboj, Sarmah, Gupta, and Dwivedi (2018)</b>        | p. 173: Brand co-creation behaviours of customers are the customer-led interactions between the brand and customer (France et al., 2015).<br><br>p. 176: Hajli et al. (2017) define branding co-creation as, “the process of branding with customers in an online environment, ...”.   |
| <b>Kaufmann, Correia Loureiro, and Manarioti (2016)</b> | p. 518: On the other hand, adopting a more collaborative approach, Ind et al. (2013), supported by Brakus et al. (2009) and the authors of this article, define co-creation as an active, creative and social process based on collaboration between organizations and participants that generate mutual benefits for all stakeholders (Ind et al., 2013, p. 9), as reflected by an active participation in a brand community (Kaufmann et al., 2012b) and influenced by the brand community principles (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). |
| <b>Lucarelli (2019)</b>                                 | p. 227: brand co-creation is a socio-processual, multi-temporal and multi-layered involvement of different stakeholders (Vallaster and von Wallpach 2013, 2018), featuring an uncontrollable process of branding (Wider et al., 2018).   |
| <b>Vallaster, von Wallpach, and Zenker (2018)</b>       | p. 55: City brand co-creation is “a discursive social process in which salient stakeholders may directly or indirectly, purposefully or coincidentally interact” online or offline, thereby shaping a brand's social reality and meaning through exchange and participation (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013, p. 1506).   |

France et al. (2015; 2018; 2020) all define exactly the same concept; customer brand co-creation behaviour (CBCB), but with slight differences. Notably, the latest article, France et al. (2020, p. 1), adds a notion of what customer brand co-creation means for a firm, in incorporating that CBCB “provides value to the firm”. The three studies can be thought of as refining the definition of CBCB and thus do not represent polysemy as such.

Kamboj et al. (2018, p. 176) refer to Hajli et al. (2017) to define branding co-creation as ‘the process of branding with customers in an online environment’. This definition is somewhat confusing, as Hajli et al. (2017) do not explicitly suggest such a definition. Nevertheless, the definition is contextual as it refers to online settings alone, ignores other potential platforms of brand co-creation, and offers little content other than to confirm the process is undertaken ‘with customers’. Hence, it is difficult to determine that the phenomenon is the same as that referred to in the first-mentioned three studies.

Kaufmann, Correia Loureiro, and Manarioti (2016) employ ‘brand co-creation’ in the title and keywords, but the text actually discusses value co-creation. The two remaining articles, Lucarelli (2019) and Vallaster, von Wallpach, and Zenker (2018) both focus on city branding and, although the papers present slightly different contextual definitions, both refer to Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013). In summary, as a group, brand(ing) co-creation studies offer a conceptually unclear picture of brand(ing) co-creation owing to the influence of polysemy.

#### Polysemy and the brand meaning co-creation concept

Table 1.4 shows that of the nine studies adopting brand meaning co-creation as their main concept, a majority (six) provide definitions of the concept. However, only two of the six use the same definition; the Vallaster and von Wallbach (2013) study that initially presents the definition and the study by Rosenthal and Zamith Brito (2017) that refers to Vallaster and von Wallbach (2013). As all the other articles defining brand meaning co-creation are more recent

than the Vallaster and von Wallbach (2013) one, the authors could have used the 2013 definition but chose not to. To sum up, the group of studies studying brand meaning co-creation also exhibit polysemy.

**Table 1.4. Definitions of brand meaning co-creation**

| Article   | Definition of brand meaning co-creation   |
|---|---|
| <b>Bertschy, Muhlbacher, and Desbordes (2020)</b> | p. 48: Interested stakeholders of a sport brand cocreate brand meaning in an ongoing discourse concerning partly co-generated brand manifestations (Stieler, Weismann, & Germelmann, 2014; Uhrich, 2014; Woratschek, Horbel, & Popp, 2014)  |
| <b>Rosenthal and Zamith Brito (2017)</b>          | p. 924: Brand meaning co-creation is ‘a discursive social process in which salient stakeholders may directly or indirectly, purposefully or coincidentally, interact via text to shape certain aspects of a brand’s social reality’ (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013, p. 1506).  |
| <b>Stach (2019)</b>                               | p. 327: By definition, research on brand meaning co-creation stresses how brand meaning is increasingly created outside of the control of marketers through interaction with multiple different stakeholders and different touchpoints (Berthon et al. 2009; Hatch and Schultz 2010; Iglesias and Bonet 2012; Michel 2017; see also Langner et al. 2016).   |
| <b>Suomi, Luonila, and Tähtinen (2020)</b>        | p. 212: When referring to brand co-creation, we are guided by Coupland, Iacobucci, and Arnould (2005, p. 107), who stated: ‘the consumer is an active partner with the marketer in brand-meaning formation’.  |
| <b>Tierney, Karpen, and Westberg (2016)</b>       | p. 918: Thus, we introduce and define the concept of BMCC [brand meaning cocreation] as a process that encompasses brand-related, resource-integrating activities and interactions among multiple market actors within service ecosystems, leading to a socially negotiated and idiosyncratically determined brand meaning. This conceptual understanding acknowledges the reciprocal, reticular interactions between multiple market actors as key elements in BMCC. |
| <b>Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013)</b>          | p. 1506: In line with recent views on co-creation (e.g., Vargo & Lusch, 2008), this article perceives online brand meaning co-creation as a discursive social process in which salient stakeholders may directly or indirectly, purposefully, or coincidentally interact via written text to shape certain aspects of a brand’s social reality (cf. Muehlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008).  |

### Polysemy and consumer–brand engagement

Of the eight studies referencing consumer–brand engagement in our data, half present detailed definitions, albeit each article employs a different definition (see Table 1.5). Engagement refers to actions, but also to attitude and emotions of the consumer. Two of the articles, Kamboj et al.

(2018), and Seifert et al. (2020) relate engagement specifically to the co-creation of value for a brand, and thus seem to have their theoretical roots in the literature of value co-creation. Cheung et al. (2020) draw on the literature on consumer–brand relationships and consumer–brand engagement, whereas Hsieh and Chang (2016) employ the literature on employee engagement. It is therefore apparent that studies within the consumer–brand engagement category contain polysemy.

**Table 1.5. Definitions of consumer–brand engagement**

| Article   | Definition of consumer–brand engagement   |
|---|---|
| <b>Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger, and De Oliveira (2020)</b> | <p>p. 524: Consumer–brand engagement (CBE) refers to “consumers’ brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity related to focal brand interactions” (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 149).</p> <p>p. 524: CBE is conceptualized as a psychological state that involves consumers’ passion for the brand, arising from the strength of consumer–brand interactions (Brodie et al., 2011).</p>   |
| <b>Hsieh and Chang (2016)</b>                             | p. 15: This study expands the definition of engagement by Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006), to define brand co-creation engagement as a ‘persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption toward brand co-creation’.   |
| <b>Kamboj, Sarmah, Gupta, and Dwivedi (2018)</b>          | <p>p. 173: Brand co-creation behaviours of customers are the customer-led interactions between the brand and customer (France et al., 2015).</p> <p>p. 173: Thus, co-creation is the process of customer’s engagement in value creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) as online customers are changed from inactive to active consumers (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).</p>   |
| <b>Seifert and Kwon (2020)</b>                            | p. 92: Brand value co-creation engagement behavior refers to the degree to which a consumer demonstrates the participation and citizenship behavior (Yi and Gong, 2013) toward the brand on SNSs [social networking sites] by sharing his or her knowledge, experience, and opinion about the brand through interactions with the brand and other consumers on SNSs; while brand value co-creation engagement attitude represents the favorable or unfavorable disposition toward the brand with which the consumer exerts this value co-creation behavior on SNSs. |

### Polysemy and brand identity co-creation

Of the six studies focusing on brand identity co-creation, only two present definitions we recognise. As with all the previous concepts, this one is also defined differently and Table 1.6

again illustrates the presence of polysemy. Even if we exclude the definition of Centeno and Wang (2017), which is restricted to personal brand identity co-creation, the remainder of the definitions differ. Suomi et al. (2020) advocate the view of da Silveira et al. (2013) that brand identity itself is a process, not an end state or static entity, and the other parts of the definition share some core features of the many co-creation definitions discussed so far.

**Table 1.6. Definitions of brand identity co-creation**

| Article                                    | Definition of brand identity co-creation  |
|--|---|
| <b>Centeno and Wang (2017)</b>             | p. 134: ... celebrity human brand identity co-creation is a social assemblage of a web of actors...both humans (i.e., celebrities, consumers, fans, and other spectators) and 'non-humans' including organizations and service entities (i.e., media outfits and commercial firms). |
| <b>Suomi, Luonila, and Tähtinen (2020)</b> | p. 212: This study applies the definition of brand identity devised by da Silveira, Lages, and Simões (2013, p. 35), that is: "a dynamic process developing over time through mutually influencing inputs from brand managers and other social constituents (e.g., consumers)".     |

#### Polysemy and brand co-destruction and other concepts

Although our search was restricted to co-creation, it also captured an emerging stream on the dark side of co-creation, namely brand co-destruction. Interestingly, Kristal et al. (2018) parallelise non-collaborative brand co-creation with the collaborative co-destruction of brand value (see Table 1.7). Further, the study finds two particular types of non-collaborative brand co-creation: brand play (e.g. parody) and the more aggressive subversion of a brand: brand attack. Rossolatos (2019, p. 1260), in turn, defines co-destruction as '*negatively valenced comments and brand image dilution*'. Although there are some similarities between the definitions, the studies do not share the same meaning (Sartori, 2009, p. 112), and thus illustrate polysemy.

**Table 1.7. Definitions of brand value/meaning co-destruction**

| Article | Definition of brand value /meaning co-destruction |
|---------|---|
|---------|---|

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Kristal, Baumgarth, and Henseler (2018)</b> | <p>p. 336: Drawing upon the notion of ‘devaluation of value’ (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010), we can characterise non-collaborative brand co-creation as the collaborative co-destruction of brand value.</p> <p>p. 341: ... we conceptualised two forms of co-creation: brand play as the playful parodying of brand meanings, as suggested by Fournier and Avery (2011), and brand attack as the expression of negative emotions or even hate for the brand, as identified by Demirbag-Kaplan et al. (2015) and Hegner et al. (2017).</p> |
| <b>Rossolatos (2019)</b>                       | <p>p. 1260: ... codestruction refers to negatively valenced comments and brand image dilution, coindifference designates the utter dissolution of brand meaning by dint of being trajectorized in totally random ways (with regard to the thematic contours of specific brand initiated posts).</p>   |

Of the remaining concepts – brand image co-creation, co-creation for brand innovation, brand co-producing, and brand strategy co-creation – only the last is meticulously defined through employing multiple references. Vallaster and von Wallpach (2018, p. 987) define brand strategy co-creation as follows:

these interactive branding processes are (a) “co-creative,” in the sense that they consist of ongoing discourses among multiple stakeholders that require access to and transparency of information on company-internal processes and structures (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and provide involved stakeholders with “actualized value” that “is subjective and varies as a function of individualized experiences’ (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014, p. 16), and (b) “strategic,” in the sense that they shape a brand’s mission, vision, goals, and objectives (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009), allowing organizations and their stakeholders to jointly decide what they want to achieve and how (Biraghi & Gambetti, 2013).

As Vallaster and von Wallpach (2018) provide the only study using the brand strategy co-creation concept, it is free from polysemy.

To summarise, the discussions on the phenomenon seem to contain less synonymy, although are not free from it, and are to a large extent influenced by polysemy. In other words, the same concept when defined, seems to refer to different understandings of the phenomenon. The current situation offers scope to clarify the conceptual confusion, a task we begin in the next section.

### *The dominant meanings and boundaries of the concepts and their descriptions*

The current study aims to clarify the conceptual discussion by applying interpretative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002) to both the above-presented definitions and the descriptions presented in those articles lacking definitions. Interpretative analysis encourages the meanings and boundaries of the concepts to emerge from the data, without applying pre-determined categories (Neuendorf, 2002). The analysis commenced with a repeat reading of the definitions and descriptions to identify the essential features that were important to their authors (see Sartori, 2009, p. 107). The number of different concepts used meant that we performed the analysis only on those concepts used in more than two studies. The analysis aimed to find out if the most commonly used facets of the concepts differ from each other. The categories that emerged from the sample were as follows: participating actors (e.g. consumers / travellers / stakeholders); characterisation of co-creation (e.g. process / activities / interaction / communication); type of co-creation (direct / indirect); and beneficiary (brand/others). Some of the feature categories proved important in all the concept descriptions, but a few emerged only in some.

Since we found variation in the meanings and boundaries, the next step in the CAM process was to tabulate the concept descriptions to isolate the most dominant ones (Tähtinen & Havila, 2019) (Table 1.8 on consumer–brand engagement will be presented as an example, Tables 1.9–1.12 are in Appendix 1.1). Rather than listing the articles alphabetically, the tables order them chronologically to show any changes that occurred over time.

The value co-creation concept shows no trend in how its major features have appeared in definitions and descriptions of the concept (Table 1.9 in Appendix 1.1). It is also difficult to detect the dominant meanings as, for the first feature, the participating actors, all options are present from the earliest writings to the latest. Hence, the concept covers two views; one where only customers or consumers and the brand owners are active in co-creation, and the second

where all stakeholders are considered parties to the co-creation. However, in general, the articles seem to characterise co-creation predominantly as a *process* of interaction between the actors, as a few studies use *activities*, a less interactive term. A few studies categorise co-creation as either direct or indirect and a few draw attention to the beneficiary of the value co-creation. Accordingly, the dominant use of the brand value co-creation concept refers to interaction processes between either customers or all stakeholders and the brand (or brand owner). The interaction may be direct or indirect, but it mainly benefits the brand.

The brand(ing) co-creation concept has also been used in place- and city branding, where the participants would include tourists and residents (Table 1.10 in Appendix 1.1). The brand(ing) co-creation concept encompasses all stakeholders, including consumers, residents, and tourists as active participants in the interaction processes. However, the concept has also been used in the more focused context of the consumer–brand relationship, which excludes the brand owner, but focuses on the brand itself as the interacting party. Brand(ing) co-creation is viewed as both direct and indirect. None of the above features show any changes occurring between 2007–2020.

Likewise, the brand-meaning co-creation concept shows no clear changes in its main features that set the meaning and boundaries of the concept. However, this is the first concept that clearly considers all stakeholders as playing a part in the interaction processes. Moreover, the interaction processes are more geared to indirect or direct communication than to interaction in general. As the brand meaning is co-created, the benefits flow to the brand.

We next examine the brand identity co-creation concept, to help the reader to connect it to the closely related branding and BMCC concepts. Brand identity appears only in our data published 2016–2020, and no trends are visible. Following the brand-meaning concept, brand identity co-creation is also a stakeholders' process, however, there is no dominant view of the specific nature of the process, as it is described both in terms of action and communication.

However, for the first time, beneficiaries of the process other than the brand are also mentioned. This implies that the parties co-creating the brand identity might also co-create their identities.

The remaining concept that has been used in more than a single study is consumer–brand engagement. The concept is clearly focused on consumers alone, and engagement is seen as both an interaction process (in other words, behaviour), and an emotional state or attitude of the consumer, the latter leading to the actual process of co-creation (see Table 1.8). The question of who benefits does not seem to be deemed important, as only Hsieh and Chang (2016) directly address it.

**Table 1.8. The meaning and boundaries of the consumer–brand engagement concept**

| Consumer–brand engagement articles                         | Participating actors    |              | Characterisation of the engagement |              |                  | Types of engagement |            | Beneficiary |        |
|--|-------------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|--------------|------------------|---------------------|------------|-------------|--------|
|  | Consumer(s) / customers | Stakeholders | Process                            | Interactions | State / Attitude | Emotional           | Behavioral | The brand   | Others |
| Hsieh and Chang (2016)                                     | ✓                       |              |                                    |              | ✓                | ✓                   |            | ✓           |        |
| Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay, and Richard (2017) |                         |              |                                    |              |                  |                     |            |             |        |
| Nobre and Ferreira (2017)                                  |                         |              |                                    |              | ✓                |                     |            |             |        |
| Kamboj, Sarmah, Gupta, and Dwivedi (2018)                  | ✓                       |              | ✓                                  |              |                  |                     | ✓          |             |        |
| Lin, Yang, Ma, and Huang (2018)                            | ✓                       |              |                                    | ✓            | ✓                |                     |            |             |        |
| Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger, and De Oliveira (2020)         | ✓                       |              |                                    | ✓            | ✓                | ✓                   | ✓          |             |        |
| Mingione and Leoni (2020)                                  | ✓                       |              |                                    |              | ✓                | ✓                   |            |             |        |
| Seifert and Kwon (2020)                                    | ✓                       |              |                                    | ✓            | ✓                |                     | ✓          |             |        |

In summary, the different concepts are surprisingly similar in their dominant meanings and with little changes occurring over time. However, there are some less-noted features that appear in just a few studies. This group offers interesting new perspectives on the phenomenon that could trigger future research and expand how co-creation in the context of brands is viewed.

### *The rare meanings and boundaries of the concepts*

Looking at the rare meanings and boundaries set reveals some interesting aspects to the phenomenon. We start with thoughts on its fairness to consumers and overall novelty.

The debate on ‘prosumers’ and ‘prosumption’ involves co-creation and views the concept in (at least) two lights. First, it is argued that prosumption provides consumers with the power of agency – especially if they join forces – and shifts the power from producers to customers (Toffler, 1980; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). This shift considerably reduces the opportunities of brand managers to influence co-creation. Lucarelli (2019, p. 55) referencing Wider et al. (2018) defines the process as ‘*uncontrollable*’. The alternative, a critical view highlights the questions of agency, control, and power (Lucarelli, 2019) and refers to co-creation by customers as unpaid work. In our sample, Cova et al. (2015), Black and Veloutsou (2017), and Lucarelli (2019) represent this view.

Is co-creation or prosumption a novel phenomenon? Sociologist Ritzer (2015, p. 414) argues that ‘pure’ production (without any consumption) and ‘pure’ consumption (without any production) are not empirically possible, as “*the two processes always interpenetrate*”. Indeed, consumers have always been part of the value-in-use production, whenever they use a product, for example, when they drive a car (Comor, 2011). However, Ritzer (2015) argues that prosumers, for example using a self-service option, are being exploited; they perform the work without getting paid (as workers are), or being compensated *via* lower prices, and remain

blissfully unaware of this injustice. When the prosumers' work contributes to *exchange* values or profits, the prosumer is being exploited (Comor, 2011).

There is certainly room for a critical discussion on whether marketers are exploiting customers and other stakeholders when trying to involve them in various brand co-creation behaviour. The question is how ready the customers and other stakeholders are to be persistent (as defined by Hsieh & Chang, 2016), passionate, and active co-creators (as defined by Cheung et al., 2020). That is a lot to ask. Are the actors behaving wholly voluntarily, or do the marketers' efforts engage them in co-creation without providing them their share of the value? A view of co-creation as a management tool that turns passive customers into active ones is exemplified in Hajli et al. (2017) and Kamboj et al. (2018). The definition used by Tierney et al. (2016) highlights how co-creation is *reciprocal*, indicating that both actors are aware of the other's efforts. On the other hand, other conceptualisations refer to *coincidental* co-creation (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013), which, we assume does not require willingness, passion, or reciprocity. Finally, Centeno and Wang (2017) include not only human actors among the parties to co-creation but also non-humans, although the examples offered are companies and the media. Nevertheless, in an era of artificial intelligence and automation, non-humans are a feature that will increasingly be part of life.

To conclude the discussion on the rare meanings attributed to brand co-creation, we discuss a fairly recent notion that co-creation refers to communication between the stakeholders. This facet is present in the definitions or descriptions used by Foroudi et al. (2019), Bertschy et al. (2020), Casais and Moteiro (2019), Cheung et al. (2020), and Seifert and Kwon (2020). The communication addition expands co-creation beyond the dyadic relationships between the brand or the brand owner and the stakeholder into networks of stakeholders. This also means that the marketers' influence on what happens outside the dyad is, as is often stated, limited when co-creation happens between stakeholders and excludes the brand owner.

The limited role of brand owners brings us to the negatives of co-creation. Those negative aspects have been labelled collaborative co-destruction of brand value by Kristal et al. (2018) and codestruction by Rossolatos (2019)<sup>3</sup>. If we consider brand value co-creation as originating with customers, co-destruction might refer to a situation where both the marketer and the stakeholder unite to destroy brand value. We are unsure of this reading, as the examples offered focus on only the stakeholders' negative actions. In addition, brand co-destruction can involve a group of stakeholders that may collaborate with each other and for example attack a brand via social media (Kristal et al., 2018; Rossolatos, 2019).

#### *Theoretical underpinnings of the concepts*

The theoretical underpinnings of the concepts were elicited by checking the sources referred to in the definitions or descriptions of the concepts. Hence, following the CAM we did not plunge into the complete list of references of the articles, but kept the investigation on the level of the definitions and their direct theoretical bases. However, when constructing the conceptual maps, we looked more closely at the two major theoretical bases of the definitions, namely branding and value co-creation research, as both have their offshoots.

The first theoretical discussion underpinning the studied concepts is branding research and its various streams and sub-streams. To detect the streams, we used a recent categorisation by Heding, Knudtzen, and Bjerre (2020) of brand management literature into positivist and interpretive paradigms. As the positivist paradigm views brands mainly as outcomes of companies' marketing activities, the stream remains unused as a theoretical basis. Thus, it is the identity approach that is applied as a theoretical basis. The approach incorporates an

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<sup>3</sup> Value co-destruction has been discussed outside the branding context in e.g. Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010) and Echeverri and Skålén (2011)

understanding of identity as being context-dependent and negotiated between all the stakeholders.

The concepts of BMCC and brand image co-creation specifically refer to the interpretative paradigm of branding research in their definitions and descriptions. The interpretative paradigm (Heding et al., 2020) was already noted in 2000, although Allen, Fournier and Miller (2008) label it an alternative. The paradigm views the brand as a result of the interaction between the brand's creator and active consumers and other stakeholders. Heding et al. (2020) further categorise the interpretative paradigm into relational, community, and cultural approaches to brand management. The relational approach focuses on the brand–consumer dyadic exchange process where both actors contribute equally and brand value is co-created. The community approach adds third actors, namely other consumers as a group into the interaction process, which is likely to go on even without the brand owner. Heding et al. (2020) connect this approach to the service-dominant logic (e.g. Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Finally, the cultural approach builds upon Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) but also includes a macro-level focus where brands are seen as significant political and financial powers.

The second clear theoretical underpinning of the co-creation definitions is the service-logic or service-dominant logic literature (e.g. Grönroos, 2011; Grönroos & Gummerus, 2014; Merz et al., 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004) both of which have discussed value co-creation. The influence of SDL is particularly clear in the conceptualisations of brand value co-creation, customer–brand engagement, and brand(ing) co-creation but, to a certain extent, also in brand identity co-creation. However, none of the brand co-creation definitions refer to the fresh conceptualisation of co-creation by Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2018) as *‘enactment of interactional creation across interactive system-environments entailing agencing engagements and structuring organization’s*. There could be two reasons: first,

Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2018) is a recent one so is only cited in a few studies; second, it does not examine brand co-creation, although some of the study's references do relate to branding.

To summarise, definitions of the phenomenon, although described in different concepts, are largely combinations of streams of branding and value-co-creation. This somewhat unified grounding explains the small differences in the dominant features of the definitions and descriptions discussed in the previous section.

Nevertheless, we also found interesting exceptions, both in theoretical backgrounds and in research approaches that have enriched the understanding of the phenomenon. Schmeltz and Kjeldsen (2019) investigate internal brand co-creation and combine the corporate branding discussion with organisation and management research. Discussions of place branding as a co-creative process stemming from tourism and city branding are used by Gonzalez and Lester (2018), Casais and Monteiro (2019), Vallaster et al. (2018), and Lucarelli (2019) when defining or describing the main concept. The place branding discussion in particular, views branding as a process emerging from the identity of the place and the stakeholders' dialogues (e.g. Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013).

A strategy-as-practice approach is applied to study brand strategy co-creation by Vallaster and Wallpach (2018). Earlier, Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) had applied stakeholder theory and adopted a linguistic and hermeneutic approach to studying BMCC. Centeno and Wang (2017) reference actor-network theory stemming from sociology to discuss the co-creation of celebrity brand identities as do Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016), where sociological assemblage theory is also applied to stress the customers' agency instead of mere actions.

Cova et al. (2015) use the multidisciplinary field of research on consumer volunteering to reveal the unpaid but planned work consumers do for brands. Consumer culture theory is represented as a background in studies where co-creation takes place in brand communities (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Fujita et al., 2017). Two so-called hot keywords from the fields of

marketing and strategy also show up in co-creation studies; brand experiences (Choi et al., 2016; Juntunen et al., 2012; Nobre & Ferreira, 2017; Stach, 2019) and ecosystems (Mingione & Leoni, 2020; Tierney et al., 2016; Törmälä & Saraniemi, 2018). The two buzz words work in opposite directions; brand experience narrows the focus and the ecosystem extends the sphere of stakeholders to involve those who are indirectly related.

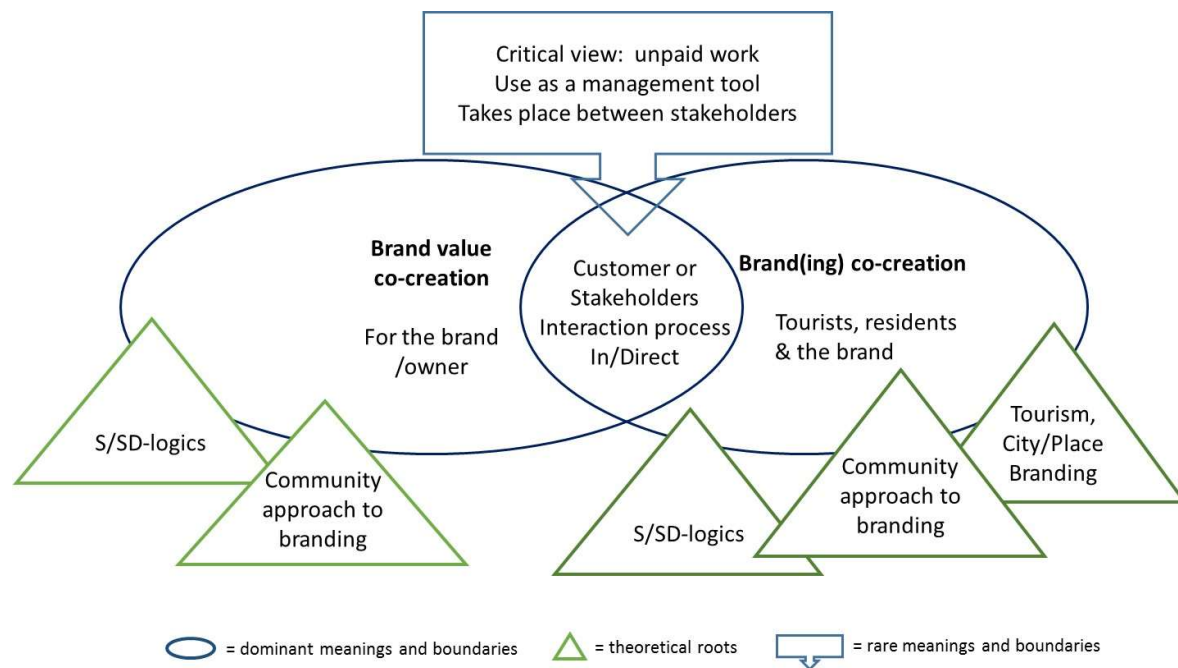
In addition to reviewing the direct references mentioned in the definitions or descriptions of the focal concept, we investigated the work of a few influential scholars in the field of branding whose work had not appeared up until that point. For example, although sociologist Adam Arvidsson is a widely cited scholar, only seven of the 47 articles refer to one or more of his authored or co-authored works (Arvidsson, 2005; Arvidsson, 2006; Arvidsson, 2008; Arvidsson, Bauwens & Peitersen, 2008; Arvidsson & Caliendo, 2016). None of the studies in our sample, however, rely on Arvidsson's texts when presenting definitions and descriptions, and thus it seems that his works do not offer a direct theoretical basis for their definitions.

### *Conceptual maps*

Although it seemed that the concepts applied in co-creation research on branding and brands are quite similar, drawing the conceptual maps of the dominant features unearths three different groups. Here, again we describe only those concepts applied in more than two studies.

The first group consists of two concepts: brand value co-creation and brand(ing) co-creation (see Figure 1.1). They both share views on the actors and the nature and type of co-creation. The phenomenon is viewed as customers and/or stakeholders interacting directly or indirectly. What seems to differentiate the two concepts is that brand value co-creation research has considered co-creation producing value for the brand and/or its owner to be an important feature. Of course, the same notion can be implicit in brand(ing) co-creation studies, but it has not been commonly stressed in the definitions or descriptions of the concept. Brand(ing) co-

creation studies are more varied in the focal contexts; hence actors also include tourists and residents. In addition, the brand itself is considered an actor.



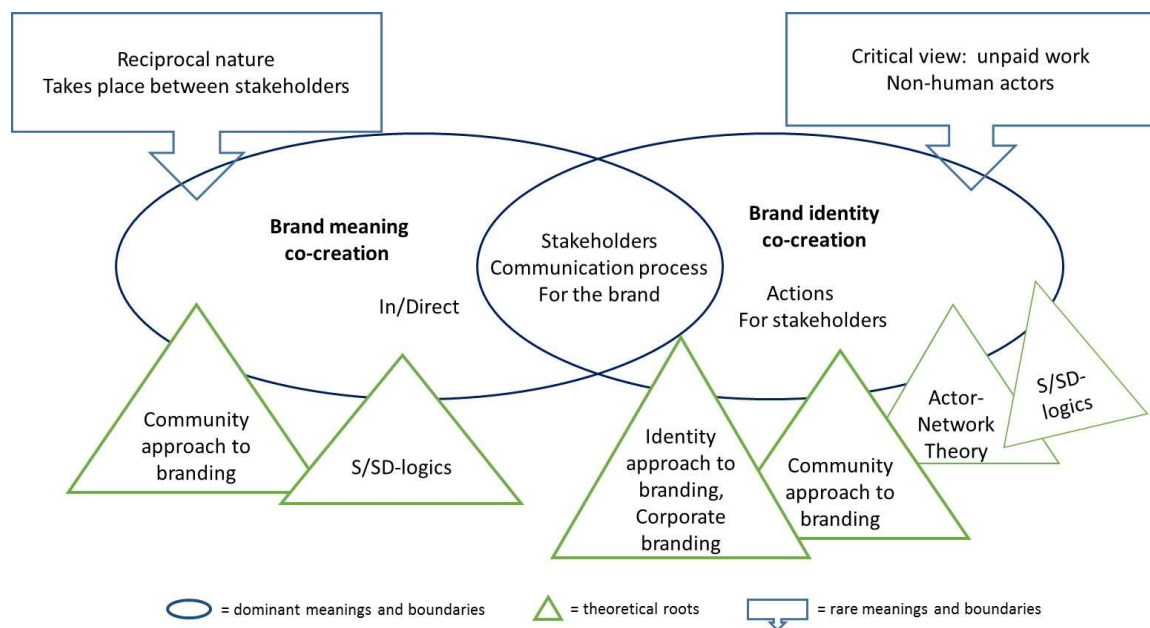
**Figure 1.1. Conceptual maps of brand value co-creation and brand(ing) co-creation concepts**

The concepts also share the rarer meanings, the critical view of unpaid work and the managerial view of co-creation as a tool; perhaps the latter is the reason for the former. Co-creation taking place between the stakeholders, without the marketer, remains a rare meaning in both concepts.

The same theoretical underpinnings; service- or service-dominant-logic and the community approach to branding research, could explain the similarities. Similarly, the different actors could be explained with context-related studies and roots in tourism or city/place branding, where customers are labelled tourists, visitors, and residents.

Brand-meaning co-creation and brand identity co-creation form the second group (Figure 1.2). They share a view of co-creation as a communication process driven by marketers and stakeholders that benefits the brand. The nature of the process is specified as a form of

communication instead of any kind of interaction, and this separates these two concepts from the first pair. The differences in the dominant features are the type of co-creation, BMCC having a greater influence in separating direct and indirect co-creation, and the nature of co-creation (where brand identity co-creation also includes actions). Moreover, the brand identity co-creation concept stresses that all stakeholders benefit from co-creation.



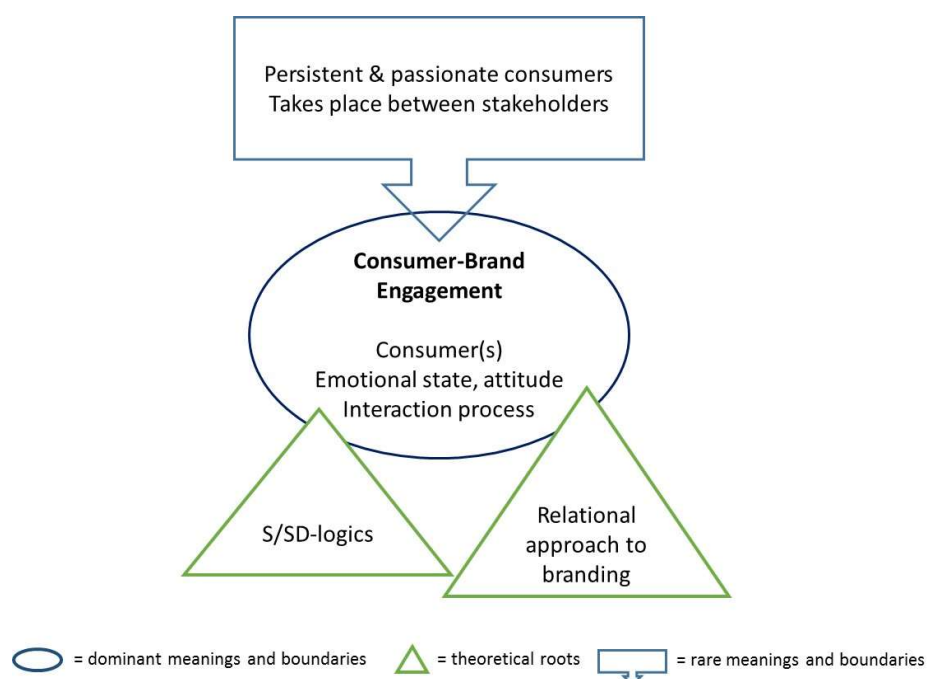
**Figure 1.2. Conceptual maps of brand-meaning co-creation and brand identity co-creation**

The rare meanings of the two concepts are quite different. The reciprocal nature of BMCC that resides between the stakeholders remains a rare feature of that concept alone. The rare conceptualisations of brand identity co-creation include the critical view of unpaid work and a novel view of non-humans being able to participate in the process.

Looking at the theoretical influences, BMCC definitions use service- or service-dominant-logic as a theoretical background, however, that does not seem to connect the concept with the two previous ones. We suggest this is due to the influence of the community approach to

branding. The theoretical roots of ‘brand identity co-creation’ definitions also apply the identity approach to branding that includes the corporate branding stream, but Actor-Network Theory also has some influence because the definition stresses not only communication but also action.

The remaining concept, consumer–brand engagement, seems quite different in its dominant features and thus cannot be grouped with any other conceptualisation discussed here (Figure 1.3). The actors are consumers, as the title suggests, but the nature of the concept is twofold; it is conceptualised both as an emotional state or attitude to co-creation and actual co-creation as an interaction process. This twofold conceptualisation may detract from the diffusion of research results, as researchers must determine if engagement is treated as a prerequisite of co-creation or the process of co-creation itself.



**Figure 1.3. Conceptual map of consumer–brand engagement**

The rare descriptions of persistent, and passionate consumers can be connected to the focus on emotional states and attitudes of the co-creating consumers. Nevertheless, the theoretical discussions used to define the concept do not differ greatly from the other concepts. Hence, the

defining features seem to stem from wider theoretical backgrounds of the articles the study as a whole refers and/or contributes to, which in this case would be consumer behaviour and CCT.

## **Conclusions and discussion**

This study reflects upon the definitions of the concepts and descriptions of the terms that research uses to refer to co-creation in the context of branding, to reveal and clarify any conceptual confusion. This study confirmed the experiences of MacKenzie (2003) that many studies underestimate the value of presenting explicit conceptual definitions. By applying CAM (Tähtinen & Havila, 2019) the results showed that co-creation in branding contains conceptual ambiguity. Of the two forms causing ambiguity, the field is somewhat affected by synonymy and, to a greater extent, polysemy; hence, the task was worth undertaking.

This study found ten different brand co-creation concepts and deconstructed the most often used to show their dominant and rare features, direct theoretical underpinnings, and how they differ from each other. The concepts of ‘brand value co-creation’ and ‘brand(ing) co-creation’ stand out as the most applied, ‘BMCC’ and ‘brand identity co-creation’ both distinguish the co-created aspect of a brand, and ‘consumer–brand engagement’ highlights the consumer’s view. The unravelling of the five most-used concepts to form conceptual maps brought to light several aspects of the phenomenon and its complexity. Some of the aspects are well studied while others remain in the shadows. The analysis can help future researchers to clarify their own conceptual choices, balance the focus of their research, and direct it at relevant aspects of the phenomenon that are insufficiently studied.

Moreover, the paper discussed interesting exceptions in the literature, explored theoretical backgrounds not often investigated, and unearthed features revealing the less studied aspects of the phenomenon and its complexity. Finally, the CAM was developed by using recent

linguistics research and explicating not only the dominant features but also the rare ones, as well as looking a little more closely at the myriad theoretical underpinnings of the concepts.

This paper does not suggest that a certain concept or definition would be better than others, or that a particular concept should be used only in its dominant meaning or to study brand co-creation in a particular context. The choice is always made by each individual researcher. This paper does suggest that in making the choice, researchers should be aware of which terms and concepts have been used and in what way. By exploring the meanings and boundaries of the concepts, scholars can choose to apply one or several concepts, and the theories that underpin them. Choosing several concepts makes it possible to present multiple perspectives on a complex phenomenon and enrich the understanding of it. Nevertheless, this requires that the studies explicitly define the different meanings and boundaries, in other words, present their definitions so as to avoid conceptual ambiguity.

However, we suggest two aspects to be taken into consideration when choosing the concept or concepts for a study. First, studies could build on the conceptual understanding that is firmly grounded in the branding discussions. Specifying exactly what is being co-created (e.g. identity, meaning, image, or strategy) and focusing on each facet would expand the understanding of the phenomenon as a whole. Second, studies using the concept of *value* (e.g. ‘brand value co-creation’) require the user to carefully state how value is to be understood in this context and how it relates to e.g. brand equity. After all, only the constructionist stream of research on customer (perceived) value views value as co-created (i.e. value-as-process) (Zeithaml et al., 2020). Brand could be seen as a subset of value (hedonic value, status value, or expressive value), as an entity or as a process remaining outside any social constructionist definitions or categorisations of value (see Zeithaml et al., 2020). Hence, research based upon the ontological choices is in place.

Co-creation must be included in branding concepts to forestall a potential decline into thinking of brand(ing) as a process performed and controlled mainly by managers. Referring back to early definitions of brand image by Gardner and Levy (1955) as, “The set of ideas, feelings and attitudes that consumers have about brands” and Herzog (1963) “Brand image is the sum total of impressions the consumer receives from many sources” it becomes obvious that managers were never considered the only active actors in branding. Nevertheless, the nature of the branding process, or all the actors involved were long denied specific research attention as research wished to provide tools for brand managers.

Methodologically, it seems that following the CAM process until the final task – the conceptual maps – is a useful way to reveal differences and similarities in the conceptualisation used. Accordingly, this study serves not only as an example of how to use the CAM, but also offers a limited evaluation of the method and how it could be improved, although that was not the main goal of this chapter. We add the recently acknowledged aspect of polysemy to the early step of CAM that investigates the conceptual ambiguity of the particular research field. In addition, we include an investigation of rare features of the definitions, to unlock interesting and also somewhat contradictory aspects that only some definitions see as important to the phenomenon. We also suggest that the rare features can be visualised as a part of the conceptual maps.

The most challenging aspect of applying the CAM is distinguishing the theoretical underpinnings of the definitions. Restricting the search for those underpinnings to the definitions/descriptions obviously shows only a proportion of them, and more careful examination would require extending CAM to search all the references cited in the articles.

As the CAM aims to study only the conceptual state of any field, one of the limitations of this study is its lack of discussion on the methodology or the findings of the studies. Further, the data set was not a full collection of all the studies in the field but the CAM protocol and

this example indicates it provided a sufficient sample for the task. A deeper analysis of the theoretical progress of the field would require a fully-fledged systematic literature review. Nevertheless, the results of this study show that the different concepts, definitions, and descriptions used to refer to the phenomenon use elements that offer future research tools to categorise different facets of brand co-creation; namely who participates, who has agency and power, how is the co-creation viewed (e.g. as a process or attitude, direct and indirect), and who benefits. Moreover, the more explicitly a conceptual definition encompasses those elements, the clearer and more useful it will be for the reader.

We hope that the conceptual maps herein provide useful guidelines for future research on how to both read existing studies and to how to conceptualise co-creation when studying it in the branding context. It will be beneficial if the research stream extends its traditional management-oriented focus towards a more stakeholder-oriented approach. Before researchers could offer managerial advice, they would have to have access to more research focusing on stakeholders. Such research would probably have determined the various stakeholders' views on co-creation; whether it is a form of exploitation, or whether it offers them value, and if so, what kind of value. Further research efforts might then examine how that value might be enhanced and whether co-creation is a dyadic process between the brand and the stakeholder or if the conceptualisation and research should include a network approach or a multi-actor view where all stakeholder interactions are viewed as essential. Researchers of the topic should also consider whether to adopt a macro view and include ecosystems, or, in contrast to focus more closely on the individual stakeholders, their experiences, and their individual traits that influence willingness and engagement in the context of co-creation. Belk (2020) suggests that an abductive strategy and ethnographic, netnographic, and autoethnographic research using (participant) observation, depth interviews, and projective data collection methods, for

example, could reignite marketing research. Such methods could also shed light on aspects of brand co-creation that remain very much in the shadows.

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## Appendix 1.1. Concept description tables

Table 1.9. The meaning and boundaries of the brand value co-creation concept

| Brand value co-creation articles                          | Participating actors  |              | Characterisation of the co-creation |            |              | Types of co-creation |          | Beneficiary |        |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|------------|--------------|----------------------|----------|-------------|--------|
|   | Consumers / customers | Stakeholders | Process                             | Activities | Interactions | Direct               | Indirect | The brand   | Others |
| Juntunen, Juntunen, and Autere (2012)                     |                       | ✓            | ✓                                   |            |              |                      |          |             |        |
| Iglesias, Ind, and Alfaro (2013)                          | ✓                     | ✓            | ✓                                   |            | ✓            |                      |          |             |        |
| Zhang and He (2014)                                       |                       | ✓            |                                     |            | ✓            |                      |          |             |        |
| Gambetti and Graffigna (2015)                             | ✓                     | ✓            | ✓                                   | ✓          |              |                      |          |             |        |
| Cova, Pace, and Skålén (2015)                             | ✓                     | ✓            | ✓                                   |            | ✓            | ✓                    |          | ✓           | ✓      |
| Choi, Ko, and Kim (2016)                                  | ✓                     |              | ✓                                   |            | ✓            |                      |          |             |        |
| Nguyen, Shirahada, and Kosaka (2016)                      |                       | ✓            | ✓                                   |            | ✓            | ✓                    | ✓        |             |        |
| Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016)                                |                       | ✓            | ✓                                   | ✓          |              |                      |          |             |        |
| Biraghi and Gambetti (2017)                               |                       | ✓            | ✓                                   | ✓          | ✓            |                      |          |             |        |
| Fujita, Harrigan and Soutar (2017)                        | ✓                     |              | ✓                                   |            |              |                      |          |             |        |
| Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay and Richard (2017) | ✓                     |              | ✓                                   |            |              |                      |          |             |        |

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>Nobre and Ferreira (2017)</b>                          | ✓ |   |   | ✓ | ✓ |   |   |
| <b>Merz, Zarantonello, and Grappi (2018)</b>              |   | ✓ | ✓ |   | ✓ |   | ✓ |
| <b>Foroudi, Yu, Gupta, and Foroudi (2019)</b>             | ✓ |   |   |   | ✓ |   |   |
| <b>Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger, and De Oliveira (2020)</b> | ✓ |   |   |   | ✓ | ✓ |   |
| <b>Mingione and Leoni (2020)</b>                          |   | ✓ | ✓ |   |   | ✓ | ✓ |

Table 1.10. The meaning and boundaries of bran(ding) co-creation concept

| Brand(ing) co-creation articles                  | Participating actors             |              |                                     | Characterisation of the engagement |        |         | Type of co-creation |                      | Beneficiary |          |
|--|----------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------|---------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------|----------|
|  | Consumers / Residents / Tourists | Stakeholders | Brand (consumer–brand relationship) | The brand                          | Others | Process | Interactions        | Activities / Actions | Direct      | Indirect |
| Boyle (2007)                                     | ✓                                | ✓            |                                     |                                    |        | ✓       |                     |                      |             |          |
| Hatch and Schultz (2010)                         |                                  | ✓            |                                     |                                    |        |         | ✓                   |                      |             |          |
| Juntunen, Juntunen, and Autere (2012)            |                                  | ✓            |                                     |                                    |        | ✓       |                     |                      |             |          |
| France, Merrilees, and Miller (2015)             | ✓                                |              | ✓                                   |                                    |        |         | ✓                   |                      |             |          |
| Oliveira and Panyik (2015)                       | ✓                                |              |                                     |                                    |        |         |                     |                      |             |          |
| Kaufmann, Correia Loureiro, and Manarioti (2016) |                                  | ✓            |                                     |                                    |        | ✓       |                     |                      | ✓           | ✓        |
| France, Grace, Merrilees, and Miller (2018)      | ✓                                |              | ✓                                   |                                    |        |         | ✓                   | ✓                    |             |          |
| Kamboj, Sarmah, Gupta, and Dwivedi (2018)        | ✓                                |              |                                     |                                    |        | ✓       |                     |                      |             |          |
| Vallaster, von Wallpach, and Zenker (2018)       |                                  |              |                                     |                                    |        | ✓       | ✓                   |                      | ✓           | ✓        |
| Casais and Monteiro (2019)                       | ✓                                |              |                                     |                                    |        |         |                     |                      |             |          |
| Lucarelli (2019)                                 |                                  | ✓            |                                     |                                    |        | ✓       |                     |                      |             |          |
| Schmeltz and Kjeldsen (2019)                     |                                  | ✓            |                                     |                                    |        | ✓       | ✓                   |                      | ✓           |          |

|  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| France, Grace, Iacono, and Carlini<br>(2020) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|

Table 1.11. The meaning and boundaries of the brand-meaning co-creation concept

| Brand-meaning co-creation articles            | Participating actors  |              | Characterisation of co-creation |              |  | Type of co-creation |          | Beneficiary |        |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|--------------|--|---------------------|----------|-------------|--------|
|   | Consumers / customers | Stakeholders | Process                         | Interactions | Discourse / Communication / Negotiation / Conversation | Direct              | Indirect | The brand   | Others |
| Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013)             |                       | ✓            |                                 |              | ✓  | ✓                   | ✓        | ✓           |        |
| Dean, Arroyo-Gamez, Punjaisri and Pich (2016) |                       | ✓            |                                 | ✓            | ✓  |                     |          | ✓           |        |
| Tierney, Karpen and Westberg (2016)           |                       | ✓            | ✓                               | ✓            |  |                     |          | ✓           |        |
| Fujita, Harrigan and Soutar (2017)            | ✓                     |              | ✓                               |              |  |                     |          | ✓           |        |
| Rosenthal and Zamith Brito (2017)             |                       | ✓            | ✓                               | ✓            | ✓  | ✓                   | ✓        | ✓           |        |
| Gonzalez and Lester (2018)                    |                       | ✓            | ✓                               |              |  |                     |          | ✓           |        |
| Stach (2019)                                  |                       | ✓            |                                 | ✓            |  |                     |          | ✓           |        |
| Bertschy, Muhlbacher and Desbordes (2020)     |                       | ✓            |                                 |              | ✓  |                     |          | ✓           |        |
| Suomi, Luonila and Tähtinen (2020)            |                       | ✓            |                                 |              |  |                     |          | ✓           |        |

Table 1.12. The meaning and boundaries of the brand identity co-creation concept

| Brand identity co-creation articles           | Participating actors  |              | Characterisation of co-creation |         |                          | Beneficiary |        |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|---------|--------------------------|-------------|--------|
|   | Consumers / customers | Stakeholders | Process                         | Actions | Communication / Dialogue | The brand   | Others |
| Dean, Arroyo-Gamez, Punjaisri and Pich (2016) |                       | ✓            |                                 |         | ✓                        | ✓           |        |
| Kennedy and Guzman (2016)                     | ✓                     | ✓            |                                 |         |                          | ✓           | ✓      |
| Black and Veloutsou (2017)                    |                       | ✓            |                                 | ✓       |                          | ✓           |        |
| Centeno and Wang (2017)                       |                       | ✓            | ✓                               | ✓       |                          | ✓           |        |
| Gonzalez and Lester (2018)                    |                       | ✓            | ✓                               |         | ✓                        | ✓           |        |
| Suomi, Luonila and Tähtinen (2020)            |                       | ✓            | ✓                               |         |                          | ✓           | ✓      |